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## 'Amoris Laetitia': Start with Chapter 4

Thomas Reese | Apr. 8, 2016 Faith and Justice  
Amoris Laetitia

If you are a layperson and want to read the pope's apostolic exhortation on the family, skip the first three chapters and start with Chapter 4. If you are a priest, moral theologian, or divorced Catholic, read Chapter 8.

The 263-page exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* ("The Joy of Love") [1] was released at noon today at the Vatican, 6 A.M. Eastern Time.

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See *NCR* Vatican correspondent Joshua J. McElwee's breaking report: **Francis' exhortation a radical shift to see grace in imperfection, without fearing moral confusion** [2]

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The opening chapter is a scriptural reflection, but frankly it comes off as a collection of Scripture references that don't really hang together well.

It is not that the chapter is bad; there are some good passages. For example, it is nice to see a positive exegesis of Genesis's description of Eve as a helper fit for Adam. Later in Chapter 4 he deals with St. Paul's saying that wives "be subject to your husbands."

The second chapter examines "the actual situation of families, in order to keep firmly grounded in reality." This chapter, like the first chapter of the pope's encyclical on the environment, reflects the pope's insistence that facts matter.

I think it gives a realistic description of the state of family life, but there are a few surprises.

One remarkable feature of this chapter is its call for "a healthy dose of self-criticism" in the church.

"We often present marriage in such a way that its unitive meaning, its call to grow in love and its ideal of mutual assistance are overshadowed by an almost exclusive insistence on the duty of procreation," he writes. "At times we have also proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families."

"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," he continues. "We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them."

This chapter also calls for state action to promote employment, decent housing, and adequate health care, as well as care for migrants and persons with special needs.

Most remarkable is the condemnation of the excesses of "patriarchal cultures" and "male chauvinism," and the demand that we must "see in the women's movement the workings of the Spirit for a clearer recognition of the dignity and rights of women."

The third chapter recalls "some essential aspects of the Church's teaching on marriage and the family."

He starts by emphasizing that the church's "teaching on marriage and the family cannot fail to be inspired and transformed by this message of love and tenderness; otherwise, it becomes nothing more than the defense of a dry and lifeless doctrine."

Alas, the chapter does sometimes get bogged down in dry and lifeless doctrine, with numerous quotes from the past three popes and Vatican II.

Let me emphasize, I am not saying don't read the first three chapters. Rather I am saying begin at Chapter 4 and come back to these chapters later.

Chapter 4 is a masterpiece. It should be read by every couple planning to marry and every couple who has been married for no matter how many years. Hopefully some publisher will publish this chapter separately for marriage prep classes and marriage counseling as well as for high school and college courses.

I have already had one argument over this chapter with a very wise old Jesuit who opined, "what does he know about married life?" Although the Jesuit had not yet read the chapter, he did reflect the many people who are tired of hearing celibate men go on and on about married life.

So married people, read the chapter and let us know what you think of it. In the meantime, I will describe what is in it.

The chapter is titled "Love in Marriage." It begins with a wonderful meditation on St. Paul's lyrical passage on love in First Corinthians (13:4-7). He quotes Martin Luther King Jr. and refers to the movie "Babette's Feast."

He sees Paul's hymn as a preparation to discuss conjugal love. "After the love that unites us to God, conjugal love is the 'greatest form of friendship,'" he says, quoting St. Thomas Aquinas.

The tone is pastoral and inspiration, not nagging or judgmental. One can only conclude that, as a priest and bishop, he spent countless hours listening and dialoguing with couples about their lived experience.

Chapter 5 deals with children in the family. For Pope Francis, this chapter and the previous one are the "two central chapters dedicated to love."

In the love of parents for their children, Francis sees "a reflection of the primacy of the love of God, who always takes the initiative," he says, "for children, are loved before having done anything to deserve it."

He says that "large families are a joy to the church" but agrees with St. John Paul II that that responsible parenthood does not mean "unlimited procreation or lack of awareness of what is involved in rearing children, but rather the empowerment of couples to use their inviolable liberty wisely and responsibly, taking into account social and demographic realities, as well as their own situation and legitimate desires."

In the chapter, he speaks of pregnancy, and I will leave to mothers to report whether he got that right, but it is clear he wants this to be a joyful experience for them.

He affirms the need and right of a child to have the love of a mother and father. Not just as individuals, but "together they teach the value of reciprocity, of respect for differences and of being able to give and take," he writes. "If for some inevitable reason one parent should be lacking, it is important to compensate for this loss, for the sake of the child's healthy growth and maturity."

Despite his emphasis on the need for two parents, in the next chapter he insists that "single parents must receive encouragement and support from other families in the Christian community, and from the parish's pastoral outreach." He notes that "often these families endure other hardships, such as economic difficulties, uncertain employment prospects, problems with child support and lack of housing."

Pope Francis says there is a special role for women in families. Despite the "legitimate and indeed desirable" wish of women "to study, work, develop their skills and have personal goals," he still affirms that "we cannot ignore the need that children have for a mother's presence, especially in the first months of life."

I wonder how much his views are influenced by the fact that his own mother shipped him off during the day to stay with his grandmother when things got hectic around the house with the birth of another sibling.

"I certainly value feminism," he says, "but one that does not demand uniformity or negate motherhood."

A mother who watches over her child with tenderness and compassion helps him or her to grow in confidence and to experience that the world is a good and welcoming place. This helps the child to grow in self-esteem and, in turn, to develop a capacity for intimacy and empathy.

A father, for his part, helps the child to perceive the limits of life, to be open to the challenges of the wider world, and to see the need for hard work and strenuous effort. A father possessed of a clear and serene masculine identity who demonstrates affection and concern for his wife is just as necessary as a caring mother.

There can be a certain flexibility of roles and responsibilities, depending on the concrete circumstances of each particular family. But the clear and well-defined presence of both figures, female and male, creates the environment best suited to the growth of the child.

He concludes that "in our day, the problem no longer seems to be the overbearing presence of the father so much as his absence, his not being there."

On the other hand, in Chapter 8, he admits "that masculinity and femininity are not rigid categories."

"Taking on domestic chores or some aspects of raising children does not make [the husband] any less masculine or imply failure, irresponsibility or cause for shame," he says. Nor does it "diminish the dignity of the father figure."

"A rigid approach turns into an overaccentuation of the masculine or feminine," he continues, "and does not help children and young people to appreciate the genuine reciprocity incarnate in the real conditions of matrimony. Such rigidity, in turn, can hinder the development of an individual's abilities, to the point of leading him or her to think, for example, that it is not really masculine to cultivate art or dance, or not very feminine to exercise leadership."

Chapter 6 reflects "on some of the more significant pastoral challenges." This chapter is addressed to bishops, priests and pastoral leaders in the church. He avoids detailed specificity because "different communities will have to devise more practical and effective initiatives that respect both the church's teaching and local problems and needs."

He speaks of the importance of proclaiming the gospel of the family, of preparing couples for marriage, of training of lay leaders, and of supporting and accompanying married couples as they continue their life together and experience crises, including breakdown and divorce or death.

Noteworthy are his words about seminarians, who "should receive a more extensive interdisciplinary, and not merely doctrinal, formation in the areas of engagement and marriage."

"Their training does not always allow them to explore their own psychological and affective background and experience," say the pope, who was once a seminary rector. "There is a need to ensure that the formation process can enable them to attain the maturity and psychological balance needed for their future ministry."

He also urges the presence of laypeople and "especially the presence of women in priestly formation."

Chapter 7 deals with the education of children, which parents should take up "consciously, enthusiastically, reasonably, and appropriately." He urges vigilance but not obsession. "What is most important is the ability lovingly to help them grow in freedom, maturity, overall discipline and real autonomy." He stresses the ethical and religious formation of children.

For the most part, what he says is sensible and traditional, but he also raises new issues, like the need for "technological disconnect."

He also echoes Vatican II's call for "a positive and prudent sex education." He acknowledges that "it is not easy to approach the issue of sex education in an age when sexuality tends to be trivialized and impoverished." He argues that "it can only be seen within the broader framework of an education for love, for mutual self-giving." He is not happy with sex education that deals primarily with "safe sex."

Chapter 8 is the chapter I said should be read by all priests, moral theologians, and divorced Catholics, but it is worth reading for everyone. It is probably the best discussion of conscience and sin that I have ever seen come out of the Vatican. It deserves much more extensive treatment than I can give it here.

He begins by quoting the synodal fathers, who said although any breach of the marriage bond "is against the will of God," still the church "turns with love to those who participate in her life in an incomplete manner, recognizing that the grace of God works also in their lives by giving them the courage to do good, to care for one another in love and to be of service to the community in which they live and work."

In such cases, "respect also can be shown for those signs of love which in some way reflect God's own love."

He cites the "law of gradualness," as articulated by St. John Paul II, through which each human being "advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God and the demands of God's definitive and absolute love in his or her entire personal and social life."

Quoting the synod, he says there is a need "to avoid judgements which do not take into account the complexity of various situations" and "to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience distress because of their condition."

Through dialogue and discernment, the church helps those in irregular marriages to understand "the divine pedagogy of grace in their lives." He notes that the situations of couples can be very different and should not be pigeonholed in rigid classifications.

One thing is a second union consolidated over time, with new children, proven fidelity, generous self giving, Christian commitment, a consciousness of its irregularity and of the great difficulty of going back without feeling in conscience that one would fall into new sins. The Church acknowledges situations "where, for serious reasons, such as the children's upbringing, a man and woman cannot satisfy the obligation to separate."

There are also the cases of those who made every effort to save their first marriage and were unjustly abandoned, or of "those who have entered into a second union for the sake of the children's upbringing, and are sometimes subjectively certain in conscience that their previous and irreparably broken marriage had never been valid." [quotes from John Paul II].

Then there are recent divorces, "or the case of someone who has consistently failed in his obligations to the family."

These all require careful discernment. No "easy recipes" exist, he says, quoting Pope Benedict XVI. As a result, neither the synod nor the exhortation "could be expected to provide a new set of general rules, canonical in nature and applicable to all cases."

"What is possible is simply a renewed encouragement to undertake a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases, one which would recognize that, since [as the synod said] 'the degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases,' the consequences or effects of a rule need not necessarily always be the same."

Again quoting the synod, he agrees that "divorced and civilly remarried need to be more fully integrated into Christian communities in the variety of ways possible, while avoiding any occasion of scandal."

The divorced and remarried should ask themselves, again quoting the synod:

"How did they act towards their children when the conjugal union entered into crisis; whether or not they made attempts at reconciliation; what has become of the abandoned party; what consequences the new relationship has on the rest of the family and the community of the faithful; and what example is being set for young people who are preparing for marriage."

Such discernment, according to the synod, requires "humility, discretion and love for the Church and her teaching, in a sincere search for God's will and a desire to make a more perfect response to it."

This is quite different from "the notion that any priest can quickly grant 'exceptions,' or that some people can obtain sacramental privileges in exchange for favors," Francis writes.

He then has a section on factors that can mitigate moral responsibility, which should be considered in such a discernment.

"It can no longer simply be said that all those in any 'irregular' situation are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace," he writes.

Quoting the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, he notes, "imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors."

Elsewhere, he notes the catechism refers to circumstances that mitigate moral responsibility and mentions "affective immaturity, force of acquired habit, conditions of anxiety or other psychological or social factors that lessen or even extenuate moral culpability."

Francis agrees with the synod: "While upholding a general rule, it is necessary to recognize that responsibility with respect to certain actions or decisions is not the same in all cases."

But Pope Francis goes beyond just using conscience to recognize "that a given situation does not correspond objectively to the overall demands of the Gospel."

He also says that "it can also recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God, and come to see with a certain moral security that *it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one's limits*, while yet not fully the objective ideal" (emphasis added).

Francis is saying that it is not enough to simply consider whether or not a person's actions correspond to a general rule or law. "General rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded or neglected," he says, "but in their formulation they cannot provide absolutely for all particular situations."

Thus, for Pope Francis, "it is possible that in an objective situation of sin—which may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such -- a person can be living in God's grace, can love and can also grow in the life of grace and charity, while receiving the Church's help to this end."

In a footnote (351) he says that "in certain cases, this can include the help of the sacraments." He mentions both confession and Eucharist, which "is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak."

Pope Francis understands that some want a more rigorous approach with 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."

"The Church's pastors, in proposing to the faithful the full ideal of the Gospel and the Church's teaching, must also help them to treat the weak with compassion, avoiding aggravation or unduly harsh or hasty judgements."

He acknowledges that "mercy does not exclude justice and truth, but first and foremost we have to say that mercy is the fullness of justice and the most radiant manifestation of God's truth."

The final chapter is on the spirituality of marriage and family life.

He insists that the Lord dwells in real concrete families with all their "daily troubles and struggles, joys and hopes." Living a life of love in such families is a means for deeper union with God.

"Spirituality becomes incarnate in the communion of the family."

"Those who have deep spiritual aspirations should not feel that the family detracts from their growth in the life of the Spirit," he says, "but rather see it as a path which the Lord is using to lead them to the heights of mystical union."

This is a papal document well worth the time to read and reflect on. Parts are dull; parts inspire and delight; parts will give hope; and parts will infuriate. If it brings the conversation about families out of the synodal hall and down to the parish and families themselves, then it will be a success.

[Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese is a senior analyst for NCR and author of *Inside the Vatican: The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church*. His email address is [treesesj@ncronline.org](mailto:treesesj@ncronline.org) [3].]

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