



Archdiocesan Clergy Convocation
Pryzbyla Center
The Catholic University of America
Washington, D.C.
Tuesday, May 10, 2016
1:00 p.m.

ONE DAY PRIEST CONVOCATION

REMARKS

by

His Eminence
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This part of our priest convocation that calls for pastoral reflections on *Amoris Laetitia* is intended to look at the apostolic exhortation against the background of its doctrinal continuity and begin to address some of its pastoral implications.

Earlier, we had the keynote presentation by Dr. John Grabowski that provided reflections on some of the foundational theological aspects of the exhortation.

What I would like to do is discuss some of the pastoral implications for you and for me as shepherds of the flock entrusted to our care.

Each of us has received a copy of the apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, recently published by the USCCB Communications Office. It is available in the April 21, 2016 issue of *Origins*. It is also accessible on the Vatican website.

In anticipation of our conversation today, the Moderator's Office also provided material that consists of the four blogs that I did, respectively on a brief overview on the content of the exhortation; a reflection on the consensus it represents; the Magisterial continuity out of which it comes, and finally some of its pastoral implications and guidance.

It is that last point that I shall return to in order to develop a little more extensively in our meeting today.

The first of the blogs, which was issued on the day of the publication of the apostolic exhortation and contained a brief overview of its content, should now be superseded by the actual exhortation you now have.

The second blog entitled “Consensus Exhortation” underscored how the document reflects the consensus of the bishops who were a part of the 2014 Synod, the material provided to the Office of the Synod by episcopal conferences around the world following that meeting, and the discussions and material of the 2015 Synod.

In the efforts to hear how the teaching is lived and applied, Pope Francis relies greatly on the consensus that came out of the two Synods and is found in the *relatio synodi* of 2014 and the *relatio finalis* of 2015. In the January 2015 and January 2016 issues of the *Priest* magazine, I did summary accounts of both the 2014 and 2015 Synods which I hope you might have seen. At the end of all of the discussions and all of the reflections carried out over two full years, there emerges now this apostolic exhortation that I would call a “consensus exhortation.” Next I did a blog on the magisterial continuity of *Amoris Laetitia* simply to reaffirm what is so evident in the document – that it is steeped in the teaching tradition of the Church.

What I find so instructive in this apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, is how our Holy Father has relied on the teaching on marriage and human love of Blessed Paul VI, Saint John Paul II, and Benedict XVI. Particularly notable is the rich use of John Paul II’s catechesis on the body and on human love. But *Amoris Laetitia* also draws on the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and Saint Thomas Aquinas in its treatment of love and the Church’s pastoral mission.

From the days of the Council until today, the Church has been greatly blessed by a series of pontiffs, successors to Saint Peter, who have so well served the Church with their teachings. However, we have at times seen people being confused and misled about those teachings, beginning with the Council itself, due to an erroneous hermeneutic, that is, interpretation and application, of the teaching. It was Pope Benedict XVI who began explicitly to point out the failings and unacceptability of what has been called “a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture,” which he contrasted with the true hermeneutic of reform and renewal in the continuity of the Church. Precisely in order to understand what it is that Jesus is revealing to us, we turn to his Church and the continuous apostolic tradition in the Body of Christ to clarify, reaffirm and assure us.

In opening the Council, Saint John XXIII said he wanted the ancient faith to be exactly preserved in its entirety and yet proclaimed in a way in which it could be heard and embraced in our age and circumstances. Blessed Paul VI also had a goal to maintain the unity of the Church, particularly in the face of the tensions and challenges of the post-conciliar times and opposition to some Magisterial teaching.

This summons was a reaction to the primacy of the categories of law and obligation which had come to dominate Catholic moral theology in modern times.¹ The Council's focus on the revelation of the human person in Christ (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, no. 22) and the fulfillment of the human person through love (cf. *GS*, no. 24) were hermeneutical keys to the teaching of Saint John Paul II. Engagement with scripture was a key to John Paul II's moral teaching, whether in his catecheses on the body, his grounding of a theology of work in the opening chapters of Genesis in *Laborem exercens*, or his reflection on the encounter between Jesus and the Rich Young Man of Matthew 19 in the first chapter of his encyclical on moral theology, *Veritatis splendor*. Pope Benedict XVI extended this emphasis on the person and on scripture in his first encyclical into a focus on the God who is love and the love which flows from Him (*Deus caritas est*) and on the theological virtue of hope (in the encyclical *Spe salvi*).

These documents also contributed to the Church's social teaching along with *Caritas in veritate*. This engagement of the theological virtues at the heart of the Christian life was completed by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Lumen fidei*. (*Lumen fidei*, no. 7) All of these hallmarks of post-conciliar renewal are carried forward in *Amoris Laetitia*: the focus on the human person, the primacy of love, the deep engagement with scripture, and the turn to virtue and grace rather than law and obligation as the primary categories of Catholic moral teaching.

But the document clearly sounds important notes of its own, and significantly contributes to and applies these hallmarks of post-conciliar renewal. The focus on the person and his or her dignity is carried forward in the Holy Father's critique of what he calls "a culture of the ephemeral" (see *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 39)—a culture which views and treats others as sources of affective or sexual pleasure to be discarded when this pleasure runs dry. This pursuit of a shallow happiness falls short of the joy of which the Exhortation speaks. As was true for the Council, the dignity of the human person is fully disclosed in Christ but in this case especially in Christ's embrace of families with their struggles, in children and other vulnerable persons, and in sinners. The Church's teaching on the indissolubility of marriage and its moral teaching should not be treated as "dead stones to be hurled at others" (*AL*, 49), but as a summons to conversion to all of the Church's members.

Love is clearly at the center of *Amoris Laetitia*. The treatment of love which occupies the central chapters is a magnificent contribution to the modern magisterium's treatment of the subject. Not only does it beautifully synthesize Saint Thomas, Saint John Paul II, and Benedict XVI, but also adds to this synthesis a masterful and meditative reflection of the qualities of love discussed by Saint Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 (see *AL*, nos. 90-119). The treatment of love in chapter 4, is, as some commentators have hailed it: "the beating heart of the document."²

¹ See the incisive analysis of this history of "the morality of obligation" as opposed to the morality of happiness found in the Fathers of the Church and Scholastic doctors such as Aquinas provided by Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Mary Thomas Noble (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America press, 1995), 240-53.

² Nicholas Austin, S.J. "Discernment charged with merciful love!: Pope Francis' *Amoris Laetitia*, on Love in the Family," *Thinking Faith*. Available at: <http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/discernment-charged-merciful-love-pope-francis%E2%80%99-amoris-laetitia-love-family> (date of access: 4/8/16).

Pope Francis approaches his teaching ministry first and foremost as a pastor of souls. Indeed, in many places in the document one hears the voice of a pastor speaking directly to members of his flock, sharing his own experience and wisdom formed from many years of service to God's people.

For the Holy Father the pastoral mission of the Church, focused on the lived expression of mercy and love, is found on four principle activities: *listening, accompanying, discerning, and evangelizing*.

One can say that *Amoris Laetitia* is itself the fruit of very intensive LISTENING on the part of Pope Francis. The two synods on family called by the Holy Father were themselves preceded by consultation of local churches throughout the world on the lived situation of families, their challenges, and their experience. The Extraordinary Synod of 2014 prepared the agenda for the 2015 general assembly. Pope Francis modeled this listening activity by his attentive presence in the Synod assembly hall. Indeed, he comments on this experience at the outset of the Apostolic Exhortation:

Pope Francis understands this process of listening to the faithful and to his brother bishops to be a key part of his own teaching and pastoral ministry. It is part of the “synodality” or “journeying together” which he sees as essential to the Church at every level.³ The fruit of this listening is reflected in the generous citation and engagement of the reports of the two synods in this Exhortation.

The second activity on which the document focuses is ACCOMPANYING, the pastoral accompaniment of families by the community of the Church. In many ways this is an extension of listening and of the synodality to which it gives rise. The journeying together of all of the members of the Church implies this accompaniment. But it also calls for a change in pastoral style and intensity. Pope Francis calls pastors to do more than teach the Church's doctrine—though they clearly must do that. Pastors must “take on the ‘smell of the sheep’” whom they serve so that “the sheep are willing to hear their voice” (*EG*, no. 24). This requires a more careful and intensive formation of all who minister to families—lay ministers, catechists, seminarians, priests, and families themselves (see *AL*, nos. 200 -204).

In chapter 6 he also draws attention to stages of life where this pastoral accompaniment of families is particularly important: in preparing for marriage, in the first years after marriage, during times of crisis, in cases of marital breakdown, and when families are touched by death.

The Church's pastoral ministry to families is intended to help them to grow in the art of DISCERNING. A key part of discernment is the formation of conscience. The Holy Father insists that the Church's pastors must “make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them” (*AL*, no. 37).

³ See Pope Francis, “Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops” (October 17, 2016).

Part of this formation is presenting the teaching of the Church in its fullness and without compromise (cf. *AL*, no. 307) though in language which is welcoming rather than defensive or one-sided (cf. *AL*, nos. 36, 38). But it is families themselves who must be invited to understand how to apply and begin to live out this teaching in the particularity of their situations. Those in irregular situations, such as the divorced and civilly remarried should be invited to deeper inclusion in the life of the Church, but the Holy Father is clear that he is in no way changing the Church's doctrine nor making general changes to its sacramental practice or Canon Law (cf. *AL*, no. 300). He is inviting such families and the pastors who accompany them to discern what it means for them to walk the path of conversion.

This is Pope Francis's further elaboration of Saint John Paul II's distinction in *Familiaris consortio* between the law of gradualness and the gradualness of the law. The "law of gradualness" refers to the progressive nature of conversion, enabling couples to grow in holiness in living out their marital vocation. When they fall short they need to return to the mercy of God poured out in the cross of Christ and made accessible in the sacraments of the Church. The "gradualness of the law" on the other hand, is the erroneous idea that there are "different degrees or forms of precept in God's law for different individuals and situations" *Familiaris consortio*, no. 34.

Even in the midst of their challenges and imperfections, families are called to respond to the Holy Spirit's promptings. Admittedly, this individual process of discernment may not be easy. A person may know full well Church teaching, Pope Francis notes, yet have great difficulty in either understanding its inherent positive value, or in being able to fully embrace it right away because of circumstances (*Amoris Laetitia*, 301). Yet, the underlying moral principle which should inform both that personal discernment and the priest's ministry is that a person whose situation in life is objectively contrary to moral teaching can still love and grow in the faith, he or she can still take steps in the right direction and benefit from God's mercy and grace while receiving the assistance of the Church (*Amoris Laetitia*, 305).

The exhortation does not create some sort of internal forum process where, for example, a marriage can be annulled or where the objective moral order can be changed. The teachings of the Church on marriage and family, and conscience and moral decision-making, remain unchanged. The role of the priest in listening and offering affirmation or challenge to persons as they work through their own understanding of their situation, is not the same as absolving from the law or annulling a marriage.

Instead, pastoral dialogue, accompaniment and integration involve the development of conscience and also the expression of a level of support or confirmation for the judgment that the individual is making about the state of his soul or her soul. That judgment is the act of the individual and is the basis for their accountability before God.

Amoris Laetitia is not a list of answers to each individual human issue. Rather, it is a call to compassionate accompaniment in helping all to experience Christ's love and mercy. To the extent that our ministry does this, it is also an EVANGELIZING action. As we recall the challenge to go out, to encounter, and to accompany, we also recognize that this is at its heart an act of the evangelizing disciple.

In the action of going, encountering, sharing and accompanying, we also recognize that in the journey we, ourselves, are also drawing closer to the Lord. In all of our action of evangelizing, teaching, catechizing, counseling, admonishing, instructing, we also remember both God's liberating truth and saving mercy. None of us can claim yet to be perfect as is our heavenly Father. But we can grow closer to the Lord who will by his grace heal us so that we can have the life he wants for us.

One reason, I believe, so many priests have greeted this apostolic exhortation with joy and satisfaction is that we are grateful for this guidance as we do what we have always tried to do – walk with our people as shepherds guiding the flock as we all try to come closer to Jesus – the Good Shepherd and our Risen Lord.

As we carry out our pastoral responsibilities, we thank God first of all for the call and then for the guidance we receive from his Holy Church and particularly from our Holy Father, Pope Francis. Thank you.

May 5, 2016