

# AMORIS LAETITIA: A LOVE THAT BURNS, YET SHOULD NOT CONSUME

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## **Introduction**

The papal Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (the joy of love) has brought the already very famous Vicar of Christ, Pope Francis, into the limelight once more. As usual for Francis, the limelight is more than a theological one, it has far reaching effects on sociological and cultural fabrics of global societies, even with some political reverberations sometimes<sup>1</sup>. *Amoris Laetitia* (*AL*) is a product of the two synods of Bishops which was held in Rome: the 1<sup>st</sup> an extraordinary Synod of 2014 and the 2<sup>nd</sup>, an Ordinary Synod of 2015. The two Synods focused on the theme of marriage and the family.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> Synod (an extraordinary synod), there were a lot of theological fireworks and it was wise that Pope Francis had decided that the Ordinary Synod of Bishops which was coming up the following year, would continue working on the same theme of marriage and family life. These two synods, as Cardinal Walter Kasper had expectantly noted, having demonstrated a process-oriented, dialogical style, in which the entire people of God made meaningful contributions, have certainly enriched the theme of marriage and brought their discussion to the fore.<sup>2</sup>

*AL*, as the Holy Father puts it, is meant “...to gather the contributions of the two recent Synods on the family, while adding other considerations as an aid to reflection, dialogue and pastoral practice, and

as a help and encouragement to families in their daily commitments and challenges.”<sup>3</sup> *AL* is equally a re-echo of one of the themes that was dear to the Pope in his first Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, precisely the call for a renewal of the indispensable position of the family in evangelization.

This exhortation which treats the timely theme of marriage and family is addressed to the entire Church, with a specific goal and mandate to each group of life in the Church. For the Bishops, priests, seminarians, *AL* has a significant import for each group in the Church, but with specific reference to “Christian Married Couples” as indicated right from the very title and description of the Papal exhortation.

At a time that family life is undergoing lots of crisis and marriage is suffering much denigration, *AL* comes packed with several encouraging words for couples, for those preparing for marriage and indeed for the entire Church of Christ who at her best, is the bride of Christ.

### **A Burning Quest for Pope Francis**

The focus of *AL* is consistent with a seeming special interest of the current Vicar of Christ.

Pope Francis has shown his love for marriages and families in many ways. In the first year of his papacy, he called for two consecutive synodal assemblies on the family. He devoted over a year's worth of weekly audiences to topics related to marriage and the family, and he gave stirring testimony to the beauty of God's plan for the family during the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia. He also canonized Pope St. John Paul II, whom he called the “Pope of the family.”<sup>4</sup>

This special interest of Pope Francis in family life and marriage is also visible in the grand plan of making this theme the subject of two whole synods, with the intention of having a year between the two synods to allow for a worldwide consultation on a matter he considered most important for the Church.

Special as this interest in marriage and family matters might be for Pope Francis however, it is not a novel interest as history bears us witness and as the documents of the Church on this theme testify. Pope Francis himself in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of *AL illumined* our memory about the rich list of the Church's teaching on Marriage and Family life.<sup>5</sup> The dialogical factor that Pope Francis is bringing into the theme is not novel either.

Pope John XXIII and Paul VI had both indicated the importance of dialogue within the Church, painting for us an image of the importance of an *ecclesia audiens* and not merely an *ecclesia dicens*. Indeed, in as much as the Church is not irresponsible with her divinely-given mandate to “teach all nations to the ends of the earth”<sup>6</sup>, she is also equally called to *listen* to the human experience of the body of Christ.<sup>7</sup>

### **Structure**

*AL* is crafted in 9 chapters, making use of a gradual development of its theme. The Holy Father himself indicated that chapters 4 and 5 are “central” to the very core of the message of the exhortation as both focus on love.<sup>8</sup> It is almost like presenting the apostolic exhortation as not being preoccupied with the expected divide which was rife globally and was highly anticipated. Rather the document would seem to be focused on the very nature of what should drive the whole discussion: love and its complementary twin, mercy.

Before presenting this driving point of love and mercy however, the Pope makes a journey through a tripartite set of values which form the first three chapters of the document. Thus the introductory chapter 1 focuses on the scriptural background to the whole discussion on marriage and family life in order, according to Pope Francis, “...to set the proper tone” for the document. Chapter 2 advances the document and focuses on the concrete situation of the family life in our world, again says Francis, “...in order to keep firmly grounded in reality.” And chapter 3 works through a doctrinal synthesis on what the Church has always thought and believed, what he called “...essential aspects of the Church's teaching on marriage and the family, about marriage and family life”.<sup>9</sup> Haven laid down this tripartite foundation of the Scripture, the situation of the family in the world and the Church's teachings on the family and marriage, the Pope unfolds the beauty of the family life and the lofty nature of marital commitment in the next two chapters (four and five) on love.

The next three chapters after these will draw from the foundation already laid. Thus Chapter 6 focuses on specific pastoral perspectives, offering the insight of the synods on pastoral methods that are necessary in supporting and maintaining the family.<sup>10</sup> Chapter 7 makes a generous dedication to children in the family, particularly the education of children, a family obligation which the Holy Father says is important and at once complicated,<sup>11</sup> while chapter 8 dwells on the situation of those “who show signs of a wounded and troubled love”, presenting vials of pastoral comfort on the way forward for such troubled body of Christ.<sup>12</sup> The last chapter, the 9<sup>th</sup>, rounds up the Apostolic Exhortation by presenting the spirituality of marriage and family life, a spirituality

that shines forth only “in the communion of the family... centred on Christ.”<sup>13</sup> The exhortation winds up on this note, marriage and family life must be centred on Christ.

### **A constellation of salient points**

To say there are a number of salient points emanating from the crucible of *AL* is to make the point mildly. While many have argued, and rightly so, that the Pope has not changed even a single doctrine in the Church in spite of this effervescent Apostolic Exhortation, yet a lot of ground has been given for a possible variation in the moral cum liturgical landscape of the Church. For while putting forth the Church's right foot in the area of dialogue, and presence in the world, the document also brings up anew some areas of deep consternation and theological obfuscation.<sup>14</sup>

Let us group these emerging considerations of *AL* under the following six points:

#### **1. A celebration of Love, Marriage and Family**

Pope Francis, in union with St. Paul and a host of the Fathers, affirms marriage as a gift from the Lord.<sup>15</sup> Haven been redeemed by Christ, marriage and family are

restored in the image of the Holy Trinity, the mystery from which all true love flows....The Gospel of the family spans the history of the world, from the creation of man and woman in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen. 1:26-27) to the fulfilment of the mystery of the covenant in Christ at the end of time with the marriage of the Lamb (cf. Rev. 19:9)<sup>16</sup>

Like a further emphasis on the sublime position of family life and the joy of love that it exudes, even Jesus would begin his public ministry by ministering to a new family that was just budding, at the wedding feast of Cana. Because Christ “makes himself present to the Christian spouses in the sacrament of marriage, ...the spouses themselves are consecrated and by means of a special grace making of them a domestic church.” This beautiful reality makes the Church, in order to fully understand her very mystery, look up to the Christian family which truly manifests her in a real way.<sup>17</sup> This is why John Paul II had defined the family as “the way of the Church” for in the mystery of love, marriage and family life the Church more easily understands her sublime position as the bride of Christ.

*AL* affirms the gift and at the same time responsibility of the married couple to transmit life, in this way sharing in the work of the Creator, becoming instruments of his love, and thus also “entrusting to them the responsibility for the future of mankind.”<sup>18</sup> The parents have a most serious duty and a primary right to educate the children thus brought to the world in this ambience of conjugal love. However in as much as school and education or important, the Holy Father reminds parents that these do not ever replace parents but complement them.<sup>19</sup>

A family thus developed in love and unity becomes a “perennial source of strength for the life of the Church”<sup>20</sup>, a reflection of the Church's call to share in the love of Christ her spouse. Like Christ who gives all for the love of his body, the Holy Father expounds particularly in the fourth chapter of *AL* the many attributes of love which the family must exhibit in order to bring love to fruition: not acting on impulse, being patient, the couple reciprocally caring for each other, not being jealous, understanding the difficult of the other etc.

In a word *AL* celebrates conjugal love, a love which is “sanctified, enriched and illuminated by the grace of the sacrament of marriage.”<sup>21</sup>

## **2. Greater recognition of efforts rather than failures in Marriage and Family life**

*AL* actually opens with a beautiful affirmative sentence, “the joy of love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church.”<sup>22</sup> This fine opening easily casts one's mind to such an opening in one of the most important documents of the II Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, the pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world. That document also opens with the words “*Gaudium et Spes*” the joy and hope but makes an addition of the words “*luctus et angor*” griefs and anxieties “...of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”<sup>23</sup> In *AL* it is evident that Pope Francis is calling for a greater celebration of the joy of love as well as a recognition and accompaniment of the great struggles within families and in many marriages.

Echoing the voice of the Bishops of Chile, the Holy Father reminds us in *AL* that difficulties will normally be experienced sometimes by families since they are human families. The sort of “perfect families (often) 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.”<sup>24</sup>

But then, it is all fantasy. The ideal family is the family which lives the joys and difficulties of the only perfect family of Nazareth and thus learns to work out its salvation in the light of the joys and struggles of that perfect family.

### 3. An accentuated Ecclesiology from below

In keeping with the style of Francis, *AL* reveals a choice of an ecclesiology from below where faith is lived in contrast to an ecclesiology from above.<sup>25</sup> Though *AL* makes reference and deference to the Church's teaching based on Scripture and Tradition and thus acknowledges a theology from above, its usage of reason and experience points to a more copious usage of a theology from below.

With such an ecclesiological hermeneutic, Francis offers *AL* as a text which celebrates the body of Christ journeying within its facticities, limitations and struggles towards love. Many times in the text the Holy Father makes reference to human experience and difficulties as crucibles in which love is perfected and the divine will is realized.<sup>26</sup> The language of the document is therefore one that recalls the wonderful signs of mystery and the divine, sewn within human experience. These mysteries must be uncoded and understood if meaning is to be made of human existence.<sup>27</sup>

### 4. An attempt at making a balance between the letter and the spirit of the law

In *AL* Pope Francis does not make a veiled use of the necessity of weighing well the delicate balance of the letter and the spirit of the law. Since the thrust of laws of the Church is for the salvation of souls (*salus animarum superma lex*)<sup>28</sup>, all must be done to achieve same. An application of Aquinas' *epikeia* is therefore an implicit part of *AL*.

According to Crux, an online Catholic news site, *AL* is “a long polemic against rigorism.”<sup>29</sup> The Holy Father did not mince words in calling for a new mindset in discerning the situation of those going through challenges in their marriages. According to him, what pastors need to do in cases of “irregular” unions is not to simply apply moral laws as if they were stones to throw at people's lives. For “this would merely reveal such a pastor as a man of closed heart, “...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.”<sup>30</sup>

A new, more profound manner of discernment which aims at helping “...to find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of limits”<sup>31</sup> must be uppermost in the heart of the pastor.

## 5. A twining of the Logic of Mercy and Integration

*AL* speaks of these two modes of logic as being central to what he calls the logic of the Gospel: namely the logic of mercy and integration.

The logic of mercy and integration bring into the Father's house all who are at the fringes and seemingly excluded. In his own words, "the logic of integration is the key to their pastoral care, a care which would allow them not only to realize that they belong to the Church as the body of Christ, but also to know that they can have a joyful and fruitful experience in it."<sup>32</sup> This is precisely because those who find themselves struggling with the practical ideals of the Christian faith (like those in some irregular unions) cannot be simply left aside as if condemned forever due to their own wrong choices. Rather, the Pontiff maintains emphatically, and even with an exclamation mark, that "No one can be condemned for ever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel!"<sup>33</sup>

However, he expands this last statement, and thus essentially the whole understanding of the logic of integration, to include not only those in such unions fraught with some irregularities. Rather he says, "...I am not speaking only of the divorced and remarried, but of everyone, in whatever situation they find themselves"<sup>34</sup>

When such a mercy is shown to all, the Father's mercy reaches to all of his children who then,

feel not as excommunicated members of the Church, but instead as living members, able to live and grow in the Church and experience her as a mother who welcomes them always, who takes care of them with affection and encourages them along the path of life and the Gospel.<sup>35</sup>

Pope Francis says he proposes the logic of pastoral mercy and integration not as a replacement for a the Church's "full ideal of marriage" (from which the Church must not desist from proclaiming)<sup>36</sup>, but in order to fully appropriate the workings of the Lord of mercy who through the Holy Spirit does still sow in the midst of human weakness.<sup>37</sup> The Church too, the Pope believes, must follow this disposition of dispensing mercy, even if in the course of doing same her "...shoes get soiled by the mud of the street."<sup>38</sup>

This logic of the gospel is equally expedient because causes of irregular unions are sometimes not as straight as often spoken of in purely legal terms. Relying on the admonition of *Familiaris Consortio* 84 which called for a careful discernment of situations, *AL* also reminds pastors that “the degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases and factors may exist which limit the ability (of persons) to make a decision.” Thus, according to the text, it is important to take into account “the complexity of various situations and be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience and endure distress because of their condition.”<sup>39</sup>

### **6. A confusing dialectics between *sustenance of Tradition* and *revision of doctrines***

There is no salient theme in *AL* that is as *disconcerting* and *confusing* as the reality of the grey areas and doubts which the documents presents, a seeming breeding ground for future pastoral confusion and, definitely, present theological quagmire. There is some shadow left behind by *AL*, or maybe something more than a shadow. There is a level of uncertainty, maybe not on the level of the doctrinal, but the words of the Pope (even if only exhorting rather than speaking *ex cathedra*) always carry weighty import. Someone glibly summed up this confusion and theological haze with the remark “...on the one hand, we have the Church's doctrine as expressed in documents such as *Familiaris Consortio* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*. On the other hand, we have Pope Francis' teaching in *Amoris laetitia*.”<sup>40</sup>

There are a number of ways in which the document at hand leaves a lot of ambiguity and confusion. While the Holy Father rightly indicated that “the degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases”<sup>41</sup> of irregular unions and moral mis-choices generally, and thus culpability is mitigated, it appears *AL* makes a jump from culpability to an almost exclusion of blame. For in trying to argue for the important logic of mercy it pleads even for a possible by-passing of the usual traditional reservation in the cult of the sacraments in order to facilitate repentance.<sup>42</sup>

Whereas the corpus of traditional documents and teachings would, in unequivocal terms, show that situations of moral irregularities constitute challenges to sacramental discipline, *AL* appears to lack this precision. For instance, in the place of the seeming abdication of the arena of moral judgement in the hands of the pastor and his discernment of culpability, *Familiaris Consortio* which equally shows a deep understanding for human situations and moral quagmires rather emphatically states,

However, the Church reaffirms her practice, which is based upon Sacred Scripture, of not admitting to Eucharistic Communion divorced persons who have remarried. They are unable to be admitted thereto from the fact that their state and condition of life objectively contradict that union of love between Christ and the Church which is signified and effected by the Eucharist. Besides this, there is another special pastoral reason: if these people were admitted to the Eucharist, the faithful would be led into error and confusion regarding the Church's teaching about the indissolubility of marriage.<sup>43</sup>

Compare such a precision and clarity above for instance with *AL*'s presumption that

When a responsible and tactful person, who does not presume to put his or her own desires ahead of the common good of the Church, meets with a pastor capable of acknowledging the seriousness of the matter before him, there can be no risk that a specific discernment may lead people to think that the Church maintains a double standard.<sup>44</sup>

Here *AL* leaves quite a wide margin of possibilities between the “responsible and tactful person's” presumed responsibility and the equally presumed “discernment” of a capable pastor. In real pastoral situations however, it can be really difficult to ascertain such responsibility and discernment. What you therefore often end up with is some moral confusion and a situation of pastoral indecisiveness on the one hand, or at best a presumptuous moral clarity/discernment on the other hand.

The last point is amplified by the fact that *AL* itself realizes that such a precision of moral evaluation cannot wholly be thrown to the subject's “responsibility” or the pastor's “discernment”. For instance, with regards to homosexual unions it says “. . .as for proposals to place unions between homosexual persons on the same level as marriage, there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family”. Here, the question that many Gay activists ask is whether what is good for the goose is not equally good for the gander. In other words, such people view *AL* as an establishment of some ample leeway for divorced and remarried couples or others in similar irregular situations, while treating people of homosexual orientation to the usual traditional

moral whip.<sup>45</sup> Or in other words, the moral order which the divorced and remarried have transgressed is pre-set to be more forgiving to them than others who the Church teaches equally transgresses the same moral order.

It is interesting to note that the most confusing of these grey areas are not quite in the body of the document itself but in the footnotes. Take footnote 351 for an instance. That note subtly makes reference to the possible usage of the sacraments as help for those who are in “objective situation of sin which may not be subjectively culpable” in order for them to grow “in the life of grace and charity.”<sup>46</sup> That is well put, it would appear, unless one remembers the “objective situation of sin” here could be a second marriage or some other irregular union.

But whether in irregular unions or other possible situations of objective sins<sup>47</sup>, the suggestion of *AL* that the sacramental cult could be used as means of practice of discretion by Pastors leaves some uneasy pastoral air. While the Church is always a mother and is called to emulate her head who came “that all may be saved”, history of the sacraments and its cult attest to the point that the sacraments are not meant to be some tools in the hand of a willing pastor or otherwise. Rather, the Catechism would precisely state for instance that “reconciliation in the sacrament of Penance which would open the way to the Eucharist, *can only be granted* to those who, repenting of having broken the sign of the Covenant and of fidelity to Christ, are sincerely ready to undertake a way of life that is *no longer in contradiction* to the indissolubility of marriage.”<sup>48</sup>

In fact the whole section of *AL* on “Rules and Discernment” raises a lot of questions about the position of the pastor who is called upon not to consider the natural law “as an already established set of rules that impose themselves *a priori* on the moral subject” but rather to realize “it is a source of objective inspiration for the deeply personal process of making decisions.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, Pope Francis would surmise, because of this “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.” It is not enough to apply the law, the Pope would argue, but to realize that those people living in the said “objective situation of sin” may not be as culpable as we usually think. The precise problem here is that these points made by Pope Francis appear founded on some traditional moral tenets, yet lack a lot of precision and thus can be easily abused.<sup>50</sup> The document is like a case of a sweet-sour presentation that replicates a moral reality yet in a quite confusing and imprecise language.

The issue of conscience is the elephant in the room as far as this document is concerned. Again, the Pope does not posit a private thought nor position but makes reference to two major documents that have dwelt on the issue in the past: the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) and the Apostolic Exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (RP). According to the CCC, “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.”<sup>51</sup> The CCC goes on to name some of the circumstances that can mitigate moral responsibility as “affective immaturity, force of acquired habit, conditions of anxiety or other psychological or social factors that lessen or even extenuate moral culpability”<sup>52</sup>

Considering the fact that the above-mentioned conditions could obtain in situations which we usually call “objective situation of sin”, the Holy Father says “...a negative judgement about an objective situation does not imply a judgement about the imputability or culpability of the person involved.”<sup>53</sup> In other words, as already mentioned above, the general principle does not have to obtain always for all couples but each case must be discerned separately by the pastor.

The problem in weighing these quotations become obvious when compared with further texts. Whereas *AL* arrives at the conclusion above about the need for discernment of the pastor and generally about the possibility of an uneven level of imputability of culpability, the Code of Canon Law rather legislates that those who are “...obstinately persevering in manifest grave sin are not to be admitted to Holy Communion.”<sup>54</sup> The same point would equally be clearly and emphatically made in *Familiaris Consortio* a year later.<sup>55</sup> Yet another important traditional (in fact legal) text to which *AL* runs contrary to its trajectory is the “Declaration” of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts. This text is important because it actually gives a resume of the Church’s response to the objection at hand, citing different documents from the Tradition of the Church. In all, whereas *AL* rightly brings to the fore the issue of “uneven culpability”, yet persistence in what is traditionally judged as manifest grave evil makes the recommendation of *AL* re culpability and the pastor’s discernment confusing.

## **Evaluation**

This paper has tried to weigh *AL*, its pastoral solicitude and its general contribution to the development of doctrines. Two recurring narratives throughout this “weighing” are: first, the unmistakable desire of *AL* to bring all into the one fold and show mercy particularly to the frail sheep in accordance with gospel values. The second however is the

imprecision, maybe essentially of the language, with which *AL* sets about the first narrative, thus creating a lot of grey areas and confusion.

Whatever be the case, it is obvious that *AL*, just like any other documents in the Church anyway, would have to be tested against the Tradition and the numerous ecclesiastical documents before its arrival. Such a test is already rife in academic and even pastoral circles. For instance, one of the major individuals in the Vatican Dicastery, in fact the man in charge of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Gerhard Müller, has made known his take on *AL*. He strongly posited that Pope Francis actually wants to offer “hope for the family” through the promotion of the culture of the family and culture of the bond which is based on the “indissoluble love of a man and a woman” and “open to the transmission and upbringing of life.” Thus for Cardinal Müller, in trying to preserve this great divine institution called Marriage, the burning question in the mind of Christ's Vicar is “How to give hope to those who live in alienation, and especially those who have lived the drama and the wound of a second civil union after a divorce?”<sup>56</sup>

Cardinal Müller for instance counters the argument that Pope Francis' impetus, and particularly as espoused in footnote 351 of *Amoris Laetitia*, promotes the offering of the Eucharist to those living in an objective situation of sin. According to the Cardinal, this is precisely because “no one can truly desire a sacrament, that of the Eucharist, without also desiring to live in accord with the other sacraments, including that of marriage.” For “one who lives in contrast with the marriage bond is opposed to the visible sign of the sacrament of marriage;” Such a person makes himself an “anti-sign of indissolubility.” And thus it follows that “because his bodily life is contrary to the sign, he cannot be part, in receiving communion, of the supreme Eucharistic sign, where the incarnate love of Jesus is revealed.”<sup>57</sup>

It goes without arguing much, that Cardinal Müller is talking first and foremost from the position of one laden with the obligation of ensuring the promotion, preservation and consistency of Catholic doctrine. He also obviously understands the importance of allowing yet managing the tensions that could possibly arise in the process of the development of doctrines without necessarily clamping on such a development. And so he appraises *AL* as a timely exhortation which is necessary in the Church but not an overturning of the salvation chart of the Ark of God, the Church. Or in other words, he gives a very strict interpretation to *AL*, and in cases of the many imprecision and confusing nuances, he rather gives the benefit of doubts to the ecclesiastical documents and Tradition that are replete before *AL*'s arrival.

Another reasoning behind such positive understanding of the exhortation that Cardinal Müller advanced is that “admitting a contradiction between the Eucharist and marriage would necessarily mean changing the profession of faith of the Church, which teaches and realizes the harmony among all the sacraments, just as she has received it from Jesus.”<sup>58</sup>

From another perspective which is not necessarily different but apparently much more readily receptive of the Holy Father's body language, Cardinal Christoph *Schönborn* to whom Pope Francis has actually given the task of further clarifying some theological points to journalists for instance, and particularly the popular footnote 351, says *AL* is but a simple presentation of the Church's teaching on marriage in more accessible language and style. *Schönborn* argues that *AL* is merely presented in the usual simple and merciful language of Francis who, at his first public presentation immediately after his election on March 13 2013, simply greeted the world with a *Buona sera*” good evening in Italian.

Though the document may not be as short as “buona sera” it is as simple, direct and in touch with reality. The idea behind *AL*, as the Holy Father himself says, is to reach out to everyone.<sup>59</sup> Whether those in regular or irregular unions, all are welcome to the Father's house. We are all on a journey, for even the family that is apparently doing fine, is yet on a journey and needs support in the Father's house. So for Cardinal *Schönborn*, “Pope Francis has succeeded in speaking about all situations without cataloguing them, without categorizing, with that outlook of fundamental benevolence that is associated with the heart of God, and with the eyes of Jesus that excludes no-one.

In essence, an understanding of *AL*, whether from the staunchly conservative traditional lens as represented by no lesser person than Cardinal Gerard Müller, or from a generally perceived liberal lens of another Prince of the Church like Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, both make an argument about the two narratives we have indicated at the beginning of this evaluation. Both argue for the mercy narrative, even if from different stand points. Yet both, without singling out the language of the exhortation as being unacceptable, try to make up for any seeming incoherence or confusion that *AL*'s simplicity could have elicited.

The arguments on the second narrative of a seeming non-specificity of the language of *AL* has been loud and clear in the academia and even within the pastoral ambit of the Church. We have cited already the powerful critique of five cardinals of the Cardinal Schönborn address,

an address which was to become the impetus for the Apostolic Exhortation. It is therefore a critique, albeit preempted, of *AL*. Four of these Cardinals will in fact eventually write the popular dubia asking for clarification from Pope Francis regarding five confusing areas in *AL*. Apart from these objections there have also been objections from several theologians who express the confusion that *AL* has caused in the theological field.<sup>60</sup>

Finally, over and above the two narratives that served as paradigms of our evaluation of *AL* here, one must appreciate *AL*'s contribution in a major area: that of recognizing the contemporary lacunae that obviously exist in the Church's moral teaching and what many report back as their experiences in the human field of moral actions. Let us give an example that Pope Francis himself noted in the document, that of couples deciding to live "as brothers and sisters". *AL* makes a novel and sincere note of the difficulty of living this counsel, sometimes even endangering faithfulness between the couple and the good of the children.<sup>61</sup>

It would appear this novel sense of sincere appreciation of moral challenges in contemporary times, particularly in the family life, is what *AL* sought to frankly face. But whether a frank confrontation of such a challenge supports a revision of doctrine is what *AL* appears not to have convincingly argued.

Worse still, while not directly suggesting a revision of doctrine, its language eminently argues for the same. Here lies the non-specificity of language in *AL* and essentially its perceived ambivalence of ideas.

### **Conclusion**

*AL* has now long been published, a year old already by the time of publication of this article. What we make of it and what theological fecundity it generates is what now matters. If we hold, from our discussions here, that the document is an overall success or, on the other hand, that it could have been better presented, the fact remains that it cannot be unpublished. But discussions on it can lend greater credence and solidity to the doctrines of the Church. Or even better than lending credence to the doctrines of the Church as if the Church were some doctrine-spewing machine it can lend growth to the fruitfulness of the Church. And the "go and bear fruits, fruits that will last" of John 15:16 will surely not be realized by a mere complacent, untested efforts.

The point about the ongoing-nature of the already published document would seem to be equally supported by the

recommendation of Pope Francis himself not to make "...a rushed reading of the text."<sup>62</sup> In fact since the Holy Spirit is indeed present to the Church, the body of Christ, to guide her towards the entire truth until, as Pope Francis puts it, "...he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enable us to see all things as he does"<sup>63</sup>, the job before us is to, in the docility of spirit, keep learning and growing.

Pope Francis does not shy away from the point that there is ample work before theologians. That is why this is not a declaration of doctrine or some infallible teaching but an *exhortation*. In fact Pope Francis says "The complexity of the issues that arose (in the synods) revealed the need for continued open discussion of a number of doctrinal, moral, spiritual, and pastoral questions. *The thinking of pastors and theologians*, if faithful to the Church, honest, realistic and creative, will help us to achieve greater clarity."<sup>64</sup>

Unlike that attitude of our world and its paraphernalia of the media which wants to saturate every debate with its own view and skew the Church's reflection on her own nature and her sublime vocation of teaching the truth to the ends of the ages, one should borrow a leaf from Pope Francis' admonition that we avoid "immoderate desire for total change without sufficient reflection or grounding", and "...an attitude that would solve everything by applying general rules or deriving undue conclusions from particular theological considerations"<sup>65</sup>

But some pedestrian persons would argue, even Pope Francis could borrow the same leaf from his own words and make a less-confusing presentation of this joy of love which is indeed the joy of life

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In political circles for instance, the visit of the Vice President of the United States of America, Joe Biden, just immediately after *Amoris Laetitia* was published, was heavily criticized by many who saw Joe Biden's visit at this notable time as some sort of a positive nod to the document by a powerful Catholic who has been noted for a vigorous support for the Gay cause and promotion of embryonic stem cell.

<sup>2</sup> See Gerard O'Connell, "Cardinal Kasper: Some Fear a Domino Effect at the Synod on the Family", in *America, the National Catholic Review*, (Sept. 29, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 4, in [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_)

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<sup>4</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/amoris-laetitia.cfm>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* *AL* complements the 1981 document *Familiaris Consortio*, "Regarding the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World", by Pope St. John Paul II after the synod on the family in 1980. This important document has remained a major reference-point for the theme of marriage and family life. John Paul would also write the "Letter to Families," in 1994, and his catechesis on human love, commonly called the "theology of the body," has also deeply enriched the Church's contemplation on marriage and family life today. All of these works are cited at various points in *Amoris Laetitia*. Other key documents, also cited, include the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (On the Church in the Modern World), Bl. Pope Paul VI's Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae* (On Human Life), and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (On Christian Love).

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 28:19

<sup>7</sup> This is a particularly important theme for the Fathers of the II Vatican Council who called for a reading of the signs of times (*Gaudium et Spes* 4), and discerning of human experiences (*Gaudium et Spes* 46, 52).

<sup>8</sup> *AL* no. 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> See *op. cit.*, no. 199

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.* no. 259.

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, nos. 291-312.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 316, 317.

<sup>14</sup> Suffices to note here as an evident indication the unease within both the academic and pastoral ambits of the Church since the publication of the Apostolic Exhortation. This unease had its incipience in the response of top academia including five Cardinals who wrote the book *Remaining in the Truth of Christ: Marriage and Communion in the Catholic Church* in the latter part of 2014, in response to Walter Cardinal Kasper's book *The Gospel of the Family*. Kasper's book contains an address that he had given during the Extraordinary Consistory of the Cardinals held in Rome on February 20-21, 2014, an address which was meant to set the tone for the discussion of the 2014 and 2015 Synod of Bishops on marriage and family. According to Robert Dodaro et al, "toward the end of his address Cardinal Kasper proposed a change in the Church's sacramental teaching and discipline, one that would permit, in limited cases, divorced and civilly remarried Catholics to be admitted to Eucharistic Communion following a period of penance." *Remaining in the Truth of Christ* rejected this stand of Cardinal Kasper, arguing that "it

cannot be reconciled with the Catholic doctrine on the indissolubility of marriage, and that it thus reinforces misleading understandings of both fidelity and mercy.” From this initial consternation has arisen even a deeper one after the publication of *Amoris Laetitia* itself. Four top-notched Cardinals have, after a preliminary struggle to elicit responses from the Pope, finally written to Pope Francis the famous *Dubia*, seeking clarifications on the nebulous parts of the Exhortation and hoping the Pope in his response will help undo the “grave disorientation and great confusion” that the document has caused. For full content of the *dubia* cf. <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/edward-pentin/full-text-and-explanatory-notes-of-cardinals-questions-on-amoris-laetitia>, last accessed January 10, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> *AL* no. 61.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 63. The Scripture thus represents in this way a celebration of spousal love, initiating and ending with bridal ceremonies.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 67.

<sup>18</sup> *AL* 81

<sup>19</sup> *AL* 84.

<sup>20</sup> *AL* 88.

<sup>21</sup> *AL* 120.

<sup>22</sup> *AL* 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1

<sup>24</sup> *AL* 135.

<sup>25</sup> The Wesleyan Quadrilateral (Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience) describes sources of theology either from above or below. While Scripture and Tradition are taken as tools for a theology from above, human reason and experience are taken as a dwelling on theology from below.

<sup>26</sup> See *AL* 22, 30

<sup>27</sup> See *AL* 151

<sup>28</sup> Canon 1752.

<sup>29</sup> See Austen Ivereigh, “Pope Francis in epic bid to save the family, convert the Church”, *Crux* (April 8 2016), in <http://www.cruxnow.com/church/2016/04/08/pope-francis-in-epic-bid-to-save-the-family-convert-the-church/>, accessed May 28, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> *AL*, no. 305.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *AL* 299.

<sup>33</sup> *AL* 297.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *AL* 299.

<sup>36</sup> *AL* 307.

<sup>37</sup> *AL* 308.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *AL* 79.

<sup>40</sup> <http://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2016/04/amoris-laetitia-in-conflict-with.html>

<sup>41</sup> *AL* 300, footnote 336.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Familiaris Consortio* 84.

<sup>44</sup> *AL* 300.

<sup>45</sup> Mary Hunt, a feminist theologian and founder of Women's Alliance for Theology, for instance argued that *AL* gives a strong impression that "if you are heterosexual, married, divorced, and remarried with an understanding parish priest, you have reason to be hopeful that your 'irregular situation' can be fixed". But, "if you use most forms of effective birth control, have an abortion, or are a sexually active LGBTIQ Catholic, you might as well read Dante and/or seek another denomination if you expect to be treated with equality, dignity, and respect". See Tom Roberts, "Reactions to *Amoris Laetitia*: A leap or baby step?" *National Catholic Reporter* (April 21, 2016), in <http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/reactions-amoris-laetitia-leap-or-baby-step>, accessed May 12, 2016.

<sup>46</sup> *AL* 305.

<sup>47</sup> The Pope himself already indicated that the focus of *AL* and the mercy it hopes to bestow is not only for those who have had divorce and remarried but indeed "everyone, in whatever situation they find themselves" *AL* 297. The understanding of objective state of sin" here therefore could arguably go more than just those in irregular unions and extend to other types of sins.

<sup>48</sup> CCC 1650, emphasis mine.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 305, quoting the International Theological Commission, *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at Natural Law*, (2009), 59.

<sup>50</sup> One of the obfuscation that such surface-scratching of the natural law here presents is the cogent question which the Cardinals have asked in their *dubia*, precisely the question 2: "After the publication of the post-synodal exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (304), does one still need to regard as valid the teaching of St. John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, 79, based on sacred Scripture and on the Tradition of the Church, on the existence of **absolute moral norms** that prohibit intrinsically evil acts and that are binding without exceptions?"

<sup>51</sup> CCC 1735.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 2352.

<sup>53</sup> *AL* 302.

<sup>54</sup> Code of Canon Law, Canon 915.

<sup>55</sup> *Familiaris Consortio*, 84.

<sup>56</sup> Gerhard L. Müller, "What can we expect from the family", in

<http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1351294?eng=y>, accessed May 15, 2016.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *AL* 297.

<sup>60</sup> Edward Pentin's article on the *National Catholic Register* is one of the many accounts of theologians who find *AL* very confusing, cf. <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/edward-pentin/catholic-scholars-appeal-to-pope-francis-to-repudiate-errors-in-amoris-laet>, last accessed January 10, 2017.

<sup>61</sup> See *AL* 298, and particularly footnote 329.

<sup>62</sup> *AL* 7.

<sup>63</sup> *AL* 3.

<sup>64</sup> *AL* 2.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*