

***Amoris Lætitia* on Marriage and Family Life: Theological and Pastoral Reception in Nigeria**

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Abstract

Amoris Lætitia has proved to be really momentous. It addresses the state of the family, its challenges in the present age and the role it can still play regardless of the challenges and even hostilities, on the heels of the 2014 and 2015 Synods of Bishops. Curiously, some of us had the erroneous perception that this synod was just about broken marriages, civil divorce, remarriage, access to the sacraments; and same-sex unions. Many of us in this part of the world let the media and western narratives dictate how we followed and interpreted doctrinal and pastoral developments in the church today. Unfortunately, we let this fixation neglect broader issues, especially our issues. This article directs our attention to the dire necessity of praxis-oriented reception of *Amoris Lætitia* in Nigeria. The contribution analyses reception efforts so far, and ends by offering how deepen and further the much-needed pastoral reception of the post-synodal exhortation especially in Nigeria is at the moment.

Keywords: *Amoris Lætitia*, Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, Family Life, Marriage Catechumenate, Moral Formation of Children, Parenting, Theological Reception

1. Introduction

Pope Francis' post-synodal exhortation, *Amoris Lætitia: On Love in the Family* (April 8, 2016) remains contended in the Roman Catholic Church worldwide. At informal levels in Nigeria, there are voices of contention about certain parts of the post-synodal exhortation. Yet, it appears that at the formal level *Amoris Lætitia* has not been theologically and pastorally received in the Church in Nigeria. This claim needs to be investigated and defended. Hence, this contribution sets out to highlight key issues, contentions, and challenges one expects the Church in Nigeria to be responding to in the light of *Amoris Lætitia*. My principal statement of interpretation of *Amoris Lætitia*, and the process of reception in Nigeria can be articulated thus: "*Amoris Lætitia and the Church in Sub-Saharan Africa: On Dashed Hopes, Discerned Promises, and Sundry Challenges*".

To defend this position, this article shall first articulate what 'reception' means in Catholic theology. This shall be followed by a cursory and illustrative look at various ways and results of *Amoris Lætitia*'s reception in various places around the Catholic world. This shall lead us to examining the extent of *Amoris Lætitia*'s reception in Nigeria, thus enabling us to appraise the work done so far in Nigeria. The article shall end with some concrete ways that this contentious papal document might be theologically and pastorally received in Nigeria.

2. Reception in Roman Catholic Theology

Reception is the process or an approach of understanding, owning and living out in concrete ecclesial contexts in local churches a church teaching or position that has been publicly promulgated for the universal church. Reception also signifies ecclesial moments when a local church recognises as its own faith a magisterial pronouncement. The local church then moves beyond the recognition to taking concrete steps towards living this faith out. Reception does not just simply acknowledge a magisterial teaching without questioning. On the contrary, reception implies critical reflection that justifies harmony between what has been proclaimed and the faith that the local community has known and has been living out (Rusch, 2007, p. 59). According to Rush (2009), there are about nine senses to 'reception' as used in theology and spiritual literature (pp. 8-11). However, the ones I underline for the sake of this contribution are communication, spiritual, juridical, and theological.

Reception as “communication, interaction, and learning” relates to how our faith and living tradition are transmitted and made intelligible to the faithful in the real-life context (Rush, 2009, p. 8). Spiritual reception relates to personal appropriation of a pronounced teaching such that it deepens one's relationship with God. Central to spiritual reception is the conversion of heart and mind of believers to greater fidelity to God, Jesus Christ and his church (Rush, 2009, pp. 8-9, 2015, pp. 56-57). Then there is juridical reception whereby the faithful make the required response to an authoritative teaching of the Magisterium (2009, p. 9). Finally, we have theological reception which refers to how “theologians and scholars in related disciplines help their ecclesial communities to deepen their understanding of what has been handed down in Scripture and tradition in the light of the particular contexts and experience of their local communities” (p. 9). The bottom-line is that reception captures the concreteness of how local communities and even the universal church has made a particular magisterial teaching a central part of their ecclesial, spiritual, and personal lives. It is about perception of a teaching; of acceptance in trust and reverence; and appropriation and action in creative fidelity. Our interrogation in the remaining part of this contribution regards the reality or absence of these senses of 'reception' in the Church in Nigeria in relation to *Amoris Lætitia*.

3. The Reception of *Amoris Lætitia* around the World

Long before Pope Francis issued the post-synodal exhortation, expectations and controversies trailed it. It appeared there had been battles for the soul of the Church during the 3rd extraordinary assembly of the synod of bishops (2014) and the 14th ordinary assembly of the synod of bishops (2015). Instead of *Amoris Lætitia* settling the issues, it has amplified them to an alarming extent. Some of the Pope's closest collaborators (Cardinals) leaked to the press a private letter they wrote to the Holy Father on what they regard as '*dubia*' (doubts in *Amoris Lætitia* centring on faith and doctrine which need straightforward answers from Pope Francis) ("Full Text and Explanatory Notes," September 19, 2016). The arrowhead of the agitators, or defenders of faith, depending on where you belong, Cardinal Raymond Burke had gone on record to say if the Pope exceeded the timeline they set, the cardinals might be forced to issue a public censure (correction) of the Pope on what they regard as erroneous (or heretical) positions and statements in the post-synodal exhortation. Their initiative has been met by deafening and unsettling silence from Pope Francis. Nonetheless, Cardinal Gerard Müller, then the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, went on record to say there is nothing in *Amoris Lætitia* that is theologically unsustainable. The discomfiting scenarios playing out far away from the shores of Nigeria are part of the process of the theological reception of the magisterial document.

Beyond the contentious instances of theological reception, there has been pastoral reception of *Amoris Lætitia* in different parts of the world. The earliest national guideline to responding to and implementing *Amoris Lætitia* is from Argentina's bishops' conference (Buenos Aires Pastoral Area; Región pastoral Buenos Aires). This guideline is specifically on how to implement the subtle and difficult chapter 8. It has been reported that Pope Francis endorsed the interpretation and pastoral plan of this guideline, which includes allowing communion to some categories of divorced and civilly remarried Catholics ("Pope endorses Argentine bishops' document on *Amoris Lætitia*").

In September 2016, the United States Catholic Bishops' Conference issued a report which should serve as a guideline for the reception and implementation of *Amoris Lætitia* all over the country ("Report on Reception and Implementation of *Amoris Lætitia*," September 2016). This report includes links to the responses of three dioceses in United States at the time the report was issued. These are Archdioceses of Washington, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles (*ibid.*,5). For instance, the Office of Family Life of the Archdiocese of Washington issued a seven-part bulletin on its website for individuals' reflection on *Amoris Lætitia* (Office of Family). These are extracts from a 25 paged teaching kit developed by the same Office of Family Life on how to receive, teach, implement and reflect on *Amoris Lætitia* in the archdiocese of

Washington. The guideline of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia offers that such couples can receive communion only if they choose to live as brothers and sisters, abstaining from sexual intercourse (Archdiocese of Philadelphia, July 1, 2016, pp. 4-5). However, to avoid ambiguity of possible endorsement of that civil union, such couples even if living as brothers and sisters, “divorced and civilly remarried persons should not hold positions of responsibility in a parish (e.g. on a parish council), nor should they carry out liturgical ministries or functions (e.g., lector, extraordinary minister of Holy Communion)” (Archdiocese of Philadelphia, July 1, 2016, p. 5).

Another guideline is from the bishops of Malta (Archdiocese of Malta and the Diocese of Gozo, January 2017). Their own guideline, like Argentina's bishops own, is devoted specifically to chapter 8 of *Amoris Lætitia*. Like the Argentina's bishops' guideline, Malta's bishops (there are just two of dioceses in Malta), give a nod to the possibility of giving communion to some categories of divorced and civilly remarried Catholics under certain conditions (pp. nos 7-11). Notable of the two Maltese bishops is Charles Scicluna, archbishop of Malta. For close to 17 years he worked at the Vatican curia. First, he was a deputy Promoter of Justice at the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura. Later he was appointed the Promoter of Justice in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. He was in this post till he was appointed a bishop in 2012. Cardinal Raymond Burke was the supervisor of Scicluna's doctoral dissertation. They both worked together at the Apostolic Signatura.

The latest episcopal reception or guideline is from the Catholic Bishops of Kazakhstan (December 31, 2017). This is in the form of a doctrinal affirmation of the sacrament of marriage. It unequivocally rejects any interpretation of the deposit of faith either in *Amoris Lætitia* or succeeding reception of chapter eight that offers any leeway to reception of communion by civilly divorced and remarried persons. Some bishops around the world are adding their signatures to this statement, which states that the Pope's position in chapter eight is foreign to Church's traditional teaching on marriage and reception of communion (Hitchens, January 3, 2018).

It must be noted immediately that, with the exception of Argentina's, and Malta's bishops' guidelines, and the Catholic bishops of Kazakhstan's statement, the others I have mentioned plainly demonstrate that *Amoris Lætitia* is more than reception of communion by divorced and civilly remarried Catholics. Accordingly, they rightly show that *Amoris Lætitia* has a lot to offer Catholic families, newlyweds, and youths contemplating marriage and family on how to joyfully live out their love in their respective family contexts. Washington Archdiocese's Guideline devotes four pages to suggestions on how

families and the faithful can reflect on the content of *Amoris Lætitia's* fourth chapter which is vintage Francis' reflection on 1 Corinthians 13 (under 'Love in Marriage and Family Life (Parts 1 & 2)').

The closest in Africa we have of a response to *Amoris Lætitia* is a general statement (Message) issued at the end of the 17th plenary Assembly of Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar ("African Bishops end their 17th Plenary Assembly," 25/07/2016). The last time I did a Google search on February 24, 2018, there is no single guideline at the continental, national, regional or diocesan level for the reception and implementation of *Amoris Lætitia* in Africa. Regarding our country Nigeria, the much we have on record from the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria is a single paragraph contained in no. 2 of its communiqué issued at the end of its 2nd plenary assembly in September 2016. The paragraph states the general response of the bishops - that they are called to "generate common pastoral approaches to accompany those preparing for marriage and provide assistance to those who have entered marriage so that by faithfully observing and protecting their conjugal covenant they may day by day achieve a holier and a fuller family life (Canon 1063, § 4)" ("Religion as Instrument for Peace"). What will these common approaches look like, or what should be the components in the light of *Amoris Lætitia*? We are left to wonder.

In an interview with John Allen Jr. (March 25, 2017), Cardinal John Onaiyekan voiced a nuanced interpretation that accepts welcoming divorced and remarried couples in the Church, not treating them as if they are excommunicated. Nevertheless, reception of communion is not opened to them, regardless of any circumstance. It is a settled discussion in Nigeria. Rules are rules. Cardinal Onaiyekan's interpretation echoes the *Dubia*, and lately the Kazakhstan's bishops, rather than the wide latitude implied in '*Amoris Lætitia*'. It appears his position is representative of the Church's hierarchy in Nigeria. Perhaps this is the reason why there is little drive towards pastoral guideline for implementing chapter eight. Yet, the document is more than chapter eight.

4. Reception of *Amoris Lætitia* in Nigeria: Dateline 2018

From an African (Nigerian) perspective, the processes leading to the existence of *Amoris Lætitia* were largely Eurocentric, such that some of our African bishops at the two synods voiced this observation ("*Circuli Minori*"; Pentin). The challenges that drove the two synods (AL 50-57), the complex marriage and family issues requiring pastoral attention (AL 247-252), and irregular love and marriage situations (AL 296-300) were more of things 'biting' the Church in the Northern hemisphere, while those things biting us in the South were treated only marginally. This led some scholars aver that regarding *Amoris Lætitia* and

the Church in Sub-Saharan Africa, it is more of a situation of dashed hopes, discerned promises, and sundry challenges. As *Amoris Laetitia* enters its second anniversary, how far is our reception? One can use an analogy to buttress this and make sense of this point. One of the criticisms levelled against Pope Francis and *Amoris Laetitia* is about the document's silence on *Veritatis splendor*, Pope St John Paul II's encyclical on fundamental moral theology after Vatican II. With no single mention of *Veritatis splendor* throughout *Amoris Laetitia*, especially the 8th chapter that deals with moral law, conscience, and culpability, *Amoris Laetitia* treats *Veritatis splendor* as if it neither exists nor important. Can we not say the same of the Church in Nigeria and *Amoris Laetitia*?

As noted earlier, apart from the single paragraph in the CBCN communiqué of September 2016, there is nothing else we can point to or read about what CBCN, the various relevant organs of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, or respective dioceses are doing. Are we behaving as if *Amoris Laetitia* does not exist, or that it is not important? Can one point to the thorough reception of *Amoris Laetitia* among theologians, pastors, pastoral agents, and Catholic families, in the mould of the various national, regional, or diocesan initiatives that the second section highlighted? If we go by what 'reception' is as offered in this article's first section, the Church in Nigeria is yet to receive *Amoris Laetitia* pastorally.

One must acknowledge, however, that there have been some initiatives toward theological/canonical reception of *Amoris Laetitia* in Nigeria. A significant reference point is the 2017 Annual St Paul Lecture, on the theme "*Amoris Laetitia*: Theological and Pastoral Reception in Nigeria", jointly hosted by the Missionary Society of St Paul and the National Missionary Seminary of St Paul, Gwagwalada, on January 17, 2017. The discussions at the lecture were facilitated by two resource persons: Revd Dr Francis Adedara, a systematic theologian and head of theology department, Ss Peter and Paul Major Seminary, Bodija - Ibadan, and Mrs Bridget Itsueli, Founder/Chairperson, Relate Africa Organisation for Marriage and Family. While Adedara focused on theological and doctrinal issues that should inform theological reception of *Amoris Laetitia*, Itsueli's contribution was a commentary on the post-synodal exhortation from a lay, and married person's perspective. Itsueli chose the approach, because in her opinion, an overwhelming majority of the lay faithful who made up the largest bloc of guests at the Annual lecture have not heard or read *Amoris Laetitia*. The contributions of the two principal resource persons are published in the seventh edition of the *Abuja Journal of Philosophy and Theology* (Adedara, June 2017, pp. 69-87; Itsueli, June 2017, pp. 89-96).

At the end of the plenary papers and discussions, the following are the major takeaways:

1. As at January 17, 2017, there is no single guideline at the continental, national, regional or diocesan level for the reception and implementation of *Amoris Lætitia* in Africa. However, there are ongoing theological and pastoral conversations, even if at informal levels.
2. Despite the lack of pastoral statement and guideline from Nigerian bishops, the 2017 Annual St Paul Lecture is an instance of the beginning of *Amoris Lætitia*'s reception in Nigeria.
3. At the heart of *Amoris Lætitia* is the problem of interpretation, and not truthfulness of doctrine and faith. Consequently, setting formal principles for the implementation of *Amoris Lætitia* will be a welcome development for the Church in Nigeria.
4. *Amoris Lætitia* is a pastoral exhortation. It is subordinate to an Apostolic constitution (e.g. Canon Law). Hence, when in doubt, the faithful should go to parallel passages in the Apostolic constitution. With regard to *Amoris Lætitia*'s chapter 8, it should be read in the light of and subordinated to canons 915 and 916.
5. The teaching office of the theologian and that of the bishop have the same end: serving the truth of the Gospel of Christ. Concerns raised by some theologians about some portions of *Amoris Lætitia* should be seen as a loving exercise at the service of truth, and not as a confrontation.
6. Mercy and truth cannot and must never be opposed. True mercy confers perfection on the recipients of mercy. Hence, true reception of *Amoris Lætitia* in the Church, in Nigeria and beyond, must reconcile various dimensions of pastoral practice with true doctrine.
7. It is possible to live out the teaching of the Church on marriage and family based on experiences of Catholics who have been happily married for decades.

Beyond the analysis and synthesis above, participants at the lecture acknowledged some actionable plans as furthering the reception of *Amoris Lætitia* in Nigeria. Some of these largely pastoral interventions are:

- (a) Need for new/renewed prenuptial pastoral care programme at diocesan or provincial level in the light of *Amoris Laetitia*, chapter 4. Consequently, various dioceses and parishes need to grow pastoral workers who can help form and train those who are preparing for marriage.
- (b) The imperative of various diocesan offices of family life developing parenting toolkits for Catholic parents in the light of AL's chapter 7. Hence, there is the need for Family Formation Centres at various diocesan and provincial levels.

- (c) Provision of ongoing formation for married couples like 'Marriage Encounter' weekends in the light of AL chapters 5, 6, 7, and 9. Allied to this is the importance of the formation of married mentors, who are living the teaching of the Church on marriage and family life, so that they can mentor those preparing for marriage and newlyweds in the light of *Amoris Lætitia*.
- (d) Inspired by AL's pastoral attentiveness to complex and irregular situations of families, various ecclesiastical provinces or dioceses need to explore how to end the needless burden of celebrating multiple marriage rites (customary, civil, and ecclesial), inspired by the Ebirá Marriage rite that was approved by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) since 1996.
- (e) Just as several dioceses or episcopal conferences are doing for their own people, it is high time the CBCN developed common rules for the Church in Nigeria on peculiar irregular unions in Africa (Nigeria) in the light of *Amoris Lætitia* nos 2, 3, 49, and 199. Pope Francis declares that "'cultures are in fact quite diverse and every general principle... needs to be inculturated, if it is to be respected and applied'" (AL 3). How can the Church in Nigeria follow up on this?
- (f) Developing concrete actions or steps to be taken regarding inclusion of non-ordained faithful on formation teams, and not just as adjunct staff (cf. AL 203).
- (g) Lay faithful need to form study groups to reflect together on *Amoris Lætitia* in order to understand and live it out, beyond the snippets of controversial aspects of the document. This is where a summarised and linguistically accessible versions will come handy.
- (h) Need for adult catechesis especially for those baptised as infants.
- (i) Need for structures of interaction and pastoral care of divorced and civilly remarried. Similarly the Church in Nigeria needs guidelines for divorced and civilly remarried with unique cases and the possibility of reception of the sacraments.

Apart from the Missionaries of St Paul 2017 Annual St Paul Lecture, the Canon Law Society of Nigeria's 2017 Annual Conference held at Port Harcourt, between November 20 and 24, devoted a pre-Convention seminar to Canonical issues and concerns in *Amoris Lætitia* from an African perspective. According to the lead paper at the seminar (Aririguzo, pp. 1-5), there are canonical issues that need deeper discussions and clear actions:

What are the canonical implications of chapters 4 & 5 (on fruitful love in marriage) and 7 (education of children) of *Amoris Laetitia*? Are there issues in chapters 4 & 5 that challenge the understanding and interpretation of *matrimonium ratum et consummatum*? ... What is the understanding, in the light of chapter eight, regarding *salus animarum*? What's the position of Canon lawyers with regards to the proper relationship between love, law, and mercy? ... What in Africa's context will qualify as internal forum situations / conditions which chapter 8 is dealing with? ... How do Canon lawyers in Africa explore the apparent tensions or problems between *Amoris Laetitia* 300, 301, 302 and Canons 912 & 915? ... How does *Amoris Laetitia*, especially 300-311 deepen or derogate from the new norms for proofs to be obtained for declaration of nullity as contained in the *motu proprio Mitis Iudex Dominus Iesus* of September 18, 2015? (pp. 4-5).

One of the takeaways during the pre-Convention seminar was the reality that the document is still largely unknown, and the content largely undigested by the people of God in Nigeria. Hence, the Canon Law Society of Nigeria shall devote its 2018 Annual conference to '*Amoris Laetitia* and Canonical Concerns in an African setting'. This is another significant moment of reception. One hopes the reception process by Nigeria's Canon lawyers will continue in 2018, and come up with concrete proposals to the sort of canonical concerns raised by Aririguzo as quoted above.

On another note, the Spiritan International School of Theology (SIST) Attakwu, Enugu will, between April 24 and 27, 2018, devote its 16th International Missiological Conference to 'Marriage and Family Life Today'. Judging by the topics to be explored during the conference, one can say the organisers have *Amoris Laetitia* in mind. The broad topics are: 'Changing Face of Traditional African Marriage and Family System,' 'Catholic Teaching/Understanding of Marriage: Implications for Same-Sex Union,' 'Preparation for Marriage: Implications for the Stability of the Family,' 'Factors that Militate against Marriage and Family Institution in Africa,' 'Challenges and Crises in Marriage and Family Life Today: Causes and Solution,' 'Societal Effects of Separation, Annulment of Marriage and Divorce,' and 'Gender Equality, Feminism and Marriage in Africa Today'. The 16th SIST conference is another indication of theological reception of *Amoris Laetitia* in Nigeria.

While theological reflections are important, we must not lose sight of the importance of praxis-oriented reception. This praxis is based on what Allsopp (2005) refers to as ancient monastic pedagogy: "first live the Christian life, then reflect; first develop a lifestyle, then speak about God" (p. 77). Accordingly, it needs to be seen how the Church in Nigeria is beginning to live out the "Joy of

Love (*Amoris Lætitia*) experienced by families” (AL no. 1), as taught by Pope Francis in his post-synodal exhortation. To live out this joy of married love and family life, those vested with the power of governance in Nigeria need to offer clear and authoritative words and guidelines on how to proceed. Churches in other continents have done this, except Africa. Yet, guidelines for developing a lifestyle of the 'joy of love in marriage and family' are indispensable considering the innovations, nuance, and contentions in *Amoris Lætitia*. If the lay faithful respond to the calls so far to pick up the post-synodal exhortation and study it even at Basic Christian Community levels, and thereafter want to live out the document to the full, how will they navigate the clear and subtle landmines in the document? They will be looking towards their pastors and their pastoral collaborators for help. What do these pastors and other pastoral agents have to teach and guide them faithfully according to the mind of the *Amoris Lætitia* and the previously received tradition of the Church on marriage, family, conjugal morality, and the sacraments? In the final section of this contribution, I shall be offering some concrete areas that our ecclesial leaders, particularly the CBCN, need to provide guidelines to live out the joy of love in marriage and family' among our people.

4.1. Marriage Catechumenate

Many of our youths today really do not know or have correct understanding of the Church's teaching about sex, marriage and family life beyond the media caricature and prohibitions. Hence, there must be structured marriage formation that should follow children through their early years, their period of discernment for marriage, the engagement stage, the period of immediate preparation for wedding, to the early years of marriage when they need marriage mentoring. Some dioceses in other parts of the world are already drawing up concrete programmes for a marriage catechumenate in the light of *Amoris Lætitia*. We in this part of the world need to do this also. It is not enough to preach, bemoan the sad state, and denounce the spirit of the age. We must equip our people, especially parents, teachers, and catechists with catechetical resource that they can use to reflect and discuss the depth of our riches about sex, marriage and family. Hopefully, pastoral theologians and pastoral assistants in our Church can help domesticate chapter four, a truly homiletic and exhortative masterpiece. One hopes that the truly original reflection of Pope Francis on 1 Cor 13 can be used to draw up a Catechesis for proximate preparation for marriage and post-wedding pastoral care. Perhaps, staff and students of theological and pastoral institutes can take on this task by providing a resource material with questions for discussions on those urgent conjugal and marriage needs arranged thematically that need to be addressed in our local churches. This way we empower our people so that they can confidently proclaim the good news of sex, marriage and family according to our Catholic

Tradition. This way we are healing some of the crises rocking marriage and family life from the source.

4.2. Parenting toolkits for Catholic parents in the light of AL's chapter 7

It is important to share the wealth and depth of *Amoris Lætitia* with our people in the pews, especially many who might be confused or wondering what this big document is saying. For instance, in chapter seven, the Holy Father turns to the issue of parenting. This chapter is unique to *Amoris Lætitia*. Neither *Familiaris consortio* nor the 2014 and 2015 synods did this. This chapter focuses on provision of better education of children, especially in this age where ICT is driving couples and families apart. How can families be helped “to discuss and resolve in ways which encourage interaction without imposing unrealistic prohibitions” regarding the use of mobile phones and obsession with computer/video games (AL 278)? Today, several parents wrongly think that being the best parents mean giving their children the best of material things – comfort, education in the best schools, exotic vacations, etc. How many parents can confidently answer the questions the Holy Father poses in chapter seven?: “... 'Do we seek to understand 'where' our children really are in their journey? Where is their soul, do we really know? And above all, do we want to know?’” (AL no. 261). Parents must be encouraged and guided to take up the essential role of being moulders and formators of their children's moral development (AL, 259). In spite of their misguided good intentions, parents must bear in mind that they cannot cede the moral formation of their children to others (crèches, schools, and nannies). The moral development of children is divided into six by Pope Francis (AL 263-290). Constantly, the Church teaches that the family has irreplaceable roles to play in the mission of the Church. However, quite often Catholic families complain of being ill-equipped. They do not have ready to use resources on issues of marriage, family life, sex education, relational brokenness, and other contextual issues needing pastoral attention. Hence, parenting toolkit, or contextual family catechesis guide, for Catholic parents in the light of these is something to look forward, especially for so many Catholic parents who have the best intentions for their children's moral formation but find themselves ill-equipped and not knowledgeable enough to fulfil this function.

Still on living out the joy of love in marriage and family life, the Holy Father outlines how parishes, movements, schools and other church institutions can contribute to Family Apostolate (AL 229). Significant proposals include home missionaries, and availability of social services that families faced with addiction, infidelity and domestic violence can go. Marriage preparation should include providing intending couples with “the names of places, people and services to which they can turn for help when problems arise” (AL 211).

Can we have in Nigeria a national family apostolate directory where these places, people, and services in every diocese and state are compiled with functional addresses? Can each diocese have a functional help hotline that is available 24/7 for members of families that may be in distress and in need of somebody to talk with?

4.3. Pastoral Care plan for IDPs and economic migrants

Nigeria ranks third after Syria and Colombia on the list of Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) index. However, till date the Catholic Church is yet to build institutional capacity to deal with IDP, yet a lot of these are Catholics. Hence, there is need to create a committee/desk for migration and IDP at the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria. If the Catholic Church in Nigeria will respond to the needs of these displaced children of God, it is imperative to invest massively in outreach programmes to the IDPs, offering spiritual and pastoral services, as well as empowerment programmes. In particular, what concrete pastoral plan would the Church propose for families torn apart due to migration and social injustice? What of families suffering under the cruelty of Islamic fundamentalism? What has the Church to say to families forced to live in the city with little or no support structure? What concrete commitment was the Church challenging us to make for such anonymous and lost families?

5. Conclusion

To faithfully receive *Amoris Lætitia* in Nigeria, we must brace ourselves for the task ahead. There are no easy answers, no clear-cut hermeneutical trajectory, and no irreversible pastoral actions. In relation to this post-synodal exhortation on marriage and family life today, the Church in Nigeria is challenged to live up to the ancient monastic pedagogy referred to earlier (“first live the Christian life, then reflect; first develop a lifestyle, then speak about God”). Even if theological reception of this document is gradually picking momentum of late, little or nothing has been done yet regarding pastoral reception and concrete guidelines to live out the “Joy of Love experienced by families” (AL no. 1). Hence, this contribution's final section highlighted some of the important areas in need of guidelines from the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria. This is a modest contribution to those proffered during the 2017 Annual St Paul Lecture and the provocations started at the pre-Convention seminar of the Canon Law Society of Nigeria.

As the process of pastoral and theological reception of *Amoris Lætitia* continues in Nigeria, the document should be seen for what it is and what it offers. It is a pastoral exhortation for all families; all families regardless their imperfections that “need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love” (AL 325). This document equally offers a framework for pastors on how to deal with special moral issues, especially in marriage and family life. Pastors must learn to listen

more with sensitivity, with a sincere desire to learn, so that the weak ones can be helped "to live better lives and to recognize their proper place in the Church" (AL 312).

Finally, the Church must always be welcoming but need not be unconditionally inclusive. Inclusion is not an end in itself. When the Church welcomes, it believes the entrance into the church will change the person. Being a welcoming Church does not mean that the Church does not pose questions. We need to grip reality more in the grey zones. So, I suggest we reread Pope Francis' *Misericordiae Vultus* (April 11, 2015) to better appreciate *Amoris Lætitia*. Hence, the anticipated interventions and ecclesial praxis based on *Amoris Lætitia* shall create more hope about the joy of love in our families and marriages in Nigeria and beyond.

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