

POPE

Amoris Laetitia Overview: We Advance Together, the Strong Helping the Weak

"Love coexists with imperfection" (Amoris Laetitia 113)

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The first thing to realize about the new Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* from Pope Francis is that it is long — more than 260 pages. The pope acknowledges, “Given the rich fruits of the two-year synod process, this Exhortation will treat, in different ways, a wide variety of questions. This explains its inevitable length. Consequently, I do not recommend a rushed reading of the text” (AL 7).

After my own initial examination of the entire text, I think it is possible to offer a few preliminary reflections. Nonetheless, I encourage everyone to read the full text as soon as possible. Pope Francis offers some powerful words of insight, comfort and challenge for all people, and his presentation must

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Spiru guides us toward the entire truth (cf. John 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does.

In short, we hear an echo of St. John XXIII, who famously stated in his opening address to the bishops of the Second Vatican Council:

What is needed is that this certain and unchangeable doctrine, to which loyal submission is due, be investigated and presented in the way demanded by our times. For the deposit of faith, the truths contained in our venerable doctrine, are one thing; the fashion in which they are expressed, but with the same meaning and the same judgment, is another thing. This way of speaking will require a great deal of work and, it may be, much patience. (John XXIII, Address Opening the Second Council of the Vatican, October 11, 1962)

This is a recurring theme in the Exhortation. The teaching of the Church on marriage and family is a constant, but the ways in which that teaching is expressed and lived in practical, pastoral ways is another. Just as St. John declared, Francis agrees that such an approach will demand a lot of work and much patience! A substantial portion of the Exhortation presents and affirms the Church’s teaching on marriage and family, grounded in scripture and tradition. It is a beautiful and often poetic presentation, building on a variety of sources.

However, the pope also states, “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 need a healthy dose of self-criticism. ... We have long thought that simply by stressing doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace, we were providing sufficient support to families.”

He continues:

We find it difficult to present marriage more as a dynamic path to personal development and fulfillment than as a lifelong burden. We also find it hard to 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 36-37)

This emphasis on the role of conscience recurs several times within the document, and the pope offers an extensive presentation on the formation of conscience along with long established conditions of mitigation which might permit a variety of pastoral judgments.

