



Is it Confusion or Different Approaches

January 30, 2017

A very small number of people, whose voices have been amplified by some of the Catholic media, have challenged the integrity of Pope Francis' post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*.

Yet, what seems to be at the heart of the issue is not a misstatement of doctrine in the exhortation but rather its invitation that we affirm the teaching of the Church on the indissolubility of marriage, the consequences of divorce and remarriage without benefit of annulment, and the place of pastoral accompaniment of those who do not fully follow the teaching, as well as the determining role of individual conscience when assessing personal culpability before God and therefore before his Church.

For some, the issues are very clear. The teaching is lucid, the canon law is exact and therefore the priest's responsibility is to apply the law. For others, the teaching of the Church is broader. The ancient and received teaching of the Church includes the recognition of the condition of the person, the ability of the individual to even understand the regulations of the law, the necessity of pastoral outreach and engagement, and the inviolability of individual conscience, even when it is erroneous.

Pope Francis is asking us to be aware of all these elements, the teaching on marriage and on conscience, as well as the example of Jesus' mercy, compassion and forgiveness.

At a recent meeting with a number of priests, when the topic of the pastoral implications of *Amoris Laetitia* and its pastoral application came up, most were explicit that they recognized an affirmation of their own pastoral concern and accompaniment in the apostolic exhorta-

tion.

It seems that what is at issue is not what the exhortation says but rather where one chooses to place the emphasis. Some seem much more comfortable emphasizing the teaching and the obligations of canon law. While so many more, the majority of bishops, including those who were a part of both synods on marriage, accept the canon law, but also see the Gospel value of accompaniment and the Church's recognition of the state of an individual's conscience in the whole process of judgment making.

In the story related in Saint John's Gospel of the woman caught in adultery, Jesus is confronted with the obligation, strict and clear, of the law, and he provides what the Church for 20 centuries has seen as the merciful response of the Lord.

Jesus is called upon by the scribes and the Pharisees who point out the obligations of the law to answer their question. "What do you have to say about the case?" It seems fair enough. A simple yes or no should suffice. The Gospel goes on to point out that "They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him" (John 8:6). The woman has been caught in adultery, the law says she should be stoned, therefore the conclusion is clear and simple – stone her!

What does Jesus do? He does not abolish the law. He does not annul the application of the law in this case. He does not deny that there is an expected response invoking the full rigor of the law. Nor does he apply the law in the way that is anticipated.

What he does is recognize the sinful human condition of the woman, avoids condemning her, and then tells her to go and sin no more.

We should see in this Gospel narrative more than just a recounting of the mercy of God at work but also an application of the lesson to ourselves. We are all caught up in the human condition. No one can claim to be perfect as is our heavenly Father. There must be space for that mercy and compassion that we all constantly need in order to be helped back up so that we can continue on our way trying to sin no more.

In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis puts it this way: "I understand those who prefer a more rigorous pastoral care which leaves no room for confusion. But I sincerely believe that Jesus wants a Church attentive to the goodness which the Holy Spirit sows in the midst of human weakness, a Mother who, while clearly expressing her objective teaching, 'always does what good she can, even if in the process, her shoes get soiled by the mud of the street'" (308). The internal quotation is taken from one of the Synod on Marriage and Family documents approved by the Synodal Fathers.

Yes, this approach involves what some would say are apparent contradictions. But if we begin with the recognition that Jesus came for our redemption, that the Son of Man has come

“to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28), and that it is not the righteous but sinners that the Son of Man has come to heal (cf. Mark 2:17), and if we take as our inspiration the image of Jesus, the one showing him to be the Good Shepherd with the lost sheep around his shoulders, we can begin to recognize what it is Pope Francis is telling us. The wider context for reading any particular sentence in *Amoris Laetitia* involves the two realities: the Fall/the human condition and the gratuitous redeeming mercy of God.

My experience with so many priests is that they are already living out their priesthood in the way envisioned by the Pope – with generosity and fidelity, striving to make present the merciful face of the Father to their people. *Amoris Laetitia* is an affirmation to every priest endeavoring to imitate the Good Shepherd, and a warm encouragement to continue this good work with the people entrusted to his care.

But it strikes me that there is even more of an undercurrent to the present position taken by a very small number of clergy and their media supporters. It seems that a part of the distress evident in what has been described as a “tempest in a teapot” is the fact that Pope Francis is challenging all of us to move into a far more Gospel-identified mode of living and being Church than we may have been comfortable with. We need to ask ourselves if perhaps the Church has not become too identified in the minds and hearts of many people with the politics and power struggles of the moment. Have we failed to persuade others of the significance of the Gospel message, so that they create the culture that reflects those values? Have we become too comfortable with announcing aspects of the Gospel but not necessarily witnessing its full demands?

The great charge that Jesus gave to us is to be his witnesses (cf. Acts 1:8). Years ago, Pope Paul VI reminded us in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (41).

Pope Francis gives us a model of bearing witness in word and deed, not just word, to the simplicity of life to which we are called in the Gospel.

Perhaps it might be very hard to let go of the symbols, medieval ornaments, and the ecclesial style and privileges that are marks of the Church of another era. It may also be difficult for all of us in leadership positions to recognize that decrees, declarations and statements are not the best way today in which we reach people, touch people, engage people, and strengthen their adherence to Christ or even bring them to Christ in the first place.

At the opening of the first synod on the family, there were those few voices that asked why we were even discussing the pastoral implications of the Church’s teaching since we already have the answers. The overriding majority of bishops from around the world at the synod recognized that what is needed today is not just a repetition of Church discipline, but an evangelizing outreach that would go out, encounter, engage and accompany those who should be with us and are not.

Once we start with the recognition that the teaching of the Church has not changed, nor has the call to compassionate accompaniment, nor has the Church's understanding of the role of human conscience, and the acceptance that this is what *Amoris Laetitia* is presenting, then any real doubts or concerns should find their response.



Knowing the Authentic Teaching of the Church

April 30, 2016

The Synod of Bishops on the Family, like the preceding Synod on the New Evangelization, universally recognized that many people either do not know or do not fully understand what the Church teaches. As a result, they are impoverished and they journey through life in darkness or twilight, without the light that shows the way. Thus, key to the pastoral initiatives urged by Pope Francis in *Amoris Laetitia* is the desire to help people in their personal situations to better know, understand, appreciate and appropriate their Catholic faith.

In many ways, it has always been this way. Precisely what the Lord reveals to us – what the Church teaches – was a fundamental concern of the various ecumenical councils of the Church, including the Council of Trent (1545-63), which was called in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. To remedy the widespread confusion regarding the faith that existed at that time, the Council called for the production of a systemic digest for use in broadly instructing people in the beliefs and teachings of the Church and as a guidebook for leading a Christian life. The result was the Roman Catechism, also known as the Catechism of the Council of Trent.

This year marks the 450th anniversary of the publication of that monumental document by Pope Saint Pius V, whose feast day is today. Despite his fairly short pontificate of six years (1566-72), the legacy of Pius V would influence the Church for the next five centuries. It largely fell to him to begin the implementation of the decrees of the Council, which had closed a little more than two years before he became pope. In addition to the Roman Catechism of 1566, Pius V began a renewal of the Church, undertaking reforms of Church life and the liturgy, enacting the Roman Missal and bringing unity into worship, erecting the seminary system, and defending the faith.

When the Catholic faith came to these shores, the bishops here looked to the Roman Catechism to produce a question-and-answer instructional resource known as the Baltimore Catechism, published in 1855. In time, however, as circumstances changed and in the light of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, it became necessary to envision a fresh articulation of our ancient faith.

By the late 60s and early 70s, it became clear that there was a need for a new publication that could serve as a touchstone for what the Church teaches and which presented our faith in an intelligible and inviting manner. It was a privilege then to have the opportunity as a young priest in the early 1970s to work with Capuchin Father Ronald Lawler and a handful of others to help produce *The Teaching of Christ: A Catechism for Adults*. Now in its fifth edition, many people have said that they found this work to be helpful in learning the faith.

Later, in response to a proposal of the 1983 Synod of Bishops, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1993) was published for use by the entire Church Universal. Following the same basic format of the Roman Catechism, this work is an indispensable tool for anyone who seeks to arrive at a comprehensive and systematic intellectual knowledge of the content of the faith. Pope John Paul II said that “it is offered to every individual who asks us to give an account of the hope that is in us (cf. 1 Peter 3:15) and who wants to know what the Catholic Church believes” (*Fidei Depositum*, IV).

Another good source is the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*. A *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* and a *Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church (YouCat)*, both in question-and-answer format, have also been produced.

Each of these sources are complete and they are authentic. Their content is not someone’s subjective opinion about what the Church believes or should believe. Here we can find the true teaching of the Church proclaimed with authority by those who are responsible for guarding the integrity of the faith.

We all need to know more about our faith for several reasons – one, so that we can live it more fully; and two, so that we can share it more effectively with others. The faith that comes to us from the Apostles still has the power to brighten our path and transform our life and the lives of everyone in the world. The more we know and the more we understand about Jesus Christ and what the Lord reveals to us in and through the Church, the more our lives are enriched and the more we can be a light to the world.



The Pastoral Implications of Amoris Laetitia

April 22, 2016

In previous reflections we have touched on a brief overview of the content of Amoris Laetitia, how it reflects the consensus of the bishops of both the 2014 and 2015 Synods and the continuity of its message with the teaching of the Church. Now, I would like to look at the contribution of Amoris Laetitia to the Church's pastoral ministry and evangelizing mission.

In Amoris Laetitia specifically, we find long-held, theologically sound teaching that displays the reality of practical, pastoral guidance that is offered to someone who, like all of us, is struggling to live up to the fullness of the norm, but within the circumstances and situations in which they find themselves.

In responding pastorally to those whose lives more reflect the brokenness of the human condition, rather than the beauty and blessing of the Church's received teaching, Pope Francis affirms that our task is not to scold, but to sustain them in faith and hope. We need to begin patiently and lovingly to accompany them with special concern, helping them to live as fully as possible the life-giving experience of Christ and his Church. In this spiritual journey, each person can be at a different place. We are called to recognize this fact as we try to go out, encounter and accompany others.

In chapter eight, the Holy Father follows the teaching of Saints John Paul II and Thomas Aquinas to remind us of the distinction between objective moral norms and their application in uniquely concrete circumstances. Thus, he says that pastoral practice needs to take into account individual conscience, which not only can recognize that a given situation does not correspond objectively to revealed Gospel teaching, but can also be that voice of the Spirit which prompts the person to make the most generous response to God he or she can considering the complexity of one's human limitation (Amoris Laetitia, 303).

One starting point is the realization that there is an objective moral order. It is written in our hearts as the natural law and proclaimed in revelation. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that the Decalogue, the Commandments, are a privileged expression of the natural law (CCC, 2070). Saint Thomas Aquinas speaks of natural law in his Treatise on the Law (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 94). He also describes the role of charity or love in human actions and the determination of rectitude in various places of the *Summa Theologiae*, II-II.

In the work of pastoral ministry we must consider the teaching, the role of the priest in working with the person to understand more fully how the law and teaching apply in his or her own life situation. We also must consider the conscientious judgment before God of the person in light of where that person might be and any mitigating factors (*Amoris Laetitia*, 305).

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 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.

In all of this, we must 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.

To help people gain a greater knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of marriage and family, the Archdiocese of Washington has prepared a number of resources to promote enrichment and healing. These may be found at VisibleSign.org.



The Magisterial Continuity of Amoris Laetitia

April 21, 2016

In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis does more than just present the teaching of the Church on marriage, which he does so beautifully. He also calls for pastoral reflection and action. His starting point, and one we need to appreciate as we receive this Magisterial document in the Year of Mercy, is the fact that this post-synodal apostolic exhortation reflects the consensus of the 2014-15 Synods of Bishops, as I discussed previously. It also shows the continuity of the teaching that we find in the conciliar era beginning with Saint John XXIII following through with Blessed Paul VI, Saint John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and now Pope Francis. If *Amoris Laetitia* is properly placed in the context of the constant teaching of the Church, we will see an affirmation of both the teaching on the indissolubility of marriage and also the Church's universal practice of applying that unchanging teaching to individual lived experience and concrete situations.

Pope Francis invites us in this exhortation to recognize and value marriage and family as visible signs of God's love and his plan for humanity, and he also encourages us to be "a sign of mercy and closeness wherever family life remains imperfect or lacks peace and joy" (*Amoris Laetitia*, 5). These challenges to marriage and family, and the pain that come with them, are well known, including divorce and other forms of family estrangement, single-parent households, economic struggle, death in the family, violence, same-sex or extra-marital sexual relations, and more. All of this highlights the increasing distance between our Gospel vision of marriage and family life as it is seen in Catholic teaching and the experience of people in the human condition.

In urging concrete steps to support married couples and families, and bring hope and healing to those in difficult situations, Pope Francis follows in the longstanding tradition of the Church Magisterium. The continuity is made clear by the astounding amount of citations from previous pontificates and the tradition of the Church in general. For example, there

are 56 citations from the teachings of Saint John Paul II, 22 citations to the Second Vatican Council, 22 citations to Saint Thomas Aquinas, 19 citations to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 11 citations to the magisterium of Benedict XVI, 10 citations to Blessed Paul VI, and more. While we can refer to *Amoris Laetitia* as a consensus document, we might also name it the continuity exhortation.

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 the 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.

In the nearly 27 year pontificate of Saint John Paul II, the third longest pontificate in the history of the papacy, we see a refocusing of the energy and vision of the Church, an explanation and application of the conciliar teaching. Pope Benedict XVI, a gifted theologian who was at the side of Pope John Paul II for most of his pontificate, and was an advisor at the Council, reminded all of us that there is an extraordinary theological richness to what we proclaim in the Creed.

Now Pope Francis picks up the threads of the energizing focus of the Council while standing on the foundational work of his predecessors.



Consensus Exhortation

April 11, 2016

One of the many aspects of the apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, that I find particularly noteworthy is that it expresses the Holy Father's engagement with the bishops who attended both the 2014 and the 2015 Synods on marriage and all of the material that was a part of those two gatherings that spoke about marriage, the challenges to marriage and of course the beauty and blessings of marriage.

Following the mind and words of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Francis has placed great emphasis on his unity with the bishops as they carry out their teaching and governance role in the Church. The Council reminds us that bishops, always with and never without Peter, share a responsibility for the life of the Church. Pope Francis has called upon all of us, but especially bishops, to recognize that it is not just one voice that guides the whole Church but the action of the Holy Spirit working in the hearts and minds of the faithful but particularly in the work, ministry and charism of the bishops.

The Holy Father has highlighted, once again, the role of bishops in collaboration with him in the overall responsibilities for leadership, teaching and pastoral ministry of the Church. You may recall that in February of 2014, the Holy Father, at a consistory of the cardinals, asked us to begin to reflect on the challenges to marriage today. He then called for a Synod in 2014 that addressed the difficulties that marriage faces and reminded us of the heavily secular culture we live in, of the materialism that is a part of the mentality of many people, the individualism that dominates our culture, particularly in the Western world and in the United States, and the relativism that is at the heart of so much of the moral judgment that is made today. Here the Pope noted that it is precisely in this context that our people live and that our teaching must help them move beyond.

In the 2015 Synod, the focus was on the substance of the Church's teaching on marriage and family and its relevance today. The Synod affirmed that there is a difference between the teaching on the indissolubility of marriage, a doctrine of the Church, and the pastoral judgment concerning relationship to the Sacraments. The two realities are greatly related but they are not the same thing. I pointed out in earlier writings, blogs, interviews and in other communications that we must be careful not to mix together as if there were no distinctions among: God's revelation to us in Jesus Christ; the Church's articulated doctrine; Church law which attempts to apply the teaching, and the evaluation of the specific concrete situation of each believer. The context of both Church law and the pastoral assessment is the loving, pastoral assistance of the pastors of the Church.

What this post-synodal apostolic exhortation is highlighting is both what the Synod in 2014 said about the challenges to married people and the cultures in which they live, and then what the second Synod in 2015 also said about the beauty and the blessing of marriage and our need to foster and share that wonderful teaching.

What I find so instructive in this apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, is how our Holy Father has relied on a number of theological sources including: Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Common Doctor of the Church; the Magisterium of the Church, and in particular the teaching of Saint John Paul II. Then in the efforts to hear how that teaching is lived and applied today, Pope Francis relies greatly on the consensus that came out of the two Synods and found in the *relatio synodi* of 2014 and the *relatio finalis* of 2015.

What this says is that the Pope together with bishops from around the world have for two years discussed, prayed, listened, reflected and discussed again and again how to present the Church's teaching on marriage in a way that it is inviting and compelling and at the same time engage people who live in a marriage that does not reflect perfectly and entirely in the Church's teaching.

Pope Francis gives an example for all of us that if we are involved in the work, ministry and particularly in the pastoral life of the Church, we have to be aware of the teaching, of the need to internalize that teaching and at the same time of the individual circumstances in which that teaching is lived.

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."

It is important to note, notwithstanding some of the news articles and blogs, that every paragraph of the final *relatio* of the Synod was approved by a two-thirds majority of the bishops and that nearly every paragraph received close to 95% support. What this apostolic exhortation is confirming for us is the validity and the value of the Second Vatican Council's call for collegial reflection, that is the bishops coming together and working together, always with and never without Peter.

This apostolic exhortation highlights in an extraordinary manner the importance of the consensus that the bishops arrived at and that he as Peter, head of the Church, and in communion with his brothers, now affirms and confirms.



On Love in the Family: The Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis

April 8, 2016

“The Joy of Love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church.” With these words, Pope Francis begins his post-synodal apostolic exhortation entitled *Amoris Laetitia* (On Love in the Family), which was signed on March 19, the Solemnity of Saint Joseph, patron of our spiritual family, the Church.

In the opening chapters, Pope Francis discusses God’s creation and plan for marriage and family as revealed in scripture, and how it contrasts with the experiences of the family in the human condition and the challenges that families, and those who wish to form families, face in the world today. Particularly challenging is an individualism that is concerned only with one’s desires, as well as the throwaway culture that sweeps away marriage and family whenever they prove inconvenient or tiresome. Against this is needed a greater effort to help couples and families to respond better to the grace God offers them and to form their consciences as they make their own pilgrim journey through life.

The Holy Father then reminds us of the vocation of the human family which is revealed in the infinite love of the Lord who was made incarnate in a human family, and who gave himself for our sake and who continues to dwell in our midst. Quoting extensively from scripture and Church teaching, Pope Francis affirms that the common life of husband, wife and children can be steeped in and strengthened by sacramental grace. For those in irregular situations, continues the Pope, Christ inspires the Church to turn to them with love and affection to assist them in overcoming the trials they face.

At the center of the Gospel of marriage and family is love, says the Holy Father. Offering

counsel to couples, family members and all of us while reflecting on Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, he explains that authentic love is patient and merciful, love is at the service of others and is marked by generosity and humility, it is neither rude nor resentful, and it rejoices with others in hope and fruitfulness. Love surmounts even the worst barriers and always brings new life. Furthermore, he emphasizes, dialogue, quality time, valuing the other person and keeping an open mind are essential for experiencing, expressing and fostering love in marriage and family life.

Sadly, as has been said, this is not always the experience of people. In the second half of his exhortation, Pope Francis provides some pastoral perspectives, saying that the Church wishes, with humility and compassion, to reach out to these people and families and help them through discernment, dialogue and prayerful support and understanding to overcome obstacles.

Without claiming to present an entire pastoral plan, the Holy Father calls for a family apostolate that offers more adequate catechesis and formation, not only of engaged and married couples and their children, but also priests, deacons, seminarians, consecrated religious, catechists, teachers, social workers, medical professionals and other pastoral workers.

Formation for marriage and family life needs to begin at an early stage, Pope Francis urges. A more intensive long-term and short-term marriage preparation, as well as continuing to accompany newly-married couples, will provide the tools needed to face trials together and thereby prevent in the first place problems that might lead to a break-up of the marriage and family. Education of children in schools, parishes and within the family with respect to caring for one another, moral virtues, socialization, fostering good habits – all these are necessary

If there is a breakdown that leads to separation or even divorce, that loving accompaniment by the Church needs to continue, said the Holy Father. "It is important that the divorced who have entered a new union should be made to feel part of the Church," he added, and pastoral care to their children needs to be a primary concern (243-45). Likewise, the Church accompanies with love those who are co-habiting or who experience a same-sex attraction to help them to carry out God's will in their lives.

The rule to follow in all cases, the Pope makes clear, is the love and mercy of the Lord. "It is a matter of reaching out to everyone, of needing to help each person find his or her proper way of participating in the ecclesial community and thus to experience being touched by an 'unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous' mercy," he says. "No one can be condemned forever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel! Here I am not speaking only of the divorced and remarried, but of everyone, in whatever situation they find themselves. Naturally, if someone flaunts an objective sin as if it were part of the Christian ideal, or wants to impose something other than what the Church teaches, he or she can in no way presume to teach or preach to others; this is a case of something which separates from the community (cf. Mt 18:17).

Such a person needs to listen once more to the Gospel message and its call to conversion. Yet even for that person there can be some way of taking part in the life of community, whether in social service, prayer meetings or another way that his or her own initiative, together with the discernment of the parish priest, may suggest" (297).

Marriage and family, as we know from personal experiences, endure all the pains and sufferings, the trials and tribulations of the human condition. Yet, we know that with and through the Risen Christ, all things are made new. Marriage and family are revitalized and are made into the marriage and family that God wants for us.

This apostolic exhortation, which follows on the Synod of Bishops that met in October of 2014 and 2015 to discuss the challenges to marriage and family today, reflects the consensus of those meetings and many voices.

Throughout the Synod process – which was supplemented by the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia, an array of books and articles, and vigorous discussion amongst many people who were following the Synod – there was universal recognition by all of the critical importance of marriage and family to humanity. More specifically, it was widely understood that a special task of the Synod, and thus the Church, was to help pastorally those who find themselves in unique or challenging situations and to patiently and lovingly accompany them with special concern, helping them to live as fully as possible the life-giving experience of Christ and his Church.

Pope Francis has used these discussions to inform this exhortation, his own pastoral teaching to aid in reflection, dialogue and pastoral practice. Over the course of 325 paragraphs in nine chapters, the Holy Father points the way to how the Church might take steps to support married couples and families in their lives, and to mercifully bring hope and healing to those who find themselves in broken and wounded situations, with a sensitivity toward the diversity of particular relationships and cultures.

The exhortation is sure to generate much discussion in the secular media, but instead of viewing it through their particular lens, I strongly suggest that you read the document itself to know what our Holy Father is really saying.

Given that this exhortation was released earlier today, it is not possible to fully analyze *Amoris Laetitia*, but in the coming days, I will revisit this teaching and more fully discuss the fruits that it offers us and the world. In the meantime, it falls to us now to read and reflect upon this pastoral gift from our Holy Father in this Easter season. Let us also join in his prayer:

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, in you we contemplate the splendor of true love;
to you we turn with trust Holy Family of Nazareth,
grant that our families too may be places of communion and prayer,
authentic schools of the Gospel and small domestic churches.

Holy Family of Nazareth, may families never again experience violence, rejection and division; may all who have been hurt or scandalized find ready comfort and healing.
Holy Family of Nazareth, make us once more mindful of the sacredness and inviolability of the family, and its beauty in God's plan.
Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Graciously hear our prayer.
Amen.



Conclusion of the Synod of Bishops on the Family

October 26, 2015

With the celebration of Holy Mass yesterday, the 14th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome came to a close. Together with an Extraordinary Synod held last year, this gathering of bishops representative of the Church in different parts of the world, joined by a variety of experts and observers, was asked by Pope Francis to consider questions concerning marriage and family in our world today. More specifically, the two synods were tasked with reflecting upon, discussing, and offering suggestions with respect to the vocation and mission of marriage and family, the myriad challenges to them, evangelization of society and culture with respect to marriage and family, and also how best to pastorally care for married couples and their families, including both strengthening marital and family life, and helping to heal those marriages and families that are wounded or broken.

It was a great privilege for me to participate in both of these synods on the family, which are intended to be viewed as part of a single process. While the many challenges might seem daunting, while the landscape may appear dark, I have seen throughout many bright lights, including the testimonies of faithful married couples at the synods and also the witness of couples and families I see every day in our own archdiocesan Church of Washington. It has been heartening also to see the wide range of involvement throughout the Church and society to consider ways to foster marriage and family.

The work of these two assemblies of bishops was supplemented formally and informally by input from dioceses and other religious communities from around the world; an array of books, articles and speeches by bishops, priests, and laity; and vigorous discussion on the Internet,

in letters to the editor, and amongst family and friends. To this we can add the huge media attention – some reports more accurate than others. In a certain way, the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia served as a prelude to the recently-concluded Synod. The vast breadth of discussion about the Synod and the issues pertaining to marriage and family – which we can safely estimate involved millions of people – shows the vast breadth of concern for these fundamental realities of human existence. Deep down in the heart of humanity is the realization that marriage and family are critically important.

The extent of these discussions, some quite animated, also demonstrates the importance that people place on our Catholic faith as revealed truth. They understand that the beautiful and scripturally-rooted vision of human love that we strive to live and offer to the world is Good News that is essential if our society is to survive.

Throughout the Synod process, Pope Francis has called us to reflection, prayer, listening to one another and being open to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Answers to questionnaires that had been sent to dioceses and communities were used to create the working document for the 2014 Synod, which in turn served as a starting point for discussion by the Synod Fathers. These talks were the basis for a report that effectively guided the discussion in the recently concluded 2015 Synod.

At this latter gathering, the Synod Fathers both met as a whole and also broke out into smaller discussion groups. Our Holy Father also addressed the assembly to open and close the Synod. What was heard in the interventions, that is, in the short speeches to the gathering, as well as in the discussion groups, was doctrinal affirmation, awareness of the challenges to family life today, and also proposed pastoral practices which our present situation requires. The Synod understood that what is needed now is a way to bring people to experience the love and mercy of God, even if different specific approaches were advocated on this point or that. On the whole, this has been a positive process that I believe will bear great fruit, spiritually and pastorally.

What comes next after all of this reflection, discussion, and exchange of ideas and pastoral reflections over nearly the last two years? Now our Holy Father in his Petrine ministry will engage in concrete action to make the aim of the Synod a reality. To a certain degree, Pope Francis has done this already with a revision of some of the rules governing annulment proceedings. Added to that, we can expect him to take further pastoral steps to support and sustain married couples and families in their lives, bring hope and healing to those who find themselves in difficult situations, and encourage a civilization of love that values and fosters marriage and children, including urging Christian families to bear witness to God's saving love and grace.

During this time, while the Synod is officially concluded, the work goes on and I ask your continued prayers for the renewal of marriage, family and the entire world.



Reflections from the Synod

October 17, 2014

Greetings and prayerful best wishes from Rome.

Since so much is being written and said about the progress of the Synod of Bishops on the Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of the New Evangelization, I thought it would be helpful to share a few thoughts from the perspective of someone inside the Synod.

In so many of the short talks given by Synod participants, the beautiful and scripturally-rooted vision of the Catholic understanding of marriage was lifted up as the starting point of our discussion. It was universally recognized how important the bond of marriage is and that it is indissoluble. At the same time, our understanding of marriage was seen as a source of encouragement for people trying fully to live that sacramental state of life.

A second major point included many reflections on the situation in which marriage is lived today in the midst of the human condition. What so many people are hearing from our culture today does not correspond to the Church's teaching on marriage. Consequently, the challenges are many. There are large numbers of failed, broken and nonfunctioning marriages and numerous statistics were cited to show how many people live in second marriages or do not bother to get married at all. All of this highlights the increasing distance between our Gospel vision of marriage as it is seen in our teaching and the actual lived reality in concrete practice.

We also heard a great deal about the influence of the dominant secular culture. It was noted that there is little or no societal support for the Gospel view of marriage. In fact, the opposite is more likely the reality. Social structures and institutions that once supported the Judeo-Christian tradition dominant in Europe and found reflected in various parts of the world,

no longer provide the societal context for young adults today.

In consequence of this state of affairs, there is serious reason to doubt whether the Church's understanding of marriage is what many, many people today understand by marriage. In many places, there is no societal expectation of marriage as an enduring lifelong commitment to a family.

How are we to respond in this type of environment?

Many Synodal Fathers highlighted the need for the Church to be clear, convincing and effective in her timeless teaching. This is a continuous task that the Church has always faced but, as recognized in the New Evangelization, we need to find better ways of passing on our understanding of the faith and evoking a commitment from our young people.

Once the discussion turned to how effective has our teaching been and how many people really understand the nature of the sacrament of marriage and its indissolubility, the conversation focused on healing those who have been wounded by these cultural currents.

It was pointed out that, in addition to teaching, the Church has to approach marriages today, particularly for those people who were married, divorced and/or remarried, with a sense of healing and find a way to bring people to experience the love and mercy of God.

Here it was pointed out that mercy is not opposed to truth but follows on it. In fact mercy flows from the truth. It is the truth that brings freedom.

When the question of responding to the current situation moved from the teaching to the healing dimension, it was necessary to determine what exactly happened in the case of individual couples. This brought the discussion into the area of annulments and the need to streamline that process and even provide a more direct, clear and easily accessible structure to reach a determination as to the validity of their marriage.

It was generally agreed that the context of our discussion today is radically different than even a quarter of a century ago. Now we also face issues of "same-sex marriage" and gender identity as a matter of choice. Thus, we need to find a better way of expressing our Catholic faith in a language that is accessible to the many people who have drifted away from the faith, helping them to better appreciate the Good News that is Jesus' revealed truth on marriage and the nature of the human person.

Finally, there was the growing recognition that we need to be able to reach out in an inviting manner to those who find themselves in situations that call for the presence of Gospel healing and accompany such people with love on the journey that is intended to bring all of us closer to Christ. For example, while the Church's teaching on human sexuality is not up for debate, it is important that we examine the language we use and our pastoral approach

toward individuals with same-sex attraction.

Much has been discussed at this Synod and the discussion will go on after it concludes. This assembly is part of a much larger process, which will continue with a Synod next year and beyond. Pastoral solutions to intractable problems are not going to come easy. Yet, we are going to try to do what Jesus has asked us to do, listening to one another, talking to one another and remaining open to the Holy Spirit. I ask for your prayers as the Synod work continues.