

## ALLOCUTIO, LEGION OF MARY MELBOURNE SENATUS, 10 APRIL 2016

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Last Friday, Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation on the family, *Amoris Laetitia*, 'The Joy of Love', was published. Appropriately, its official date is March 19<sup>th</sup>, Solemnity of St Joseph. These last two years the Synod of Bishops has considered many themes concerning the family, prompting great discussion in the universal Church. Some 'progressives' were *hoping* Pope Francis was going to overthrow existing teaching; some 'conservatives' were *worried* he was going to do so – sometimes with little apparent trust that the guidance of the Holy Spirit would prevent that happening. Well, of course he hasn't overthrown any doctrines, but as is normal with acts of the Magisterium, he's thrown new lights on them.

The Holy Father here is really acting as the Shepherd looking out especially for the lost sheep. Over history the Church understands every doctrine with greater clarity, so we have here a 'development of doctrine' of the art and science of going after the lost sheep – something good Christians and good priests have always done, but now gaining new depth in Church teaching. It is a beautiful document, with much wisdom about living the ups and downs of family life. One of the great things that anyone would read with profit is an extended line-by-line reflection on St Paul's famous description of love (*1 Cor 13*).

It was dismaying that as soon as it appeared, some voices were rising up imperiously against the Pope's letter. It's hard to see how this followed the Church's directives on how magisterial teachings are to be received. *Amoris Laetitia* obviously isn't an infallible statement – those are fairly unusual. However it is manifestly, in the Pope's mind and will, an *authoritative* document of the Ordinary Magisterium (like past Apostolic Exhortations) and so its teachings come under the general guidance of the Holy Spirit. Vatican II explains that these are to be accepted with 'religious submission of mind and will' (*Lumen Gentium 25*): though there can be exceptions (cf. Holy See, *Donum Veritatis* (1990) 24-31), normally Catholics are morally bound to adhere to them. The onus of proof is on the one who would disagree with them, and who even then must speak and act with humility, respect, patience and discretion.

Since Legionaries may well come into contact with these critical views, it's worth looking at them in more detail. Firstly, it should be emphasised that *Amoris Laetitia* convincingly reaffirms Catholic teaching on the indissolubility of marriage [62, 52, and repeatedly], on contraception [80-82], on same-sex marriage [251, 172], on gender ideology [56], on abortion [83]. What a pity the value of all this is being lost by the exclusive focus of dissenters on just a few lines!

Those concern the possibility, in some individual cases, of a priest admitting the divorced and remarried to the Sacraments. The Pope does say, rightly, that we can't presume all such people are necessarily in a state of mortal sin. That requires not only (1) grave violation of God's law, but also (2) full knowledge and (3) fully free consent [301-302; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1735, 2352]. (And as the Pope indicates [301], there can be real-life cases, for example of confused and perplexed conscience, where simply being told the Church's teaching does not necessarily immediately lead to full responsibility.) It's only when the three conditions of mortal sin are present that someone *absolutely* must not receive Holy Communion until they repent and determine to change their lives (cf. *1 Cor 11:27-28*; *Catechism* 1385). In no case does Pope Francis authorise the contrary, which indeed would inflict grave spiritual damage on them.

Admittedly, even if there might be no mortal sin due to subjective responsibility (knowledge, freedom) being diminished (cf. *footnote 345*), within *Church* law (building on divine law) it is impossible for a minister to give Communion to those who are in ongoing and public serious violation of the objective law of God (Canon 915). For one thing, this is to avoid scandal. And even without full moral responsibility, the state of life of remarriage after divorce is incongruous with the meaning of the Eucharist (St John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* 84). However, an attentive reading does not find that these considerations establish moral absolutes of divine law with no exception conceivable. (As a parallel, non-Catholic Christians in good faith are permitted to receive Communion in the Catholic Church in some circumstances (Canon 844), even though their status is incongruous with the unity of Catholic faith and communion.) And Church law, while normally morally binding, is subject to exceptions according to the mind of the Legislator, and is under his supreme authority.

And so Pope Francis indicates, not as a general rule but in individual cases [*300; 304*], that where a priest prudently discerns that a divorced and remarried Catholic is lacking full knowledge or freedom and thus is not in an ongoing state of mortal sin [*305*], he may admit them to receive the help of the Sacraments [*footnote 351*] (scandal to others being avoided [*299*]). This develops a more flexible interpretation of Church law than has commonly been understood, but does not contradict existing doctrine.

This is all as part of a gradual path towards the final goal of the person's full understanding and living out of God's law as taught by the Church [*303*]. That final goal would involve the couple separating, or if that is impossible (e.g. because there are children to be brought up), living 'as brother and sister' [*cf. footnote 329*] (since in God's eyes they are not husband and wife). But for a priest to force the matter hastily might sometimes be counterproductive.

The Pope highlights the need to consider different features of individual cases [*300*]. There is a big difference between someone who deliberately abandoned their first marriage, and someone who was themselves unjustly abandoned [*298*]. This is not to assess whether they may remarry after divorce (this is always against God's law [*292; 295*] unless the Church has determined the first marriage was invalid from the start (annulment)). Rather, it is to assess appropriate pastoral care [*291*].

Time will tell the extent to which Pope Francis' pastoral initiative will bear fruit in helping people live by God's life-giving law. That is his call, as he does everything possible to bring mercy to the lost sheep. So don't be led astray by dissenting voices, who often seem to be becoming progressively aloof from the See of Peter, the rock foundation of the Church. We accept the teaching of *Amoris Laetitia* with serene confidence in Christ's promises to St Peter and his Successors: the sheep may safely graze where the Chief Shepherd leads them.