



POST SYNODAL APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION AMORIS LAETITIA

The Bishops of England and Wales welcome the Pope's Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. Following the two synods on the family, the Exhortation is intended to aid reflection, dialogue, and pastoral practice on love and family. It offers great help and encouragement to families in their daily commitments and challenges. We are inspired by the Pope's portrayal of God's love present in the daily and often messy realities of family life. The Holy Father offers a rich scriptural presentation of the meaning of love, in a reflection on that well-known text of St Paul's, "Love is patient, love is kind" (1 Cor 13:4-7) (90).

This Exhortation has to be read in the context of the Jubilee Year of Mercy. Pope Francis reminds us that the Church is a tender Mother who "must accompany with attention and care the weakest of her children, who show signs of a wounded and troubled love, by restoring in them hope and confidence" (291). The Church is "a field hospital" ready to bind the wounds of the broken and her sacraments are powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak. The Pope emphasises that this Exhortation needs to be read patiently and carefully, and needs time for reflection. We have begun to do this together at our plenary assembly.

We recognise that the Exhortation presents new pastoral challenges for evangelisation and catechesis. Pope Francis says: "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" (307). It makes clear the need to find new pastoral methods to assist "Christian families, by the grace of the sacrament of matrimony, who are the principle agents of the family apostolate, above all through their joy-filled witness as domestic churches" (200).

Pope Francis presents the challenge of educating people for lifelong love. Parents, as the first educators of their children, supported by schools, are given this challenge so that an integral moral and spiritual life is developed. The Exhortation pays special attention to the education of the



conscience informed by the teaching of the Church so that people are enabled to grow in their faith and spiritual lives (cf 37). Formation of pastoral workers, and the formation of priests and deacons, must involve married couples and include preparation for the effective pastoral care of families. The Exhortation pays special attention to the very important tasks of marriage preparation and the care of families at different stages of married life (205ff). “Today, more important than the pastoral care of failures is the pastoral effort to strengthen marriages and thus to prevent their breakdown” (307).

The Holy Father considers the pastoral care of families who are struggling in their daily lives. He notes the acute difficulty of judging difficult situations and calls priests to be close to these families and understanding of the reality of their lives, however untidy these may be. Prayer, discernment and the Sacrament of Reconciliation can help many grow in their relationship with God whatever their situation.

Pope Francis states that pastors are not only responsible for promoting Christian marriage, but also for the pastoral discernment of their situation before God of a great many who no longer live this reality (293). In the particular case of the divorced and civilly remarried, there is a need to consider both those elements which can lead to a greater openness to the gospel of marriage in its fullness and those factors which may limit a free response to the Gospel in order to understand the subjective situation of a person before God. “Hence 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” (301). Through this spiritual discernment they should feel confident in the promise of God’s mercy, the love of the Church and discover the next step in their response to God.

Pope Francis therefore encourages all who find themselves in difficult situations to speak confidently to their priests in order to understand their personal situation before God and discover a path of personal growth.

The remarkable increase in the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation which, in many places, is an early fruit of the Year of Mercy, encourages us that this invitation will indeed be taken up.

The challenges presented in this Exhortation, whilst not changing Church teaching, are far reaching and radical. Embracing them will take time, effort and patience.

Finally, as bishops, we are grateful to the families who witness to Christ in the midst of complex and busy lives. We thank all those engaged in marriage and family life ministries in our dioceses, and all our priests called to be the living face of the Father’s mercy.