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Wednesday, February 22, 2017, 06:30 by Mgr Edward Xuereb

Novelty of 'The Joy of Love'



The complex situation of wounded families in today's world poses a serious pastoral problem.

Lately Malta through its bishops hit the headlines of various Catholic news agencies and websites because of the criteria they issued last month about the application of Pope Francis's document *Amoris Laetitia* (*The Joy of Love*) regarding persons in the so-called irregular marital situations.

Just a few titles give a clear idea of the vociferous reactions to those criteria which after all do not move an inch away from what the papal document actually declares and prescribes: "Malta's bishops allow civilly remarried divorcees to receive Communion", "Malta's bishops tell the remarried: take Communion if you feel at peace with God", "The Maltese Disaster", "The Maltese bishops lower the bar". Probably those who welcomed the criteria kept rather silent or caught less attention.

A widespread cliché, also testified by these headlines, is that this ground-breaking document of the Pontiff actually gives or at least risks to be misinterpreted as if it gives a free ticket for holy communion to all cohabiting persons, no strings attached. Conversely, a good-faith reading of chapter 8 that steers clear of imposing one's prejudices upon the text not only proves this stereotype mistaken, but discovers that the discourse put forward is much wider than that specific issue. And it is precisely in the general argument presented in the entire chapter that lies the novelty of *Amoris Laetitia* about problematical family situations.

This newness does not consist so much of the moral assessment of such cases because great saints and doctors of the Church, particularly St Alphonsus de Liguori with his famous contribution about conscience, always advised pastors of souls to enlighten the faithful and bring to them God's grace in the highly diversified situations of life. Later on, Pope St Pius X, in his catechism recalled that mortal sin requires a grave matter, but also full awareness and deliberate consent.

Interestingly enough, in a 1972 article about the indissolubility of marriage, Josef Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) wrote about the possibility of the admission to communion of certain categories of persons who live in a second marriage, when certain conditions were fulfilled. We all know that then, as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith and later as pope, his emphasis was on the objective aspects of moral theology, to counteract today's widespread moral relativism.

Yet, objective morality cannot be separated from its correlative subjective aspects. In fact, the complex situation of wounded families in today's world poses a serious pastoral problem, which *Amoris Laetitia* intends to address, through a down-to-earth application of the teachings of the Gospel and of the most recent ecumenical council, Vatican II.

Chapter 8 is probably the best discussion of moral conscience and sin that ever came out of the Vatican...

Within this context, the novelty of *Amoris Laetitia* – so to speak, because it is all in the Gospel and wherever and whenever the Gospel is earnestly lived – lies in the perspective of further integrating such faithful in the life of the Church. Only persons detached from reality would question the opportunity of such a line of action, considering the notable proportion of failed marriages and problematic family situations, with all the difficulties that such a wide phenomenon entails.

The key note of integration in *Amoris Laetitia* first of all precludes an a priori exclusion of persons in wounded families, because the circumstances of life are so manifold that culpability may diminish or even totally fade away.

Secondly, it means that rather than focusing primarily on those who are in regular marital situations, the Holy Father changes the approach and brings those irregular scenarios to the centre of the discussion. Thirdly, in so doing, he indicates the task of doing a careful discernment, free from blanket rules to be applied to all situations. In this respect, chapter 8 is probably the best discussion of moral conscience and sin that ever came out of the Vatican.

The hot-button issue of the access of cohabiting persons to the sacraments should not be plucked out of its proper and broader context of integration through discernment and accompaniment. At times, circumstances like conditioning and mitigating factors may make it possible that an objective situation of sin may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such in such a way that one can be living in God's grace and grow in it, while receiving the Church's help to this end. In certain cases, this can include the help of the sacraments.

In their criteria, also published on the Vatican's house journal L'Osservatore Romano, the Maltese bishops follow the ancient theology of conscience restored by Amoris Laetitia and spell out a whole series of 'ifs'. If, at the end of the discernment, if it has been undertaken with humility, discretion and love for the Church and her teaching, if a divorced and civilly remarried person has sincerely searched for God's will with an informed conscience, and has a desire to respond more perfectly to it; and if, at the end of all that, they are at peace with God then they cannot be barred from confession and communion.

On a final note, no human discourse can say everything about any topic and leave nothing else to be discussed. This applies, in our case, to the subjective aspect of morality, with the paramount role of conscience in moral decision-making, which is the other facet of the coin that is its corresponding objective dimension.

The treatment of pastoral action with persons in problematic marital and family situations by Pope Francis fits within the line of the hermeneutic of continuity and deepening and not of discontinuity and rupture of the teaching and orthopraxis of the Church.

Mgr Edward Xuereb serves as judicial vicar at the Church Tribunal of Gozo.

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Henry S Pace • 5 hours ago

Divorce
Remarriage

The dissolution of a marriage is a legal act that may not coincide with the emotional tearing asunder. Divorce is typically a painful process for all concerned. While it can take adults time to regain psychological equilibrium, there is debate whether children ever recover a stable perspective. Post-divorce hostility between adults, in addition to directly harming kids, is a sure indicator that the emotional split is incomplete.

In the U.S., divorce rates have been rising since the beginning of the 20th century, and especially since the 1970s, when no-fault divorce was instituted. Some experts contend that the easing of divorce laws has helped make marriage stronger by rooting it more deeply in personal choice, although it does little to give people the skills needed to work out the inevitable difficulties that arise in marriage.

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Henry S Pace • 5 hours ago

An atmosphere of cultural relativism exists in many democratic countries. But the concept of pluralism which accepts all systems of morality as equally valid must be rejected. Only the moral and ethical systems taught by the church are correct. That is because the Church's "...ethical precepts are rooted in human nature itself and belong to the natural moral law."

"...citizens claim complete autonomy with regard to their moral choices, and lawmakers maintain that they are respecting this freedom of choice by enacting laws which ignore the principles of natural ethics and yield to ephemeral cultural and moral trends, as if every possible outlook on life were of equal value."

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