

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE
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BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIÈGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 160408a

Friday 08.04.2016

Presentation of the post-Synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*: the logic of pastoral mercy

Vatican City, 8 April 2016 – This morning a press conference was held in the Holy See Press Office to present the apostolic exhortation "*Amoris Laetitia*: the joy of love", signed by the Holy Father on 19 March, solemnity of St. Joseph. The panel was composed of Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, general secretary of the Synod of Bishops; Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, O.P., archbishop of Vienna, Austria; and the married couple of Francesco Miano, professor of moral philosophy at the University of Tor Vergata, Rome, and Giuseppina De Simone, lecturer in philosophy at the Theological Faculty of Southern Italy in Naples.

Cardinal Baldisseri explained that the title *Amoris Laetitia* is in full continuity with the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. "From the joy of the Gospel to the joy of love in the family", he said. "The Synodal process has presented the beauty of the family by speaking about love. This constitutes the foundation of the family institution, because God is love among Persons and Trinity, and not solitude. ... The result of the Synod Fathers' work brings together the diversity of experiences and points of view of the particular Churches. Disputes between different opinions took place with freedom and openness, which allowed an almost unanimous outcome to be achieved".

The principle according to which "time is greater than space", continued the Cardinal, "suggests that time is needed and there are different ways to find the best solutions to the different situations. ... For example, the text refers to three prime situations in which the passage of time is necessary: in preparation for marriage, the education of children, and in mourning a death in the family".

The key to reading the exhortation, in harmony with the Jubilee that the Church is living, is "the logic of pastoral mercy". "The Holy Father clearly affirms the doctrine on marriage and the family and he proposes it as an indispensable ideal. ... On the other hand, the Pope does not overlook the fragility of families and even their failure ... making room for the Lord's mercy, which spurs us on to do our best".

With regard to the sources that inspired *Amoris Laetitia*, the cardinal stated that the document is "a further outstanding expression of the pontificate of Pope Francis: it is a splendid synthesis and points towards further horizons". The exhortation is based on the final documents of the two Synodal assemblies on the family, and the text makes numerous references to the Fathers of the Church, to medieval and modern theologians, to

contemporary authors (from Erich Fromm to St. Therese of Lisieux, as well as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jorge Luis Borges and Martin Luther King), and documents by his papal predecessors.

Among the highlights of the text, the general secretary of the Synod indicated its "positive look at the beauty of married love and the family", and noted that the bishop is entrusted with "the task of leading the people of God, following the example of Jesus the Good Shepherd who calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ... It follows that the bishop, through the priests and properly trained pastoral workers, makes appropriate services available to whoever is experiencing family difficulties, crisis and failure".

Like any pastor, Pope Francis "addresses his paternal care to the immense variety of concrete situations", and therefore affirms that "it is understandable that neither the Synod nor the exhortation could be expected to provide a new set of general rules, canonical in nature and applicable to all cases". The cardinal then went on to give examples of various situations such as that of baptised persons living in a second marriage, who "must be integrated and not excluded", and emphasised that to accompany and integrate those who live in so-called "irregular" situations, it is necessary for pastors to "look them in the face one by one. ... Discernment takes place through 'conversation with the priest, in the internal forum, [and] contributes to the formation of a correct judgement on what hinders the possibility of a fuller participation in the life of the Church and on what steps can foster it and make it grow".

"From the perspective of fulfilling the ideal of marriage, the exhortation has put great emphasis on the preparation of engaged couples for the sacrament ... and also signals the need for this journey to continue after the celebration, especially in the first years of married life. ... The document states that the Fathers also considered the specific situation of a merely civil marriage or, with due distinction, even simple cohabitation, nothing that 'when such unions attain a particular stability, legally recognised, are characterised by deep affection and responsibility for their offspring, and demonstrate an ability to overcome trials, they can provide occasions for pastoral care with a view to the eventual celebration of the sacrament of marriage".

"In accompanying frailties and treating wounds, the principle of gradualness in pastoral care reflects divine teaching: how God cares for all His children, beginning with the weakest and furthest away, so 'the Church turns with love to those who participate in her life in an imperfect manner', because the all have to be integrated into the life of the ecclesial community".

"Not limiting itself to so-called 'irregular' situations, the exhortation therefore opens up the wide horizon of undeserved grace and unconditional mercy for 'everyone, in whatever situation they find themselves", concluded Cardinal Baldisseri. In this context, the exhortation "touches the heart of the Gospel and heals the wounded person, with this expression: 'Mercy is the fullness of justice and the most radiant manifestation of God's truth'".

Cardinal Schönborn began by remarking that before discussing the text, he wished to explain in a very personal way, why he read it "with joy, gratitude and always with strong emotion". He explained, "In the ecclesial discourse on marriage and the family there is often a tendency, perhaps unconscious, to discuss these realities of life on the basis of two separate tracks. On the one hand there are marriages and families that are 'regular', that correspond to the rules, where everything is 'fine' and 'in order', and then there are the 'irregular' situations that represent a problem. Already the very term 'irregular' suggests that such a distinction can be made very clearly. Those, therefore, who find themselves on the side of the 'irregular' families, must live with the fact that the 'regular' families are on the other side. I am personally aware of how difficult that is for those who come from a 'patchwork' family, due to the situation of my own family. The discourse of the Church in this regard may cause harm and can give rise to a sensation of exclusion".

He continued, "Pope Francis' exhortation is guided by the phrase 'It is a matter of reaching out to everyone', as this is a fundamental understanding of the Gospel: we are all in need of mercy! 'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone'. Regardless of the marriage or family situation in which we find ourselves, we are all journeying".

Pope Francis "has succeeded in speaking about all situations without cataloguing them, without categorising,

with that outlook of fundamental benevolence that is associated with the heart of God, with the eyes of Jesus that exclude no-one, that welcome all and grant the 'joy of the Gospel' to all. This is why reading *Amoris Laetitia* is so comforting. No-one must feel condemned, no-one is scorned. In this climate of acceptance, the discourse on the Christian vision of marriage and the family becomes an invitation, an encouragement, to the joy of love in which we can believe and which excludes no-one, truly and sincerely no-one".

Another two key words in the exhortation are "discern" and "accompany" which, the archbishop of Vienna explained, "apply not only to the so-called 'irregular situation' (Pope Francis underlines this 'so-called') but rather to all people, to every marriage and every family. Indeed, we are all journeying and we are all in need of 'discernment' and 'accompaniment'". He reaffirmed that his "great joy" in response to the exhortation "resides in the fact that it coherently overcomes that artificial, superficial, clear division between 'regular' and 'irregular', and subjects everyone to the common call of the Gospel, according to the words of St. Paul: 'For God has consigned all to disobedience, that He may have mercy on all'".

"This pervasive principle of 'inclusion' clearly troubles some people", he remarked. "Does this not favour relativism? Does the frequently evoked mercy not become permissiveness? Does there no longer exist the clarity of limits that must not be exceeded, situations that must objectively be defined as irregular or sinful? Does this Exhortation favour a certain laxity, a sense that 'anything goes'? Is Jesus' mercy not instead often severe and demanding? To clarify this, Pope Francis leaves no doubt regarding his intentions or our task. 'As Christians, we can hardly stop advocating marriage simply to avoid countering contemporary sensibilities, or out of a desire to be fashionable or a sense of helplessness in the face of human and moral failings. We would be depriving the world of values that we can and must offer. It is true that there is no sense in simply decrying present-day evils, as if this could change things. Nor it is helpful to try to impose rules by sheer authority. What we need is a more responsible and generous effort to present the reasons and motivations for choosing marriage and the family, and in this way to help men and women better to respond to the grace that God offers them'".

Pope Francis is convinced that the Christian vision of marriage and the family still retains its power to attract, but it demands "a healthy dose of self-criticism". "We also need to be humble and realistic, acknowledging that at times the way we present our Christian beliefs and treat other people has helped contribute to today's problematic situation ... We have also proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families", he writes in *Amoris Laetitia*.

In this respect, Cardinal Schönborn spoke about an experience during last October's Synod: "as far as I know, two of the thirteen 'circuli minores' started their work by first hearing an account from each participant of his own family situation. It soon emerged that almost all the bishops or other participants in the 'circulus minor' had encountered, in their families, the themes, concerns and 'irregularities' that we, in the Synod, have discussed in a rather too abstract way. Pope Francis invites us to speak about our own families 'as they are'. And here the magnificent aspect of the Synod journey and of its continuation with Pope Francis: this sober realism of families 'as they are' does not take us far at all from the ideal! On the contrary, Pope Francis succeeds, in the work of both Synods, to offer a positive outlook to families, profoundly rich in hope. But this encouraging outlook on families requires that 'pastoral conversion' we find in *Evangelii gaudium*". He added, "Pope Francis speaks of a profound trust in the hearts and the nostalgia of men. He expresses this very well in his reflection on education. Here we perceive the influence of the great Jesuit tradition in education in personal responsibility. He refers to two contrary dangers: 'laissez-faire' and the obsession with controlling and dominating everything".

The Holy Father writes, "'We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them". Cardinal Schönborn adds, "The great question, obviously, is this: how do we form consciences? How do we arrive at what is the key concept of all this great document, the key to correctly understanding Pope Francis' intentions: 'personal discernment', especially in difficult and complex situations? ... It is discernment that grants a person a mature character, and the Christian path should be of help in reaching this personal maturity. ... Only when this personal 'discernment' is mature is it also possible to arrive at 'pastoral discernment'; which is important especially in 'those situations that fall short of what the Lord demands of us'".

Pope Francis considers the fourth and fifth chapters to be central in terms of their content. "We cannot encourage a path of fidelity and mutual self-giving without encouraging the growth, strengthening and deepening of conjugal and family love", he writes. "As a pedagogic expert, Pope Francis knows well that nothing attracts and motivates as strongly as the positive experience of love. 'Speaking of love'. ... I recommend reflection on these pages. ... They encourage belief in love and trust in its strength. It is here that growth, another key word in *Amoris Laetitia*, finds its main location: in no other place does it manifest itself so clearly, but it can also turn cold ... But here it is made painfully visible how much harm wounds to love can cause, and how lacerating the experience of a failed relationship can be. Therefore it is unsurprising that it is largely the eighth chapter that has attracted attention and interest. Indeed, the question of how the Church treats these wounds, of how she treats the failure of love, has become for many a test question to understand whether the Church is truly the place where God's Mercy can be experienced".

This chapter "owes much to the intense work of the two Synods, to the extensive discussions in the arenas of public and ecclesial opinion. Here the fruitfulness of Pope Francis' method is shown. He expressly wished for an open discussion on the pastoral accompaniment of complex situations, and has been able to fully base this on the two texts that the two Synods presented to him to show the possibility of 'accompanying, discerning and integrating weakness'. ... With regard to those who are divorced and civilly remarried, he states: 'I am in agreement with the many Synod Fathers who observed that ... the logic of integration is the key to their pastoral care. ... Such persons need to feel not as excommunicated members of the Church, but instead as living members, able to live and grow in the Church and experience her as a mother who welcomes them always'. But what does this mean in practice? ... The Pope says clearly: 'What is possible is simply a renewed encouragement to undertake a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases'".

How this personal and pastoral discernment can and should be is the theme of the section of *Amoris Laetitia* made up of paragraphs 300-312. "In the 2015 Synod, in the Appendix to the statements by the 'Circulus germanicus' an 'Itinerarium' of discernment, was proposed, of the examination of conscience that Pope Francis has made his own. 'What we are speaking of is a process of accompaniment and discernment which "guides the faithful to an awareness of their situation before God'. But Pope Francis also recalls that 'this discernment can never prescind from the Gospel demands of truth and charity, as proposed by the Church'".

"Naturally this poses the question: what does the Pope say in relation to access to the sacraments for people who live in 'irregular' situations?", continued the cardinal. "Pope Francis reiterates the need to discern carefully the situation in keeping with St. John Paul II's *Familiaris consortio*. 'Discernment must help to find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of limits. By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God'. ... In the sense of this 'via caritatis', the Pope affirms, in a humble and simple manner, in a note that the help of the sacraments may also be given in 'certain cases'. But for this purpose he does not offer us case studies or recipes, but instead simply reminds us of two of his famous phrases: 'I want to remind priests that the confessional should not be a torture chamber but rather an encounter with the Lord's mercy' and the Eucharist 'is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak'".

"Is it an excessive challenge for pastors, for spiritual guides and for communities if the 'discernment of situations is not regulated more precisely? Pope Francis acknowledges this concern: 'I understand those who prefer a more rigorous pastoral care which leaves no room for confusion. However, he challenges this, remarking that 'we put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance. That is the worst way of watering down the Gospel'".

"Pope Francis trusts in the 'joy of love'", concludes Cardinal Schönborn. "Love is able to find the way. It is the compass that shows us the road. It is both the goal and the path itself, because God is love and love is from God. Nothing is more demanding than love. It cannot be obtained cheaply. Therefore, no-one should be afraid that Pope Francis invites us, with *Amoris Laetitia*, to take too easy a path. The road is not an easy one, but it is full of joy".

