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REVIEW ARTICLE: *AMORIS LAETITIA*

Andrew Atherstone

AMORIS LAETITIA (The Joy of Love)

Pope Francis

London: Catholic Truth Society, 2016, 159pp ISBN: 9781784691226

Amoris Laetitia, the latest “apostolic exhortation” by Pope Francis, on the blessings of marriage and family, cannot quite make up its mind about its primary audience. It is part theological treatise, part training course for married couples and parents. Some sections are aimed at professional ecclesiastics in their seminaries; others are addressed to the Roman Catholic faithful across the globe struggling through the complexities and trials of modern family life.

At times it feels like we could be sitting in a priest’s study in Buenos Aires, as Jorge Bergoglio (in the years before he became pope) prepares a young Argentine couple for marriage. Chapter Four, dedicated to a detailed exposition of love’s attributes in 1 Corinthians 13, would be equally at home in a seminar by Rob Parsons of Care for the Family (author of pithy booklets like *The Sixty Minute Marriage* and *The Sixty Minute Father*), or in *The Marriage Course* by Nicky and Sila Lee from Holy Trinity Brompton. Francis offers numerous down-to-earth practical hints on how couples should build a strong relationship, like the importance of those three little words, “please,” “thank you,” and “sorry” (§133). He repeats aphorisms (“Take time, quality time,” §137), and enjoys a romantic flourish: “Young love needs to keep dancing towards the future with immense hope” (§219). Newly-weds are encouraged to develop daily rituals: “a morning kiss, an evening blessing, waiting at the door to welcome each other home, taking trips together and sharing household chores” (§226). Sometimes it is like listening to an innocent curate, labouring just a little bit too hard to find practical applications for his Sunday sermon. Or like the octogenarian trying earnestly to connect with the young. We are warned, for example, that modern technology can keep families apart, “when at dinnertime everyone is surfing on a mobile phone, or when one spouse falls asleep waiting for the other who spends hours playing with an electronic device” (§278).

The pope’s reflections on the pressures of family life are remarkably wide-ranging. He touches upon affordable housing, migration, children with disabilities, assisted suicide, and families in “dire poverty” (§44–49).

He speaks against the “shameful ill-treatment” of women suffering from domestic abuse, sexual violence or enslavement, and the “reprehensible” practice of female genital mutilation (§54). There are also strong words against abortion (§83, §168). When it comes to gender roles, *Amoris Laetitia* welcomes a new recognition of the dignity and rights of women as a movement of the Holy Spirit (§54), but argues that young children need their mothers at home:

The weakening of this maternal presence with its feminine qualities poses a grave risk to our world. I certainly value feminism, but one that does not demand uniformity or negate motherhood. For the grandeur of women includes all the rights derived from their inalienable human dignity but also from their feminine genius [meaning especially motherhood], which is essential to society. (§173)

In case fathers feel left out, we read that “the clear and well-defined presence of both figures, female and male, creates the environment best suited to the growth of the child” (§175). Therefore the pope is particularly critical of absentee and workaholic fathers who neglect their families (§176). In another place, he writes that “masculinity and femininity are not rigid categories,” determined by temperament and environment as much as by biology and genetics. We wonder, momentarily, if Pope Francis is subscribing to the doctrine of “gender fluidity,” which is the new orthodoxy in our British schools? But he means only that

a husband’s way of being masculine can be flexibly adapted to the wife’s work schedule. Taking on domestic chores or some aspects of raising children does not make him any less masculine or imply failure, irresponsibility or cause for shame. (§286)

We are glad to hear it! This demonstrates the difficulty of writing for a global audience, for families in a plethora of cultural contexts as diverse as Baltimore, Bangkok, Belfast, Bloemfontein, Brasilia, and Bujumbura. What seems radical in one context, appears passé or jejune in another.

Nevertheless, there is much valuable material in *Amoris Laetitia* which reaches beyond its primary Roman Catholic audience. Although garnished with papal trimmings (like encouraging children to blow a kiss to the Virgin Mary, §287) it contains pastoral and theological wisdom from which evangelicals also will benefit as we seek to promote a biblical understanding of marriage and family life. In particular, the pope’s

exhortation is shot through with both (1) confident reassertion, and (2) compassionate realism.

Confident Reassertion

Amoris Laetitia outlines a bold biblical vision for the good of lifelong marriage between a man and a woman, as one of the fundamental building blocks of society. It sets this doctrine within the broad sweep of salvation history from Genesis to Revelation—from Adam and Eve to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. The pope shows how the language of Creation (“made male and female”; “leaving and cleaving”; “becoming one flesh”) is picked up by the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels, and how the New Testament’s understanding of marriage is inextricably bound up with the relationship of Christ and his Bride: “Marriage is a vocation, inasmuch as it is a response to a specific call to experience conjugal love as an imperfect sign of the love between Christ and the Church” (§72). Family is also essential to human flourishing: “The welfare of the family is decisive for the future of the world and that of the Church” (§31); “The family is a good which society cannot do without, and it ought to be protected” (§44). Marriage, in particular, is

much more meaningful than a mere spontaneous association for mutual gratification, which would turn marriage into a purely private affair. As a social institution, marriage protects and shapes a shared commitment to deeper growth in love and commitment to one another, for the good of society as a whole. That is why marriage is more than a fleeting fashion; it is of enduring importance. (§131)

Amoris Laetitia demonstrates unembarrassed confidence in the marriage project. Young people are exhorted to take up the challenge of being married as an act of “courage” and “even heroism” (§40). As legislation in various nations deconstructs the family by providing a range of modern “alternatives,” the Church must not acquiesce by disparaging marriage as “an old-fashioned and outdated option” but must seek its “renewal” and rediscover its “authentic meaning” (§53). There is much here that echoes evangelical defenders of marriage in a previous generation, such as the writings of Raymond Johnston, director of the Nationwide Festival of Light and author of *Who Needs the Family?* (1979). The pope repeatedly declares that the family is a “domestic church” (§86), essential for both mission and discipleship. Families are “both domestic churches

and a leaven of evangelization in society” (§290). In his closing prayer to “the Holy Family of Nazareth,” at the end of the exhortation, he asks again that our families would become “authentic schools of the Gospel and small domestic churches” (page 159). For Johnston also, the family is “the micro-church,” a place of great potential for healing, encouragement, personal growth and evangelism.¹

Compassionate Realism

Alongside confident reassertion, the second dominant motif in *Amoris Laetitia* is compassionate realism. Here Pope Francis speaks especially to the clergy as pastors and teachers of the faith. They are warned against a presumptive attitude which attempts to “solve everything by applying general rules” (§2). They must not proclaim “a merely theoretical message without connection to people’s real problems” (§201). In particular, pastors must avoid “a cold bureaucratic morality” and listen with “sensitivity and serenity” (§312). That requires, of primary importance, a Christlike compassion:

we have often been on the defensive, wasting pastoral energy on denouncing a decadent world without being proactive in proposing ways of finding true happiness. Many people feel that the Church’s message on marriage and the family does not clearly reflect the preaching and attitudes of Jesus, who set forth a demanding ideal yet never failed to show compassion and closeness to the frailty of individuals like the Samaritan woman or the woman caught in adultery. (§38)

Elsewhere the pope reiterates that the Church’s teaching on marriage and family life must be a “message of love and tenderness; otherwise, it becomes nothing more than the defence of a dry and lifeless doctrine” (§59). The Bible, after all, is “not a series of abstract ideas” but a source of comfort to real families facing real suffering (§22). Pastoral care, therefore, must be “fundamentally missionary, going out to where people are.” The Church can no longer afford to act “like a factory, churning out courses” on marriage that nobody wants to attend (§230).

¹ See further, Andrew Atherstone, “Christian Family, Christian Nation: Raymond Johnston and the Nationwide Festival of Light in Defence of the Family,” in *Religion and the Household*, ed. John Doran, Charlotte Methuen, and Alexandra Walsham (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2014), 456–468.

The pope conceives of the Church's missionary task as that of "a field hospital" (§291), which takes proper account of human frailty in the midst of the battles of life. Again the emphasis is upon engaging with the complexities of real human beings, rather than solving imaginary scenarios in the seminary classroom with a little old-fashioned casuistry. In particular, and most controversially, he suggests that while some sexual unions "radically contradict" the marriage ideal, others fulfil the ideal in "a partial and analogous way," and therefore pastoral discrimination is needed (§292). The Church must respect "those signs of love which in some way reflect God's own love" (§294). By analogous unions, he does not mean same-sex unions—which are rejected *tout court* (§250–251)—but rather civil marriage (as opposed to sacramental marriage) and cohabitation.

Localism and Exceptionalism

The pope's approach to pastoral complexity has two corollaries, (1) localism, and (2) exceptionalism. He only hints at the first, arguing that not all moral questions need to be "settled by interventions of the magisterium." Although unity of doctrine is necessary throughout the global Church, each different region may draw out particular implications or "seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs" (§3). Likewise, he speaks of the need to devise "new pastoral methods" which "respect both the Church's teaching and local problems and needs" (§199). Frustratingly, this tension between *globalism* and *localism*, or catholic unity and regional diversity, is left underdeveloped.

Exceptionalism, by contrast, receives fuller attention—especially applied to divorce and remarriage. *Amoris Laetitia* protests strongly against the divorce epidemic currently sweeping the world:

Divorce is an evil and the increasing number of divorces is very troubling. Hence, our most important pastoral task with regard to families is to strengthen their love, helping to heal wounds and working to prevent the spread of this drama of our times. (§246)

However, considerable space is spent explaining why there might be exceptions to the general rule. For example, separation of husband and wife is sometimes "morally necessary," as a last resort, in the face of domestic abuse or maltreatment (§241). The pope therefore aims at

pastoral discernment on a case-by-case basis, rather than the application of blanket rules. Those who have been divorced and remarried should “not be pigeonholed or fitted into overly rigid classifications.” Sometimes, he admits, an attempt to turn the clock back by breaking up remarried divorcees and their new families will simply lead them to “fall into new sins” (§298). Therefore, he recommends, divorced and civilly-remarried couples must not be excommunicated but embraced and carefully re-integrated into the Church (§243, §299).

Repeatedly *Amoris Laetitia* asserts the need for compassionate pastoral care which applies the laws of the Church in a flexible manner. Although the focus is on couples in “irregular” unions (that is, divorced and remarried), the general approach has wider resonance:

a pastor cannot feel that it is enough simply to apply moral laws to those living in “irregular” situations, as if they were stones to throw at people’s lives. This would bespeak the closed heart of one used to hiding behind the Church’s teachings ... By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God. ... The practical pastoral care of ministers and of communities must not fail to embrace this reality. (§305)

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” [a quotation from *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013]. (§308)

This is a difficult theological balancing act—clear confident biblical teaching, but pastoral flexibility in its application which makes room for the sinfulness and brokenness of humanity. The pope insists that the granting of occasional “exceptions,” is not the same as holding “a double standard” (§300). His conclusion, entitled “The Logic of Pastoral Mercy,” is clear:

In order to avoid all misunderstanding, I would point out that in no way must the Church desist from proposing the full ideal of marriage, God’s plan in all its grandeur ... A lukewarm attitude, any kind of relativism, or an undue reticence in proposing that ideal, would be a lack of fidelity to

the Gospel and also of love on the part of the Church for young people themselves. To show understanding in the face of exceptional situations never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing less than what Jesus offers to the human being. Today, more important than the pastoral care of failures is the pastoral effort to strengthen marriages and thus to prevent their breakdown. (§307)

Here, again, we see the two major motifs of the treatise brought together. Throughout *Amoris Laetitia*, confident reassertion and compassionate realism go hand in hand.

Fruitfulness and Celibacy

Amoris Laetitia references same-sex relationships only in passing, but there is much in the pope's exhortation which applies to this theme, especially as the debate is currently conceived in the Church of England. In particular, Anglican and Roman Catholic teaching on (1) fruitfulness, and (2) celibacy, deserves closer comparison.

Fruitfulness is central to the pope's definition of marriage. We are told that the characteristics of marriage are "exclusivity, indissolubility and openness to life" (§53), and this third characteristic is a recurrent emphasis. For example, fecundity in marriage imitates God's own desire to create: "The couple that loves and begets life is a true, living icon ... capable of revealing God the Creator and Saviour" (§11). And again: "Begetting and raising children ... mirrors God's creative work" (§29). There is also a close connection between making babies and making Christian disciples. The Church should encourage newly-married couples to be "generous in bestowing life," because through children "the Lord renews the world" (§222). Although the pope acknowledges the need for responsible "family planning," he laments the tendency of sex education in schools to teach "safe sex," which conveys "a negative attitude towards the natural procreative finality of sexuality, as if an eventual child were an enemy to be protected against. This way of thinking promotes narcissism and aggressivity in place of acceptance" (§283).

A pressing question for Anglicans is whether we still accept the pope's basic definition of marriage as "exclusive, faithful and open to new life" (§125)? It has, of course, been classic Christian teaching for centuries. In contemporary controversies over sexuality, the claim is often made that when Anglicans in the 1920s welcomed artificial contraception, they broke the historic link between marriage and fruitfulness—sexual

intercourse could now be exclusively for pleasure, not for procreation. The bishops worried about the policy for all sorts of reasons, not least that there would no longer be enough Anglo-Saxons to keep the British Empire running! Bishop Charles Gore warned the 1925 Birth Rate Commission that if the link between sex and fruitfulness was broken, then the next logical outcome would be the justification of homosexuality²—a reasoning developed by Rowan Williams six decades later in his infamous essay, *The Body's Grace* (1989). It is now a standard argument. But Anglican thinking has become muddled here. We need clearly to affirm, with the pope, that marriage is “exclusive, faithful and open to new life,” not just pick two out of the three. Contraception is designed as a way to help married couples space out the births, not to prevent them altogether.

Celibacy is not addressed directly in *Amoris Laetitia*—indeed the word appears in only one paragraph, strangely as a synonym for “virginity” (§162), perhaps a mistaken conflating of terms in the English translation. Nevertheless, celibacy is assumed for all unmarried Christians. Here again, Anglicans are generally muddled in their thinking, and would benefit from the clarity of classic Roman Catholic teaching. Both Rome and Canterbury insist upon the “celibacy” of unmarried clergy, but are operating with entirely different definitions. The Church of England allows ordinands and clergy to enter same-sex civil partnerships, exclusive intimate relationships which are publicly validated, provided they are “celibate.” These couples may sleep together in a double bed—and are typically offered “married” accommodation by their theological colleges—provided they do not actually “sleep together.” It is inconceivable that the Church of Rome would agree to such a policy for their “celibate” clergy, whether homosexual or heterosexual. Why not? Because it would be a public scandal! Because it would foolishly open the door to unbearable sexual temptation! And because Roman “celibacy” means refusing exclusive intimate relationships, whereas Anglican “celibacy” now seems to mean living as a quasi-married couple who happen to be sexually abstinent. Some *bona fide* marriages become sexless over the years, perhaps through physical disability, or old age, or the waning of desire. Yet the pope rightly affirms that these are nonetheless still full marriages—that is, “close and exclusive relationships” where couples, despite the absence of “intense sexual desire,”

² Timothy Willem Jones, *Sexual Politics in the Church of England, 1857–1957* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 159, 173–174.

still experience the pleasure of mutual belonging and the knowledge that neither of them is alone but has a “partner” with whom everything in life is shared. He or she is a companion on life’s journey, one with whom to face life’s difficulties and enjoy its pleasures. This satisfaction is part of the affection proper to conjugal love. (§163)

In what ways is such a conjugal union distinct from the civil partnerships which the Church of England now promotes as a sexless alternative to marriage? Where Rome is clear, Anglicans are constantly befuddled.

Throughout *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis speaks to the global Roman Communion with confidence and compassion. But there are many lessons here for Anglicans too in the crucial areas of marriage and family life. Indeed it would be a cause of celebration if any member of the Anglican episcopate were to publish an exhortation containing half as much classic Christian doctrine and biblical sense.

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