

AMORIS LAETITIA AND THE NATURE OF MERCY

+Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.
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Last month the *Wall Street Journal* covered the fighting around the Philippine city of Marawi. The story was riveting, and I was struck by the violence of the Muslim militants who had seized the city. It reminded me of how many hardships Filipinos have faced over the 73 years of my lifetime. Japanese occupation, the Huk insurgency, the NPA insurgency, dictatorship, corruption, martial law, and now Islamic extremism. The list of sufferings is a long one.

But as I read about Marawi, I also recalled the 4 million people who jammed the streets of Manila for John Paul II at World Youth Day 1995. Despite their hardships, Filipinos have always been a people of joy, enthusiasm for life, and deep Catholic faith. Those same qualities have always marked Filipinos in the United States. The Filipino community in Philadelphia is a great blessing for our local Church. So it's a particular pleasure to be here.

My job today is to talk about *Amoris Laetitia*. Papal documents are always important. But – if we can be candid for a moment -- some have the energy of a lead brick. *Amoris Laetitia* is very different. It has passages of great wisdom and beauty on marriage and on family life. And it has other passages that have caused some obvious controversy. The controversy has obscured much of the good in the document. So we need to engage the text with open hearts and the discipline of clear thinking.

The specific issues I want to deal with today are three: the pastoral challenges *Amoris Laetitia* seeks to address; the pastoral challenges the text itself may seem to create; and how we as priests need to respond as “missionaries of mercy.”

But let me start first with some background.

Some of you probably took part in the World Meeting of Families two years ago in Philadelphia. It was a great success and a wonderful gift for our people. I think Pope Francis was surprised by the faith and enthusiasm of the Philadelphia crowds. I'm sure he was pleased.

Three days later, I left for Rome as a delegate to the 2015 Synod on the Family. I served as secretary to one of the Anglophone working groups. I shared my thoughts on the synod floor. And I worked with other bishops in suggesting improvements to the synod's final document. I was also elected to the synod's permanent council.

My point is this. I took part *directly* in the synod discussions on marriage, sexuality, conscience and the family as a synod father myself. And back at home in Philadelphia, that experience helped us to draft our local guidelines for applying *Amoris Laetitia* promptly and accurately once it appeared.

We developed our guidelines in consultation with pastors, lay couples, our Marriage Tribunal, and many others in the process. And we based our work on paragraph No. 2 from *Amoris Laetitia* which reads, in part, with these words:

“The thinking of pastors and theologians, if faithful to the Church, honest, realistic and creative, will help us achieve greater clarity” in addressing the issues that face today’s families.

The key words there are “if faithful to the Church.” Fidelity to the received and constant wisdom of Catholic teaching is paramount. So the spirit behind our Philadelphia guidelines, grounded in *Amoris Laetitia*, is the following.

As a Church we need to meet people where they are. We need to listen to their sufferings and hopes. We need to accompany them along the path of their lives. That demands from us as priests a spirit of patience and mercy. We need to have a bias toward welcoming, and a resistance to seeing individual persons merely as parts of alien or alienated groups. The divorced and civilly remarried are not exiles from Church life. They need to be invited back. The same applies to persons with same-sex attraction. Jesus Christ died for all of us, and we need to behave in a manner that embodies his love.

At the same time, “accompanying” people also means that we need to guide them in the right direction – gently but also honestly, speaking the truth with love. It does no one any good if we “accompany” someone over a cliff, or even worse, to a fatal separation from God. We can’t simply confirm people in their mistakes. Scripture is very clear about right and wrong sexual relationships and behavior. We’re very poor disciples if we lack the courage to speak the truth as the Church has always understood it.

We live in an age of studied ambiguity -- at times, even within the Church -- and in such an age, clarity about the truth, made gentle by patience and understanding, is a treasure without price.

So let’s turn to the problems *Amoris Laetitia* seeks to address. Much of this you already know. American culture is rapidly becoming less religious. One of the big reasons is a steady diet of distractions offered every day by a mass-media driven consumer economy. The average adult is exposed to about 5,000 commercial messages a day. The average child sees 40,000 ads a year, and that’s just on television. There’s no way to compete with that kind of catechesis in materialism except by turning it off. And most families don’t. The results are no surprise.

Jean Twenge’s new book, *iGen*, is a study of young people born between 1995 and 2012. They’ve never known a world without iPhones and iPads. And statistically they’re the least religious generation in American history. This isn’t really news. Researchers like Christian Smith have been tracking the behavior and beliefs of young people for years. And they come to the same conclusion: The implications for marriage, family life and religious institutions are not good.

Philadelphia is seen as a fairly traditional diocese. So consider these facts as evidence.

In the year 2000, the Philadelphia Archdiocese had 441,000 registered Catholic households. By 2015, that had dropped to 389,000. In 2000, we had 283 parishes. In 2015 we had 219. In 2000 we had 6,000 marriages and 15,400 infant baptisms. In 2015 we had about 3,200 marriages and 9,100 infant baptisms. Our parish schools had 81,300 students in 2000. They had 43,000 in 2015. And so on.

Now, the picture I just drew can be misleading. Demographics are always changing. Other dioceses, especially in the south and west of the country, are growing. Overall though, American religious faith is weakening. And plenty of social research tells us that people who practice their faith and attend religious services regularly have more stable marriages and families than people who don't.

But a paradox of our national personality is this: Even at our most religious, Americans have *always* had a deep streak of individualism, a distrust of authority, and a big appetite for self-invention and personal happiness unencumbered by obligations to others. As religion loses its hold on people's behavior, all of these instincts accelerate. And that leads to exactly the kind of personal and social suffering that *Amoris Laetitia* seeks to heal.

One of the main messages in the Holy Father's text is that life, marriage, children and family are joys to be treasured -- not problems to be solved. This seems obvious, and in normal times, it would be. But we don't live in a "normal" time. For 50 years since Vatican II, the Church has been locked in disputes over doctrine and practice. And these have been compounded by deep and rapid changes in the world around us.

Conflict can become a habit. Every issue can become a nail that needs a hammer. We can get comfortable in our anger. And that's dangerous, especially within the Church, because frustration and resentment can start to feel normal, and then to feel *good*. C.S. Lewis would describe the pleasure we take in an unhealthy taste for argument as a pretty clear mark of the demonic. There's nothing more poisonously delicious than trashing an enemy in the name of the Gospel of love.

So for me, at the heart of *Amoris Laetitia*, and a key to the whole document, is paragraph No. 28, where Francis writes:

"Against [the] backdrop of love so central to the Christian experience of marriage and the family, another virtue stands out, one often overlooked in our world of frenetic and superficial relationships. It is tenderness."

Tenderness, personal contact, listening instead of just hearing, and intimate attention to the needs of the other – these are the priorities Francis weaves throughout his text. It explains why he stresses in paragraph No. 22 that "the word of God is not a series of abstract ideas but rather a source of comfort and companionship for every family that experiences difficulties or suffering." And it gives a context to his paragraphs Nos. 36 and 37, where he warns against "a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families." Francis urges us again and again to deal lovingly with people and situations as they really are.

In my reading, that leads to one of the central ironies in communicating the message of *Amoris Laetitia*. We live in an age of the laity. The text deals very heavily with marriage and the family, major features of Christian lay life. But to succeed, *Amoris Laetitia* depends profoundly on the zeal and sensitivity of the priest. The priest has the freedom of action, the pastoral experience and the overview of human relationships to be the presence of Jesus Christ in so many of the complex situations Francis describes. In other words, the vocation you have, brothers, has never been more vital for family life than it is right now.

That might sound curious because I've never had more priests voice uncertainty about their value to the Church than I've heard in recent years. I've had many priests approach me feeling confused or hurt by something the Pope has said about priestly indifference or harshness. And these are good, solid men – not whiners or crazies -- experienced in their parishes and committed to their people.

How can we make sense of that? Part of their priestly frustration comes from the constant beating the priesthood has taken in this country since 2002. The clergy abuse crisis has caused a lot of innocent priests to suffer. And some of the Pope's more painful comments surely come from his own pastoral experiences in Latin America, which seem to have been very different from the realities in the United States. In my own experience, cruel confessors and harsh "doctors of the law" have been rare, and a very long way from the American norm.

But I do think Francis is right in pushing all of us as priests to engage our people more directly, personally, with an open heart and a patient spirit. And we need to really listen to the truth in the Holy Father's words. There's a great temptation in ecclesial life, including parish life, to hide behind staff and offices and committees and programs and schedules. Jesus was captured by none of those things. He was always present to his people. And while we can't escape our material duties as priests, we *can* find ways to keep them from dominating our pastoral service.

To put it another way: We can't be missionaries of mercy if our main focus is running the machinery of an institution. I know very well that hitting the right balance in priestly life can be very difficult. I deal with it myself every day. But it's possible, and Francis is urging us to put mission and people first.

It's not my purpose today to go through *Amoris Laetitia* paragraph by paragraph. But the text has some beautiful passages on the needs of the elderly, the poor, migrants, persons with special needs, the importance of children and openness to new life. It's important for all of us to read the text with an attentive mind and study its strengths. Chapter Four on "Love in Marriage" is especially rich. And his reflection on St. Paul's thoughts on the nature of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 is perfect material and easily adapted for parish study groups of four or six sessions.

I want to spend my remaining time on the pastoral challenges the text itself may seem to create; some general comments on the state of our Church; and how we as priests need to respond as "missionaries of mercy."

Ground Zero is this: For Christians, sexual intimacy outside a valid marriage *can never be morally legitimate*. And it's the Church that determines what a valid marriage is.

Scripture's clearest words about the indissolubility of marriage come from Jesus himself in Matthew 19. They can't be softened, or reinterpreted, or contextualized. Christian marriage is a covenant between one man and one woman. When valid, it endures until the death of one or the other spouse. And our task as priests is to uphold and advance that truth as a message of liberation, even when it's difficult.

The most widespread concerns voiced about the content of *Amoris Laetitia* – in public, but even more urgently and commonly in private -- focus on Chapter 8, including footnote 351. Critics see in the text a preference for ambiguity over clear teaching and a resentment toward defenders of traditional Church teaching that seem out of sync with the rest of the document.

Since at least some of the people raising these issues are persons of fidelity and substance, their concerns can't -- in justice -- be dismissed. And the resulting confusion is regrettable, because the whole purpose of Chapter 8 is to provide a merciful outreach to decent persons entangled in irregular marital situations.

So how should we proceed?

First, as with all papal documents regarding faith and morals, if any confusion exists in a text, *it must be interpreted consistent with the magisterium of previous popes*.

Second, I've been a priest for 47 years and a bishop for nearly 30. In all that time, I've met very few priests who like punishing anyone, kicking anyone out of their parish, or keeping anyone from taking part in the sacraments. But I've met hundreds of priests who worry that their people, while loving God, *don't* really know their faith, *don't* understand the sacraments, *don't* catechize their children, and *don't* know what a properly formed Catholic conscience is. Poorly formed, immature consciences are among the biggest pastoral challenges facing the Church. This is what makes delegating decisions about the nullity or validity of a first marriage to the internal forum a matter of real concern.

The Christian virtue of mercy flows out of charity and depends on the existence of justice and truth. Romano Guardini argued that mercy is a greater virtue than justice. And rightly so. But he also stressed that truth undergirds and is essential to both virtues. In other words, real mercy is always more than mere sentiment. It can never exclude careful moral reasoning about right and wrong. It can never be set against, or elevated above, the other virtues that are key to life-giving human behavior. Otherwise it becomes just another source of confusion. Permanent truths exist about human nature, sexuality, behavior and relationships. Those truths apply to all of us, in all circumstances, and justice involves living according to those truths.

But of course, all of us fail many times every day. Thus, mercy is God's outreach through the Church to offer a way back to grace. It's a living expression of his tenderness. But mercy does not abolish God's justice any more than it can soften or adjust the demands of truth in order to be more congenial to our weaknesses, to our culture, or to our times.

Christian marriage is never simply an “ideal.” Describing it as an “ideal” tends to open the door to excusing and then normalizing failure. Clearly many married couples *do* fail, especially in today’s world of institutionalized selfishness. They need our understanding and support, especially in cases of domestic violence.

But if grace is real, and God’s word is true, then the joy of a permanent marriage is possible for anyone called to the vocation. This is why better preparation and support for couples considering marriage are so vital. It’s also why we need to defend the permanence of the marriage bond wherever and whenever we reasonably can. The permanent, loving bond between a man and a woman open to new life is the glue of a culture and the guarantee of its future. We need to fight for it, and not collapse – like so many other Christian communities -- into the confusion of a society based on compromises, caveats and alibis. That’s the message we need to preach and teach.

More than 70 years ago the economic historian Karl Polanyi wrote a book called *The Great Transformation*. It’s one of the seminal works of the last century. It chronicles the deep changes that took place during the Industrial Revolution – not just in economics but in politics, law, patterns of thought, and all kinds of human relationships. We’re living in that same kind of moment right now. So much of life can seem out of our control and beyond our influence. As Joseph Ratzinger saw five decades ago, the Church of the future will very likely be smaller, poorer, and empty of prestige – not everywhere, but certainly in the nations that like to posture themselves “advanced.”

We might mitigate that outcome with smart thinking and good Church leadership. But we probably can’t prevent it. The reason is simple. We can’t quick-fix ourselves out of moral and social problems we behaved ourselves into. And knowing that can easily lead to frustration and despair.

But God doesn’t ask us to save the Church or fix the world. That’s in his hands. What he asks is much simpler and more important. He asks each of us as priests to be faithful, and to be his healing presence to *his* – and to *our* – people.

In the midst of confusion, he asks us to speak and live the truth. In the midst of conflict, he asks us to be peacemakers. In the midst of distress, he asks us to be sources of hope. The curse of our age is loneliness; a loneliness wrapped in relentless noise to muffle the worry that our lives and sufferings have no meaning. No matter how intractable or unfixable the problems of a marriage or family might be, the priest who listens and counsels with a spirit of mercy guided by truth is doing what God called him to do: to be the presence of God’s love in the world.

There’s no greater mission of mercy than that, and no greater joy in the life of a priest.