

**Presentation of the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*
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Today is an important day in the pontificate of Pope Francis. For today the crown is put on an extensive process that he started soon after the beginning of his pontificate: it was a route that was intended to initiate in the Church a process of reflection regarding the pastoral care for marriage and family. For this there are several reasons: the christian view on marriage and family, in a world that is becoming increasingly secularized, is less understood, accepted and put into practice. This manifests itself mostly in the Western world, where secularization is so far advanced that christians in many places, particularly in Western Europe, are a minority. However, anywhere in the world a tendency towards secularization manifests itself by the impact of social media, albeit not everywhere to the same extent and in some parts of the world only in certain circles. Partly because of the prevailing mistrust in the institutions and the restraint to make definitive choices for life, a minority of catholics, certainly in Western Europe, contracts a church wedding. There are also fewer and fewer people who enter into a civil marriage, and often people simply choose to live together. On the other hand, we see many people who have chosen for marriage, getting stuck in it and - often after a very painful process for both - getting divorced.

Also the openness of marriage for receiving and educating children, as Church doctrine preaches on biblical grounds, is no longer seen widely as an essential value of marriage. Increasingly other relations than those between husband and wife, are *de facto* or legally equated to marriage. Under the influence of the gender theory the differences between the sexes are no longer seen as based on the biological differences between men and women, but seen as an autonomous personal choice.

The oppressive question in all these developments is: How can the Church find ways in pastoral care and preaching to bring its teaching on marriage and family so out into the limelight that it is easier to understand and that it will be accepted by more people? Ways also through which the Church can help married couples and families to live according to God's purposes. To answer these questions Pope Francis

has started the abovementioned route of reflection. This process included two Synods of Bishops. An Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, in which the presidents of the Bishops' Conferences of the whole universal Church participated and which took place in October 2014. Subsequently an Ordinary Synod of Bishops was held in October 2015, in which bishops participated who were elected by the Bishops' Conferences to which they belong. I attended the 2014 Extraordinary Synod as president of the Dutch Bishops' Conference. In 2015 I attended the Ordinary Synod of Bishops as an elected representative of the Dutch Bishops' Conference.

To both Synods of Bishops, the Pope on his own initiative added a number of Synod Fathers. He also invited married couples to bear witness to the way in which they bring the catholic view on marriage and family into practice. At the last Synod he invited a married couple from the Netherlands, Massimo and Patrizia Paloni. They attended with their youngest child, Davide. Later they will also speak.

That this large project involved a lot of work, will be clear when we realize that for both Synods a preparatory document, the *Lineamenta*, was written by the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops. Regarding these *Lineamenta* a global consultation has been organised. On the basis of the results of this global consultation, for both Synods a working paper was composed, an *Instrumentum Laboris*. Both Synods have recorded the results of their discussions, each in its own Final Document. The Final Documents were an advice of the Synod Fathers to the Pope.

Today we witness the culmination of this extensive project with the publication of the so-called Post-Synodal Exhortation, entitled *Amoris laetitia* (The Joy of Love). In this document the Pope gives his final conclusions in line with the two Synods. Given the size of the project and the importance of the treated themes for the Church, we may characterize the publication of this Post-Synodal Exhortation as a prominent moment in the pontificate of Pope Francis.

As more often before, with this publication he surprises the Church and the World. And this in several respects. So this week I, of course, had to adjust my agenda to prepare for the presentation of this document comprising 325 sections and nearly one hundred closely printed pages. It will take some time before one will have consumed the complete, very

rich content. The Pope himself recommends to read the Exhortation not in a hurry but to study it quietly and to get used to it.

What is also surprising is the character of the document. I would qualify the Post-Synodal Exhortation as a Church document with a striking existential character. You might say we are used to it of Pope Francis, but here it strikes a lot more than in his other publications. Of course Pope Francis primarily proclaims the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church on marriage and family. In addition to this he pays a lot of attention to the difficulties faced by people to understand the doctrine and to apply and hold to it.

Pope Francis realizes himself that resistance to the teaching of the Church not always plays a part. The choice of a purely civil marriage or simply living together are not always motivated by a rejection of christian marriage, but also by cultural and contingent situations: the prevailing mistrust of institutions in general, the difficulty which many have to take on a particular state of life and to assume commitments for the rest of life and the problems to find employment, to take out a permanent contract or to secure a sufficient income, because of which marriage is considered as a "luxury" (nr. 294).

Where it comes to so-called irregular situations, that is to say situations in which people enter into relationships which do not or do not in all respects meet the requirements of Church doctrine, the Pope urges all who work in the pastoral care that they accompany them with great mercy. This without giving up or harming Church doctrine, but accompanying them and being close to them with a lot of love and patience. They must not be excluded from Church activities, but be integrated in these activities as much as possible. In this, it is according to the Pope essential that priests and others who work in the pastoral care of married couples try to make as well as possible a 'distinction'. With this he means a constant effort to enlighten by the Word of God the concrete reality of life, the situations and relationships in which people live. He also recommends them to search for openness in people who live in an irregular situation to still shape their relation in accordance with Church doctrine.

The Exhortation consists of nine substantial chapters. Of course it is not amazing that in first chapter, entitled "In the Light of the Word", Pope Francis sheds light on the vision on marriage and family in Sacred Scripture. In Chapter II he discusses at length the actual reality and the

actual challenges for the family. In Chapter III the Pope stresses that among all contemporary difficulties of the family we have to look at Jesus, who will bring to completion God's plan with us, and so to discover or rediscover the vocation of the family. This chapter briefly presents a survey of the doctrine of the Church on marriage and family. In line with this, Chapter IV subsequently contains an explanation on love in marriage, on the basis of the canticle of love, written by the Apostle Saint Paul (1 Cor 13, 4-7; nr. 90). In Chapter V "Love made fruitful", the Pope stresses that conjugal love presupposes openness to pass on human life. In Chapter VI "Some pastoral perspectives", the Pope addresses the necessity to find new ways for the pastoral care for marriage and family, in which he limits himself to indicating some general principles. The Pope considers the development of more practical initiatives as a task for the bishops' conferences, parishes and communities. Chapter VII treats the education of children and Chapter VIII is about accompanying vulnerable relationships. Significant for the existential character of the document is the concluding Chapter IX about "The spirituality of marriage and the family", in which he indicates some ways for the family to achieve an intense life of faith and to give common and personal prayer a firm place in it.

I want to address in particular one subject which played an important role during both Synods of Bishops and that concerns the question whether people who are divorced and civilly remarried may receive the Holy Communion. On two places in the Post-Synodal Exhortation the Pope brings up this question where he, by the way, does not speak about people who are divorced and civilly remarried, but in a broader sense about people who are divorced and who have entered a new union. These people, according to the Pope, must not be given the feeling that they are excommunicated (nrs. 243 and 299). It is important to stress that in saying this, he is not saying something new. Excommunication is a canonical penalty which someone can incur automatically *latae sententiae* or which can be legitimately imposed or declared in case of severe forms of behavior or delicts. The situations in which this happens are limitative; it concerns a limited number of situations, but not the situation of people who are divorced and live in a new union. Nowhere in the Exhortation the Pope says that they may receive the Holy Communion. This means that in respect of those people who are divorced and live in a new union, the traditional praxis applies which

means that they cannot receive Communion, and which in 1981 is thus formulated by Pope John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio*:

“However, the Church reaffirms her practice, which is based upon Sacred Scripture, of not admitting to Eucharistic Communion divorced persons who have remarried. They are unable to be admitted thereto from the fact that their state and condition of life objectively contradict that union of love between Christ and the Church which is signified and effected by the Eucharist. Besides this, there is another special pastoral reason: if these people were admitted to the Eucharist, the faithful would be led into error and confusion regarding the Church's teaching about the indissolubility of marriage.” (No 84. Cf. *Communicating Worthily* Letter of the Dutch Bishops on the occasion of Corpus Christi 2012, June 10, 2012).

In reply to the question what the Church could offer to people in these situations, Pope Francis gives in Chapter VIII of the Exhortation the answer which was already mentioned above: people who work in the pastoral care must accompany these people and consider how they may be involved as much as possible in Church life. In this it is important to realize that God's grace is not only received through the sacraments, but also by hearing and reading the Word of God and by prayer.

As already mentioned, this papal document is entitled *Amoris laetitia*, "The Joy of Love". It is our duty as Church to promote and protect this joy, convinced that this joy for married couples and families themselves and for us as society is salutary. It is therefore our duty to be near to married couples and families according to our abilities and to accompany them with our prayer and with pastoral care, especially when they bear the heavy and painful burden of a marriage or family life that is broken. With this Exhortation the Pope urges us to do that.

Pope Francis concludes his Exhortation with a prayer to the Holy Family (Jesus, Mary and Joseph):

“Holy Family of Nazareth,
make us once more mindful
of the sacredness and inviolability of the family,
and its beauty in God's plan..”