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Interpreting Amoris Laetitia 'through the lens of Catholic tradition'

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Post Francis' post-synodal apostolic exhortation Amoris Laetitia in Vatican City on April 8, 2016. Credit: Daniel Ibanez/CNA.



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By Andrea Gagliarducci

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Vatican City, Apr 8, 2016 / 11:00 am (CNA/EWTN News).- While some passages in Pope Francis' new document may be unclear and open to multiple interpretations, the correct view is that which aligns with the tradition and teaching of the Church, said a synod consultor and leading expert on Catholic family studies.

The pope's exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* must be read in "doctrinal continuity," said Fr. José Granados, vice president of the John Paul II Pontifical Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family and consultor of the Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops.

"If there are doubts or some paragraph remain unclear, the correct interpretation is that in accordance with the constant teaching of the Church," he told CNA.

"Pope Francis has repeatedly said that he did not want to change any doctrinal item, and this must be the key through which we interpret the document," he said.

Pope Francis' highly anticipated post-synodal apostolic exhortation on the gifts and challenges of family life was published April 8.

Titled *Amoris Laetitia*, or *The Joy of Love*, the document is the conclusion of a two-year synod process at the Vatican that gathered hundreds of bishops from around the world to discuss both the beauty and challenges of family life today.

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Both of the synods sparked controversy amid speculation over whether there would be a change in the Church's practice that the divorced-and-civilly remarried may not receive Communion. In accordance with the words of Jesus that "anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery," the Church says that those

living in adultery – or any other unrepentant grave sin – may not receive Communion.

In his 1981 exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, St. John Paul II wrote, "The Church reaffirms her practice, which is based upon Sacred Scripture, of not admitting to Eucharistic Communion divorced persons who have remarried."

In his new document, Francis stresses the importance of individual discernment over one-size-fits-all style rules. He suggested that in some cases, a person who is divorced-and-civilly-remarried may not be in a state of mortal sin, due to mitigating factors such as a lack of full knowledge and consent.

The document has immediately been met with confusion, raising questions about whether this constitutes an actual change in practice, and if so, under what circumstances.

Fr. Granados offered a lens through which to view the exhortation. He emphasized that when certain areas are cloudy or unclear, one must interpret them in conformity with established magisterial teaching of the Catholic Church.

"The Pope shows that he wants to re-propose what the Synod said, sometimes offering some new issues as well, like the section on the education of love. In the end, I think the document must be read in a doctrinal continuity, as it is fit to a Catholic hermeneutic," he said.

Fr. Granados explained that "the exhortation must be interpreted as in continuity with St. John Paul II's *Veritatis Splendor*, which was aimed at teaching the moral teaching of the Church." The Pope does acknowledge absolute moral norms, he said, pointing to paragraph 245 of the document, which says, "never, ever take your child hostage," in relation to divorced parents with children.

Fr. Granados stressed that a pastoral exhortation "cannot address norms coming from the Divine Law received by Christ, what the Church cannot change," and *Amoris Laetitia* is no exception.

He added that there are only some disciplinary norms on Sacraments that the Church can change, such as "the fact that someone divorced and remarried in a new civil union can serve as a Godfather."

The exhortation "addresses explicitly these norms," saying that "there is a need for a discernment," he said.

One of the signals of strong continuity with the traditional teaching of the Church, the priest suggested, is the strong praise paid to Bl. Paul VI's

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encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, which reaffirmed the Church's traditional teaching against the use of artificial contraception.

"*Amoris Laetitia* wants to reaffirm *Humanae Vitae's* teaching. There is a reference to conscience, but conscience is always meant to be rightly formed. There is never an opposition between conscience and moral law," Fr. Granados said.

Amoris Laetitia thus "emphasizes the need to keep on forming consciences, so that people see in *Humanae Vitae* the only true way to live sexuality in the conjugal union."

"*Humanae Vitae's* 50th anniversary will be celebrated soon, but it is in fact an encyclical with a concrete vision of the future: it tackled the issue of the loss of a sense of sexuality that started with the sexual revolution," Fr. Granados stressed.

The exhortation also rejects abortion, gender ideology, euthanasia, while at the same time it praises large families.

These issues, Fr. Grandos said, "are pivotal to expressing a culture of family, the only kind of culture through which we announce the Gospel of Christ."

"Christian faith cannot be lived in private, in the intimacy of an isolated and subjective conscience. It is situated in the world and in the communion among men, where God manifest himself and opens us a path of fullness toward Him."

The consultor of the Synod of Bishops also maintained that "the document presents some original contribution."

"In the document, we can glimpse the big pictures of Pope Francis' pastoral efforts, and his wish to bring Christ, and his project of Love, to all the family, so that they can live the larger life of the Gospel," he said.

He added that "the text presents a renewed proposal for an education directed at families," as well as sexual education oriented toward love and helping prepare people for marriage.

Finally, he said, "the exhortation stresses the need that the Church accompany families in order to integrate everyone – even the furthest ones – into the vocation that Christ taught us."

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