



IFCA INTERNATIONAL FORUM
of CATHOLIC ACTION

AMORIS LAETITIA

In the life and mission
of Catholic Action



A CONTRIBUTION SO THAT CATHOLIC ACTION MAY
DECISIVELY MAKE THE APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION
AMORIS LAETITIA

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Introduction

The text which we are proposing is meant to be an invitation to read *Amoris Laetitia* (AL), the post-synodal Exhortation where Pope Francis collects and re-launches the long synodal journey dedicated to the family.

“An outgoing” Catholic Action is called to get its inspiration from this text and to become the protagonist of a true and profound missionary transformation which should animate the organisms, which shoulder responsibilities, as well as parish groups, in such a way, that they announce faith’s beauty in the family and incorporate the apostolic exhortation in their community programmes so as to promote a more profound meeting with Jesus, who is rich in mercy.

At the same time, it aims at motivating CA members to reflect, on a personal basis and in their families, so that they may feel the call “to love and for love” more strongly. Thus, this will be helping CA to foster relations with other social groups in the community which bring to light problematic symptoms in family life (school, health, associations, law enforcement,...) This will have an effect on the guidelines which will be defined and on the interventions regarding the needs faced by families in concrete realities.

Amoris Laetitia should also inspire us to enter into dialogue with public institutions so as to promote laws and strategies which favour family life and present it as a social and human benefit for every person on the planet.

It should serve as a guide for our pastoral work within the Church which should be: to promote a catechesis which fosters the growth of family love and an active, participatory, stimulating catechesis, which reaches adolescents and young people, engaged couples and newlyweds in the first years of their married life and in the course of their family life, especially in times of transition, thus contributing to a mature and fraternal accompaniment of families.

1. A new outlook. The family is not a problem but an opportunity

Before taking up AL, we should highlight the fact that the text is addressed to everyone: not only to experts in family pastoral care or to those who are married, but to all of us who come from a family and are part of a family, convinced of the fact that the family is close to everyone's heart and to that of all the Church. It is only by starting from the family that we can announce the Gospel today. In the chirograph which accompanied the handing over of the exhortation to all the bishops of the world we find written:

Dear brother:

Invoking the care of the Holy Family of Nazareth, I am happy to send you my exhortation "Amoris laetitia" for the good of all the families and persons, young and old, entrusted to your pastoral ministry.

Talking about the family and stopping to consider its irreplaceable value is good for everyone and is greatly needed today.

The whole document is a heartfelt invitation to reconsider the reality of the family, to pause and reflect on what goes on in it so as to learn how to look upon it as a place where the Lord's grace acts, notwithstanding, but precisely through our daily

imperfections, sufferings, joys, efforts and good intentions.

The key to its reading, given from the beginning and continually reiterated, is that the family is a "theological space"

The Lord's presence dwells in real and concrete families, with all their daily troubles and struggles, joys and hopes and their daily aspirations. (AL 315)

The invitation is to recognize this presence, to recognize God's message in one's family history (cf AL 30).

This is a real change of perspective:

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. Then too, 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. Nor have we always provided solid guidance to young married couples, understanding their timetables, their way of thinking and their concrete concerns. 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. This excessive idealization, especially when we have failed to inspire trust in God's grace, has not helped to make marriage more desirable and attractive, but quite the opposite. (AL 36)

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, strengthening the marriage bond and giving meaning to marital life. (AL 37).

The Christian proclamation on the family "is good news indeed" (AL 1) for all humanity. All should feel called «to love and cherish family life, for families are not a problem; they are first and foremost an opportunity » (AL 7). The family is the future of the world, the engine which drives history. Learning how to value the gifts of matrimony and of the family helps one «to maintain a strong love strengthened by the values of generosity, commitment, fidelity and patience», and also urges one to «be a sign of mercy and closeness wherever family life is not perfect or lacks peace and joy » (AL 5).

We are all called to look at the family, at our families, in a new way, that of

learning how to look upon them through God's eyes.

➔Points for discussion:

At personal level

- How do I look upon my family experience? Do I know how to look upon this family history with gratitude?
- How much time do I spend to think about the action of grace in this story?
- What language do I use in talking about my family?

At Church level

- What space and what attention do we give to the family in our pastoral commitment?
- What language do we use when we speak about the family?
- In our homilies, catechesis, our daily communications do we notice an attitude of esteem towards the family?
- Do families feel welcomed in the ecclesial community? Are we preoccupied to create conditions so that the community may be a welcoming place for the family? How?

At CA level

- When, how, with whom, do we speak about the family?

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- Are we able to perceive the centrality of the family outside the logic of specialization and sectorialization (the family not as a part to be absolutized, but as a key to our reflections, a global approach that focuses on relationships)?
 - How much do we value intergenerationality in the formative programmes and in CA's life?
 - What does "CA's family format" mean to us?

At social and community level

- What sort of families are there in our social context?
- What do we consider as necessary in families?
- Which "lights and shades" on the family, as a space of love and encounter, do we notice in society?

Consequently

- What positive concrete actions can we propose to transform reality starting from what we already do?

➡ **Suggest three lines of action**

2. The joy of love between time and eternity

God's presence is not in perfection, which is never reached. Nor is it in our voluntary effort towards perfection. "Love coexists with imperfection" (AL 113). In the life of our families we cannot expect perfection nor that the other is perfect or loves us with perfect love. The only absolute, to be recognized as such, is the love of the Lord by which we should let ourselves be guided and from which we should learn to love and welcome one another.

The perfection of love is in its very root which never fails us; it is in its fulfilment, also given, which we should pray and work for, never ceasing to grow in love.

All this occurs through a process of constant growth. The very special form of love that is marriage is called to embody what Saint Thomas Aquinas said about charity in general. "Charity", he says, "by its very nature, has no limit to its increase, for it is a participation in that infinite charity which is the Holy Spirit [...] Nor on the part of the subject can its limit be fixed, because as charity grows, so too does its capacity for an even

greater increase". Saint Paul also prays: "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another" (1 Th 3:12), and again, "concerning fraternal love [...] we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more" (1 Th 4:9-10). More and more! Marital love is not defended primarily by presenting indissolubility as a duty, or by repeating doctrine, but by helping it to grow ever stronger under the impulse of grace. A love that fails to grow is at risk. Growth can only occur if we respond to God's grace through constant acts of love, acts of kindness that become ever more frequent, intense, generous, tender and cheerful. Husbands and wives "become conscious of their unity and experience it more deeply from day to day". The gift of God's love poured out upon the spouses is also a summons to constant growth in grace. (AL 134)

It is not helpful to dream of an idyllic and perfect love needing no stimulus to grow. A celestial notion of earthly love forgets that



the best is yet to come, that fine wine matures with age. As the Bishops of Chile have pointed out, “the perfect families proposed by deceptive consumerist propaganda do not exist. In those families, no one grows old, there is no sickness, sorrow or death [...] Consumerist propaganda presents a fantasy that has nothing to do with the reality which must daily be faced by the heads of families”. It is much healthier to be realistic about our limits, defects and imperfections, and to respond to the call to grow together, to bring love to maturity and to strengthen the union, come what may. (AL135)

Love’s perfection, the fullness of communion is not something we can obtain but something we have to build up with humility and tenacity, something which has been promised to us and which will be given to us, beyond our every imagination and expectation.

The teaching of the Master (cf. Mt 22:30) and Saint Paul (cf. 1 Cor 7:29-31) on marriage is set – and not by chance – in the context of the ultimate and definitive dimension of our human existence. We urgently need to rediscover the richness of this teaching. By heeding it, married couples will come to see the deeper meaning of their journey

through life. As this Exhortation has often noted, no family drops down from heaven perfectly formed; families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love. This is a neverending vocation born of the full communion of the Trinity, the profound unity between Christ and his Church, the loving community which is the Holy Family of Nazareth, and the pure fraternity existing among the saints of heaven. Our contemplation of the fulfilment which we have yet to attain also allows us to see in proper perspective the historical journey which we make as families, and in this way to stop demanding of our interpersonal relationships a perfection, a purity of intentions and a consistency which we will only encounter in the Kingdom to come. It also keeps us from judging harshly those who live in situations of frailty.

All of us are called to keep striving towards something greater than ourselves and our families, and every family must feel this constant impulse. Let us make this journey as families, let us keep walking together. What we have been promised is greater than we can imagine. May we never lose heart because of our limitations, or ever stop seeking that fullness of love and communion which God holds out before us. (AL 325)

Therefore, we must not stop moving forward nor let ourselves be discouraged by our limitations. We should enjoy the strength of the bonds which we can build, knowing that nothing of love is lost, that every little bit of good in the history of our bonds counts and contributes towards their fulfilment. Our bonds will flourish when communion reaches its fulness and when we can enjoy everlasting celebrations.

The time of family life can only be understood in relation to the fulness of communion, which is the life of God and which is its root, breath and fulfillment.

In the sacrament of matrimony, the spouses are united by the love of God himself, in the love which they promise and give each other. The sacrament is not something which passes, something which happens once and which stops there, just as if it were an object; it is dynamism, a force that transforms and regenerates, a living source to be referred to later in time and in the different times and seasons of family life which flow from it. Grafted in Christ Jesus, the spouses are conformed to Him and share in Him the life of God which is a life of communion but in a dynamism which fosters responsibility, an ability to support freely and an active commitment of protection and care.

We must help people understand that the sacrament is not just a moment which then becomes part of the past and of our memories, because it has an influence on the whole of married life, in a permanent way. (AL 215)

Another great challenge of marriage preparation is to help couples realize that marriage is not something that happens once for all. Their union is real and irrevocable, confirmed and consecrated by the sacrament of matrimony. Yet in joining their lives, the spouses assume an active and creative role in a lifelong project. Their gaze now has to be directed to the future that, with the help of God's grace, they are daily called to build. For this very reason, neither spouse can expect the other to be perfect. Each must set aside all illusions and accept the other as he or she actually is: an unfinished product, needing to grow, a work in progress. A persistently critical attitude towards one's partner is a sign that marriage was not entered into as a project to be worked on together, with patience, understanding, tolerance and generosity. Slowly but surely, love will then give way to constant questioning and criticism, dwelling on each other's good and bad points, issuing ultimatums and engaging in



competition and self-justification. The couple then prove incapable of helping one another to build a mature union. This fact needs to be realistically presented to newly married couples from the outset, so that they can grasp that the wedding is “just the beginning”. By saying “I do”, they embark on a journey that requires them to overcome all obstacles standing in the way of their reaching the goal. The nuptial blessing that they receive is a grace and an incentive for this journey. They can only benefit from sitting down and talking to one another about how, concretely, they plan to achieve their goal. (AL 218)

This process occurs in various stages that call for generosity and sacrifice. The first powerful feelings of attraction give way to the realization that the other is now a part of my life. The pleasure of belonging to one another leads to seeing life as a common project, putting the other’s happiness ahead of my own, and realizing with joy that this marriage enriches society. (AL 220)

Among the causes of broken marriages are unduly high expectations about conjugal life. Once it becomes apparent that the reality is more limited and challenging than one imagined,

the solution is not to think quickly and irresponsibly about separation, but to come to the sober realization that married life is a process of growth, in which each spouse is God’s means of helping the other to mature. Change, improvement, the flowering of the good qualities present in each person – all these are possible. Each marriage is a kind of “salvation history”, which from fragile beginnings – thanks to God’s gift and a creative and generous response on our part – grows over time into something precious and enduring. Might we say that the greatest mission of two people in love is to help one another become, respectively, more a man and more a woman? Fostering growth means helping a person to shape his or her own identity. Love is thus a kind of craftsmanship. When we read in the Bible about the creation of man and woman, we see God first forming Adam (cf. Gen 2:7); he realizes that something essential is lacking and so he forms Eve and then hears the man exclaim in amazement, “Yes, this one is just right for me!” We can almost hear the amazing dialogue that must have taken place when the man and the woman first encountered one another. In the life of married couples, even at difficult moments, one person can always

surprise the other, and new doors can open for their relationship, as if they were meeting for the first time. At every new stage, they can keep "forming" one another. Love makes each wait for the other with the patience of a craftsman, a patience which comes from God. (AL 221)

Love needs time: not time to be consumed, but time to be lived and time to listen. We need to give ourselves time to learn how to wait, to listen, understand and forgive ourselves. We should allow ourselves time to build, to dialogue, to project, to "negotiate".

As love matures, it also learns to "negotiate". Far from anything selfish or calculating, such negotiation is an exercise of mutual love, an interplay of give and take, for the good of the family. At each new stage of married life, there is a need to sit down and renegotiate agreements, so that there will be no winners and losers, but rather two winners. In the home, decisions cannot be made unilaterally, since each spouse shares responsibility for the family; yet each home is unique and each marriage will find an arrangement that works best. (AL 220)

Despite the fragility of time, marriage and the family make us grasp that we are made for communion, made to be in relation to the image of the God-Trinity and that "the unity of the whole human race" in the "intimate union with God" is the ultimate goal that orientates men's history, as well as the existence of each one of us.

"To want to form a family is to resolve to be a part of God's dream, to choose to dream with him, to want to build with him, to join him in this saga of building a world where no one will feel alone". (AL 321)

➔Points for discussion

At personal level

- What does joy in love mean to me?
- What link do I see between joy and responsibility in my family life? Am I able to find joy in the difficulties and hardships I face everyday?
- Am I able to see my family story as a journey?
- In our family, do we ever stop to rethink and to project together this story?
- Do we succeed in giving time to each other?
- How do I relate to imperfections in family ties in actual life? How do I behave when faced with imperfections in my family?



At Church level

- What type of marriage preparatory courses do we offer? Are we succeeding in helping those who attend to grasp the gift of grace there is in the sacrament of matrimony and the dynamism of responsibility it generates?
- Do we manage to envisage the journey opened by marriage? Do we manage to be a help in understanding the ultimate aim of this journey which is reached day by day? Do we manage to be a help in understanding time in relation to eternity? Are we educating people to value the beauty and richness of family relations even in their fragility?
- What care is the ecclesial community giving in the different stages of family life? Do we know how to accompany and support families over time?

At CA level

- What type of education are we giving when it comes to relations? As regards affection, does our formation take the different stages in life into consideration?
- What space does our understanding of the ultimate meaning of the existence of each one of us and of everybody's history have in our training courses?
- Do we know how to support and accompany vocational discernment? Are we aware that the vocation of every individual

needs to be confirmed, consolidated and rediscovered over and over again?

- Do we know how to sustain and accompany the life of families in the events and seasons that mark its course? Do we help families to develop the ability to discern and to be open to seek God's will in all the events of life and in their relationships?

At social and community level

- In our social context, what do we "feel" about a life project centred on marriage and the family?
- Which are the strengths and weaknesses we discover during this careful study?
- Faced with a weakened reality regarding the image of the family as a place that helps and supports vocational choice, what can we do?

Consequently

- What concrete action can we propose to positively transform reality starting from what we already do?

➔ Suggest three lines of action

3. A scheme of good relationships

The proclamation of the Gospel passes through the family which is the ideal place for this to happen and the place where one can experiment.

The experience of love in families is a perennial source of strength for the life of the Church. "The unitive end of marriage is a constant summons to make this love grow and deepen. Through their union in love, the couple experiences the beauty of fatherhood and motherhood, and shares plans, trials, expectations and concerns; they learn care for one another and mutual forgiveness. In this love, they celebrate their happy moments and support each other in the difficult passages of their life together [...] The beauty of this mutual, gratuitous gift, the joy which comes from a life that is born and the loving care of all family members – from toddlers to seniors – are just a few of the fruits which make the response to the vocation of the family unique and irreplaceable", both for the Church and for society as a whole. (AL 88)

The family could be called "a domestic church" because it is here

that individuals «enter upon an ecclesial experience of communion among persons, which reflects, through grace, the mystery of the Holy Trinity» (AL 86).

Even for society, the family has an irreplaceable value. It is the place where one learns to be together and to understand what this means by experiencing this concretely. The family can educate, like no other reality, how one can feel part of a fabric of relationships how one can assume responsibility and be co-responsible of a common life.

The family is built as a fabric of good relationships which generate relationships.

Families should not see themselves as a refuge from society, but instead go forth from their homes in a spirit of solidarity with others. In this way, they become a hub for integrating persons into society and a point of contact between the public and private spheres. Married couples should have a clear awareness of their social obligations. With this, their affection does not diminish but is flooded with new light. (AL 181)

The love that is celebrated in matrimony, and which is nourished by the sanctifying power of the



sacrament, is a love which generates life: in the acceptance of the children which the Lord gives, but also, and above all, in a spiritual fruitfulness which is the true substance of fatherhood and motherhood and which makes it possible to contribute to the generation of children, who do not belong to us, and to a truly human world. A married couple, who experiences the power of love, knows that this love is called to heal the wounds of the abandoned, to establish the culture of encounter, to fight for justice. God has entrusted the family with the project of making the world "domestic", so that everyone can start looking upon every human being as a brother: «A careful look at the daily life of today's men and women immediately shows the prevalent need of a strong injection of family spirit. [...] Not only is the organization of common life increasingly stuck in a bureaucracy completely alien to fundamental human bonds, but even social and political customs often show signs of deterioration».

For their part, open and caring families find a place for the poor and build friendships with those less fortunate than themselves. In their efforts to live according to the Gospel, they are mindful of Jesus' words: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me (Mt 25:40)". In a very real way, their lives express what is asked of us

all: "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbours, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed" (Lk 14:12-14). You will be blessed! Here is the secret to a happy family. (AL 183)

By their witness as well as their words, families speak to others of Jesus. They pass on the faith, they arouse a desire for God and they reflect the beauty of the Gospel and its way of life. Christian marriages thus enliven society by their witness of fraternity, their social concern, their outspokenness on behalf of the underprivileged, their luminous faith and their active hope. Their fruitfulness expands and in countless ways makes God's love present in society. (AL 184)

➔ Questions for discussion

At personal level

- In my family, how do I live the openness to the world and to others?
- Do I feel my family as part of a larger community?

- What space does the attention to those in need have in my family
- What does the social responsibility of being a family mean to me?
- What does bringing the family style into the places of everyday life mean?
- What does the definition of the family as a domestic Church mean to me concretely?

At Church level

- What is your opinion about the family's ability to proclaim the Gospel? And through what, in your opinion, can this announcement be passed on?
- Do we create the adequate conditions for families to feel protagonists in the life of the community?
- What support are we offering for the transmission of faith in family life?
- Do we know how to educate as regards fertility?

At CA level

- Do we involve families in the life of the Association? How?
- Do we know how to make them participate in the training courses?
- What are we doing to open families to assume more responsibility?
- Which networks can we build between the families of the Association and those in our community?

At social and community level

- How would you describe the values and disvalues that today predominate in family and married life as regards to interpersonal relationships?
- What can consolidate this type of relationship as a social model?
- How is the experience of motherhood and fatherhood looked upon in the concrete realities of our society?

Consequently

- What concrete action can we propose to positively transform reality starting from what we already do?

➡ Suggest three lines of action

4. The Church-family alliance

The spirituality which is specific to marriage and to the family is "a spirituality of care", in which the tenderness of God and the permanent provocation of the Spirit are felt. Caring, supporting and stimulating each other is a living part of family spirituality: a spirituality which is nourished by prayer:

A few minutes can be found each day to come together before the living God, to tell him our worries, to ask for the needs of our family, to pray for someone experiencing difficulty, to ask for help in showing love, to give thanks for life and for its blessings, and to ask Our Lady to protect us beneath her maternal mantle. With a few simple words, this moment of prayer can do immense good for our families. (AL 318)

A spirituality which in the celebration of the Eucharist finds the strength and the stimulus to live every day the marriage covenant as "domestic Church" (AL 318) and that above all is solidly strengthened by the opening of the heart to the needs of the weakest (cf. AL 324).

But caring is also the style with which the Church is called to address the family. We need a Church that

rediscovers the family, that sees in itself a family style.

The Church is a family of families, constantly enriched by the lives of all those domestic churches. "In virtue of the sacrament of matrimony, every family becomes, in effect, a good for the Church. From this standpoint, reflecting on the interplay between the family and the Church will prove a precious gift for the Church in our time. The Church is good for the family, and the family is good for the Church. The safeguarding of the Lord's gift in the sacrament of matrimony is a concern not only of individual families but of the entire Christian community". (AL 87)

The Church-family alliance is the way indicated by *Amoris Laetitia*, an essential alliance for the proclamation of the Gospel, for the life of the Church itself and for the life of people. For this reason, restoring centrality to the family does not simply mean extending the field of family ministry, finding new slogans around which to organize initiatives and promote debates. We need to create a new mentality, to rethink pastoral care and therefore times,

ways and in some cases even places, starting from families; not a pastoral care that looks exclusively at individuals and focuses on them on certain occasions or on their specific condition of life. We need to overcome the logic of a fragmented pastoral care, sectorial specialisms, and to recover the sense of unity in a person's life and in his relationships. The parish, a concrete Christian community, can play a decisive role in this sense because it is in the parish that one must be able to feel the welcoming character of the Church, of a Church according to the Gospel with the doors always open. And in the parish, as *Amoris Laetitia* recalls, the contributions of small communities, movements and ecclesial associations are harmonized. (AL 202).

However, this means that we have to overcome the idea of functional visions. We are still too used to thinking in terms of initiatives for families, to act in the logic of pastoral activism. The time has come to learn how to question ourselves by focusing on that which is essential. And the essential thing today is that more and more families (in the simplicity and in the normality of their life) know how to proclaim the Gospel joyfully and how to be authentic testimonies of the beauty of encountering the Lord and how this changes one's life.

The Synod Fathers emphasized that Christian families, by the grace of the sacrament of matrimony, are the principal agents of the family apostolate. (AL 200)

Today we need to give our attention to families in the various concrete situations of lives, so that each one may feel welcomed and encouraged and supported in the search for God; so that everyone can feel, in the tenderness of the community, a motherly tenderness and the merciful love of God which lifts and regenerates.

It is true that many couples, once married, drop out of the Christian community. Often, however, we ourselves do not take advantage of those occasions when they do return, to remind them of the beautiful ideal of Christian marriage and the support that our parishes can offer them. I think, for example, of the Baptism and First Holy Communion of their children, or the funerals or weddings of their relatives or friends. Almost all married couples reappear on these occasions, and we should take greater advantage of this. Another way of growing closer is by blessing homes or by bringing a pilgrim image of Our Lady to houses in the neighbourhood; this provides an opportunity for a pastoral conversation about the



family's situation. It could also be helpful to ask older married couples to help younger couples in the neighbourhood by visiting them and offering guidance in the early years of marriage. Given the pace of life today, most couples cannot attend frequent meetings; still, we cannot restrict our pastoral outreach to small and select groups. Nowadays, pastoral care for families has to be fundamentally missionary, going out to where people are. We can no longer be like a factory, churning out courses that for the most part are poorly attended.(AL 230)

A pastoral care of proximity entails that we know how to stand by in times of crisis that inevitably mark the lives of families.

The life of every family is marked by all kinds of crises, yet these are also part of its dramatic beauty. Couples should be helped to realize that surmounting a crisis need not weaken their relationship; instead, it can improve, settle and mature the wine of their union. Life together should not diminish but increase their contentment; every new step along the way can help couples find new ways to happiness. Each crisis becomes an apprenticeship in growing closer together or learning a little more

about what it means to be married. There is no need for couples to resign themselves to an inevitable downward spiral or a tolerable mediocrity. On the contrary, when marriage is seen as a challenge that involves overcoming obstacles, each crisis becomes an opportunity to let the wine of their relationship age and improve. Couples will gain from receiving help in facing crises, meeting challenges and acknowledging them as part of family life. Experienced and trained couples should be open to offering guidance, so the couples will not be unnerved by these crises or tempted to hasty decisions. Each crisis has a lesson to teach us; we need to learn how to listen for it with the ear of the heart. (AL 232)

But this requires a closeness that is built over time. And above all one has to act delicately.

Crises need to be faced together. This is hard, since persons sometimes withdraw in order to avoid saying what they feel; they retreat into a craven silence. At these times, it becomes all the more important to create opportunities for speaking heart to heart. Unless a couple learns to do this, they will find it harder and harder as time passes. Communication is an art learned in moments of peace in order to

be practised in moments of difficulty. Spouses need help in discovering their deepest thoughts and feelings and expressing them. Like childbirth, this is a painful process that brings forth a new treasure. The answers given to the pre-synodal consultation showed that most people in difficult or critical situations do not seek pastoral assistance, since they do not find it sympathetic, realistic or concerned for individual cases. This should spur us to try to approach marriage crises with greater sensitivity to their burden of hurt and anxiety. (AL 234)

Then there are situations of particular suffering. These are sometimes very dramatic and need to be accepted, understood and supported.

The Synod Fathers noted that “special discernment is indispensable for the pastoral care of those who are separated, divorced or abandoned. Respect needs to be shown especially for the sufferings of those who have unjustly endured separation, divorce or abandonment, or those who have been forced by maltreatment from a husband or a wife to interrupt their life together. To forgive such an injustice that has been suffered is not easy, but grace makes this journey possible. Pastoral care must necessarily include efforts

at reconciliation and mediation, through the establishment of specialized counselling centres in dioceses”. At the same time, “divorced people who have not remarried, and often bear witness to marital fidelity, ought to be encouraged to find in the Eucharist the nourishment they need to sustain them in their present state of life. The local community and pastors should accompany these people with solicitude, particularly when children are involved or when they are in serious financial difficulty”. Family breakdown becomes even more traumatic and painful in the case of the poor, since they have far fewer resources at hand for starting a new life. A poor person, once removed from a secure family environment, is doubly vulnerable to abandonment and possible harm. (AL 242)

Nobody should feel excluded from the ecclesial community.

It is important that the divorced who have entered a new union should be made to feel part of the Church. “They are not excommunicated” and they should not be treated as such, since they remain part of the ecclesial community. These situations “require careful discernment and respectful accompaniment. Language or



conduct that might lead them to feel discriminated against should be avoided, and they should be encouraged to participate in the life of the community. The Christian community's care of such persons is not to be considered a weakening of its faith and testimony to the indissolubility of marriage; rather, such care is a particular expression of its charity". (AL 243)

And no one should be left alone, especially when the well-being of children is at stake.

Christian communities must not abandon divorced parents who have entered a new union, but should include and support them in their efforts to bring up their children. "How can we encourage those parents to do everything possible to raise their children in the Christian life, to give them an example of committed and practical faith, if we keep them at arm's length from the life of the community, as if they were somehow excommunicated? We must keep from acting in a way that adds even more to the burdens that children in these situations already have to bear!" Helping heal the wounds of parents and supporting them spiritually is also beneficial for children, who need the familiar face of the Church to see them through this traumatic

experience. 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. (AL 246)

We must discern and help others to discern.

For this reason, 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, "sitting on the chair of Moses and judging at times with superiority and superficiality difficult cases and wounded families". Along these same lines, the International Theological Commission has noted that "natural law could not be presented as an already established set of rules that impose themselves a priori on the moral subject; rather, it is a source of objective inspiration for the deeply personal process of making decisions". Because of forms of conditioning and mitigating factors, 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. Discernment must help to find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of limits. 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. Let us remember that "a small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order, but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties". The practical pastoral care of ministers and of communities must not fail to embrace this reality. (AL 305)

We must not stop announcing the Gospel of the family, proposing the beauty of marriage. Pastoral work to help consolidate and sustain marriage is more important than that which tries to cure failures

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: "Young people who are baptized should be encouraged to understand that the sacrament of marriage can

enrich their prospects of love and that they can be sustained by the grace of Christ in the sacrament and by the possibility of participating fully in the life of the Church". 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. (AL 307)

But the logic which must guide the Church's work is always that of mercy. This logic urges us to start working to facilitate a journey towards the Lord which each one is called to fulfil in the uniqueness of his personal history.

This offers us a framework and a setting which help us avoid a cold bureaucratic morality in dealing with more sensitive issues. Instead, it sets us in the context of a pastoral discernment filled with merciful love, which is ever ready to understand, forgive, accompany, hope, and above all



integrate. That is the mindset which should prevail in the Church and lead us to "open our hearts to those living on the outermost fringes of society". I encourage the faithful who find themselves in complicated situations to speak confidently with their pastors or with other lay people whose lives are committed to the Lord. They may not always encounter in them a confirmation of their own ideas or desires, but they will surely receive some light to help them better understand their situation and discover a path to personal growth. I also encourage the Church's pastors to listen to them with sensitivity and serenity, with a sincere desire to understand their plight and their point of view, in order to help them live better lives and to recognize their proper place in the Church. (AL 312)

➤ Points to discuss

At personal level

- What place does prayer have in my family? Are we able to pray for one another? Do we find in the Eucharist the centre and the permanent source of our being together?
- Remember the moments of difficulty and crisis experienced. What have they meant? How did

we live them? What or who helped us?

- How do we relate to those who live in the so-called "irregular" situations?

At Church level

- How familiar are we with family stories?
- How does the community manage to be near in times of difficulty and crisis?
- What attention is being given to injured families? Is our community in a position to be welcoming?
- How attentive are we to the needs of the vulnerable, to children in particular?
- When we discern, do we find experiences of support?

At CA level

- Are our groups places where we experience proximity?
- Are we in a position to welcome those who are experiencing situations of particular suffering?
- Are we in a position to propose and sustain discernment programmes?

At community level

- Which are the main family wounds we observe in our social and community context?
- What impact do these injuries have on adults, young people and children?
- Which signs of vulnerability do we notice on the horizon of families in our community?
- What attention do we give to family fragilities which lead to poverty, immigration, unemployment, violence, etc.?

Consequently

- What concrete action can we suggest to transform reality positively starting from what we already do?

➡ **Suggest three lines of action**

5. CA's contribution

CA has always been committed to work in this direction. Family life has always been given importance in its programmes and today more than ever. It is enough to see the dialogue between generations the widespread co-responsibility and the sense of accompaniment experienced in CA. By bringing together children, young people, adults, students and workers, persons from all generations and social conditions, CA offers its members a concrete experience of living in a community and of loving one's own country. CA is a project which is "at the service" of families. The services offered to children and all the initiatives which Catholic Action realizes for engaged couples, young couples, for parents, for the very young, for the elderly, for families in difficulty, the cultural and political commitment and above all the formation commitment go along these lines and are the heart of the associative proposal.

CA offers a serious formation for all ages and for all, a formation, which, starting from faith, helps one to find criteria for discernment, to orientate one's meaning in life, to develop an ability to make mature choices and to develop a sense of responsibility. It is that education of one's conscience, never totally reached, which

accompanies a person in all stages of his life and which is fundamental for facing family life adequately. With the type of associative life and the formative programmes, which not only are interrelated but involve families at all levels, Catholic Action can definitely help to make every family feel at home in the Church, feel supported and accompanied in life's journey and discover the gift, of which it is the bearer, for the life of the Church and of all humanity. It can help to break the individualism in which we often seek refuge.

The individualism so prevalent today can lead to creating small nests of security, where others are perceived as bothersome or a threat. Such isolation, however, cannot offer greater peace or happiness; rather, it straitens the heart of a family and makes its life all the more narrow. (AL 187)

In addition to the small circle of the couple and their children, there is the larger family, which cannot be overlooked. Indeed, "the love between husband and wife and, in a derivative and broader way, the love between members of the same family – between parents

and children, brothers and sisters and relatives and members of the household – is given life and sustenance by an unceasing inner dynamism leading the family to ever deeper and more intense communion, which is the foundation and soul of the community of marriage and the family". Friends and other families are part of this larger family, as well as communities of families who support one another in their difficulties, their social commitments and their faith. (AL 196)

This is what the Pope calls "large family" or "extended family".

This greater family may have members who require assistance, or at least companionship and affection, or consolation amid suffering. (AL 187)

But it is also the context in which one can experience that no one is left alone with his suffering, his fatigue, his limitations.

This larger family should provide love and support to teenage mothers, children without parents, single mothers left to raise children, persons with disabilities needing particular affection and closeness, young people struggling with addiction, the unmarried, separated or widowed

who are alone, and the elderly and infirm who lack the support of their children. It should also embrace "even those who have made shipwreck of their lives". This wider family can help make up for the shortcomings of parents, detect and report possible situations in which children suffer violence and even abuse, and provide wholesome love and family stability in cases when parents prove incapable of this. (AL 197)

In conclusion, we can say that what emerges from *Amoris Laetitia* is both an image of the family and of the Church, of a Church which is a family, an idea which fascinates and challenges us. It is the dream of a humanity and of a Church which we cannot but support and to which we cannot but choose to be committed.

Prayer to the Holy Family

Jesus, Mary and Joseph,
in you we contemplate
the splendour of true love;
to you we turn with trust.

Holy Family of Nazareth,
grant that our families too
may be places of communion and prayer,
authentic schools of the Gospel
and small domestic churches.

Holy Family of Nazareth,
may families never again experience
violence, rejection and division;
may all who have been hurt or scandalized
find ready comfort and healing.

Holy Family of Nazareth,
make us once more mindful
of the sacredness and inviolability of the family,
and its beauty in God's plan.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph,
Graciously hear our prayer.

Amen.



*Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation **Amoris Lætitia**
of the Holy Father **Francis**
to bishops, priests and deacons, to consecrated persons
christian married couples and all the lay faithful, on love in the family*

19 March 2016

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Prayer to the Holy Family

Edited by IFCA Secretariat

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Rome, 8 April 2018 – *Domenica in Albis*

AMORIS LAETITIA

IN THE LIFE AND MISSION
OF CATHOLIC ACTION

I desire a Catholic Action present among people: in the parish, in the diocese, in towns and in neighbourhoods, in the family, in offices and workplaces, in the countryside, in all spheres of life.

These are the new areopagi where decisions are made and culture is created.

Pope Francis
Address to participants in the Congress
of the International Forum of Catholic Action (IFCA)
27 April 2017