

D. Jorge Ortiga

BUILDING THE HOUSE UPON THE ROCK

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those who build it labor in vain*

Pastoral Letter

Braga / 2017

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Introduction

“The Joy of Love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church” (AL 1). It’s in this attitude of joy that we welcome the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* that Pope Francis offered to the Church at the end of the two Synods of Bishops about families in today’s world. We thank Holy Father for his positive vision, his encouragement and his proposals for a renewal of marital and family pastoral care towards the difficulties and challenges that couples and families have to face and overcome today.

In a simple but specific language, Pope Francis leads us to discover the beauty and the value of a christian marriage. Marriage and family are a gift from God and, simultaneously, a human being’s specific vocation and mission.

“Through the Church, marriage and the family receive the grace of the Holy Spirit from Christ, in order to bear witness to the Gospel of God’s love. The sacrament of marriage is not a social convention, an empty ritual or merely the outward sign of a commitment. The sacrament is a gift given for the sanctification and salvation of the spouses” (AL 71-72), to their family mission, to their path of happiness.

The *Amoris Laetitia* Exhortation invites us all to a profound renewal of the family apostolate. As we shall see below (see num. 8 and 12), it’s important to emphasize the extreme need for a deeper and more continuous formation of pastoral workers who can accompany families in their different stages of life, including the “wounded” families either in need of private care or courses of further discernment. Moreover, “enabling families to take up their role as active agents of the family apostolate calls for an effort at evangelization and catechesis inside the family” (AL 200).

The richness of the Exhortation requires a deep reading which this document, by no means, claims to replace. Topics such as courtship or widowhood and the place of the elderly in the family are of crucial importance and great delicacy. Also, accompaniment

in situations of marriage disruption, such as divorced people who remain alone, single parents or single mothers is an issue that the Church cannot, absolutely, neglect.

By welcoming the plea of the Apostolic Exhortation, without intending, as mentioned above, to summarize or replace its reading or to deal with all matters dealt with in it, this document seeks only to highlight some guidelines for this pastoral renewal, namely the preparation for marriage, with regards to the assistance to young couples and the integration of divorced people who live in a new union.

I *Educating for the joy of love in the family*

1. Education is a process of autonomization and personalization built on the interpersonal relationship. It means “to lead out”, to “unbutton”. An educated person is someone who lives outside of oneself, who lets the light come in, who evolves, who grows in self-awareness of his values, principles, what he is. To educate is to personalize. It’s within the family that we learn to be who we are and that we become a person, because “the family is the first school of human values, where we learn the wise use of freedom” (AL 274). Family life turns out to be a special school, with a very

strong dynamism, since everyone is, in their own way, a teacher and a student. Parents learn as they exercise paternity, children learn filial respect, and siblings extend themselves to fraternity, learning how to share spaces, possessions and life itself. “This training, at times quite demanding, is a true school of socialization” (AL 195). Therefore, educating in the family implies to form for true freedom, for the true love that requires justice and sharing, and for true joy, that one “joy of the Gospel [which] fills the heart and the whole life of those who meet Jesus” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 1).

2. Educating for freedom means being able to help walking from the “desiring” to the “wanting”. You are not free when you do what you want, but only when you act according to the deepest desire. Whoever does only what one wants or acts impulsively, is a slave to his appetites and impulses. “When children or adolescents are not helped to realize that some things have to be waited for, they can become obsessed with satisfying their immediate needs and develop the vice of «wanting it all now» (...) on the other hand, when we are taught to postpone some things until the right moment, we learn self-mastery and detachment from our impulses” (AL 275). A truly free person is the one who is able to ultimately free himself, from his ego, from

his selfishness. Freedom is not choosing between good and evil (that would just be free will); is to free oneself from all evil and choose the good. So, learning how to not act impulsively but, instead, to know how to wait, is a great learning for freedom. “There comes a point where a couple’s love attains the height of its freedom and becomes the basis of a healthy autonomy. This happens when each spouse realizes that the other is not his or her own, but has a much more important master, the one Lord” (AL 320). In a society that stands up for the individual rights, fidelity to a commitment for life is radically counter-cultural. The compromise is seen as an attack on individual autonomy. But, paradoxically – in fact, only in an apparent paradox –, to be free is to commit yourself; to be free is attaching yourself to someone forever. To educate for freedom is, therefore, to educate for fidelity.

3. Educate for love requires this freedom because “only those who freely choose and love one another may marry” (AL 217). And love cannot be reduced to a “merely physical attraction or a vague affection”, or this would make the marriage suffer from extreme vulnerability (*ibid.*). One of the great misconceptions of our times is to confuse feelings with will, to mix up “like” with “love”. But, in fact, liking is not loving. Liking

someone is on the horizon of feelings, whereas love belongs to the realm of the deepest will. Love is an option of freedom. It is an act of the will. It's not liking, but rather wanting the good of the other, even when it is hard to like. Love remains when passion fades or the taste is absent. Because love is a decision. "There is no guarantee that we will feel the same way all through life; but we can (...) love one another and live as one until death do us part, enjoying an enriching intimacy (...). The love they pledge is greater than any emotion, feeling or state of mind, although it may include all of these. It is a deeper love, a lifelong decision of the heart" (AL 163). And that decision certainly includes joy, enjoyment, and pleasure. But also, and inevitably, service, surrender, pain and suffering. For the one who loves suffers: "there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's brothers" (Jhn 15, 13). The Cross is, therefore, the greatest mark of love. To educate for true love is to educate for surrendering and for a strong will, to know how to keep oneself true to commitments in the midst of life's tribulations.

4. "Joy is the fruit of the Spirit" (Gal 5, 22). To educate for joy is, first of all, to provide openness to the Holy Spirit. Living the joy is the christian's deepest vocation because joy arises from the resurrection. In this way, it

also becomes a mission, since from the experience of the relationship with the Risen Lord overflows the need to echo that first Easter morning announcement: "I have seen the Lord!" (Jhn 20, 18). The joy of resurrection, the only one that no one can steal from us, is the result of death and death from the cross. This image shapes our entire existence. Joy without pain is not possible, as resurrection without death is not possible either. The great temptation is to imagine a full life without surrendering. As if joy was possible without love. And as if love was possible without pain. All the world's offerings are illusory ones precisely because they present us with this plastic joy that, after all, is nothing more than a mere caricature of true joy. True joy fills the human heart fully. But it will always be a "sore joy," because it will always be a fruit of commitment, struggle, reconciliation, loss of one's own will and interest. In a word, joy is the result of an "unlived life", of death. Therefore, we must forcefully assert that the opposite of joy is not sadness. Educating for joy is not teaching to flee from pain, suffering or sadness at any price. It is rather to teach how to embrace history with all its life, in a surrender of love that generates peace and a deep joy that surpasses all sorrows. That is why christian joy can't be contained in itself. It is an authentic mission of

transforming the world in the Kingdom of justice and peace dreamed by Jesus. “God has given the family the job of «domesticating» the world and helping each person to see fellow human beings as brothers and sisters” (AL 183). A family that cares only for its own, that closes itself, that does not take into account the obligation to fight for justice and to share everything with the poorest, is not a truly christian family and will never experience true joy. Instead, “open and caring families find a place for the poor and build friendships with those less fortunate than themselves” (*ibid.*). And they discover the true secret of happiness as they put the Gospel into practice: “(...) When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be happy (Lk 14, 12-14). You will be happy! Here is the secret of a happy family” (*ibid.*). Educate for joy is then to educate for service.

II Preparation for Marriage

5. It is the whole christian community that is called to become more and more deeply involved in the preparation of the bride and groom for marriage. But, given the social complexity and acceleration in which the family is subjected today, a more up-to-date and accurate preparation of pastoral agents becomes

essential: “Courses and programs, planned specifically for pastoral workers, can be of assistance by integrating the premarital preparation program into the broader dynamic of ecclesial life” (AL 204).

6. Pope Francis mentions the elements that must be present in a journey of preparation for marriage: “They do not need to be taught the entire Catechism or overwhelmed with too much information (...). Quality is more important than quantity, and priority should be given – along with a renewed proclamation of the *kerygma* – to an attractive and helpful presentation of information that can help couples to live the rest of their lives together (...). Marriage preparation should be a kind of «initiation» to the sacrament of matrimony, providing couples with the help they need to receive the sacrament worthily and to make a solid beginning of life as a family” (AL 207).

7. We know that marriage preparation is not a one-off or isolated thing at a specific point in life. Rather, it necessarily implies thinking about a long-term family pastoral care, because “learning to love someone does not happen automatically, nor can it be taught in a workshop just prior to the celebration of marriage. For every couple, marriage preparation begins at birth” (AL 208). So, the great preparation for marriage is the

remote preparation that bride and groom received at home. “A true education of children that is able to generate maturation processes of their freedom, of integral growth, of nurture of authentic autonomy” (AL 261), prepares them for life’s options with deep convictions in which commitment and fidelity are elements of human growth. In this sense, every family apostolate that supports spouses and helps them to be signals of true christian love for their children is a pastoral of indirect preparation for marriage.

8. The most immediate preparation for marriage should experience a new vitality. It is true that much has been done in this area over the last few decades. But, more and more in the current times, when life gains amazing rhythms, it is necessary a continuous evaluation and renewal for a preparation that must always be adjusted to the needs of each time. Family life has never been easy and a healthy and happy marriage takes time and effort to build. We know the accelerated rhythms of life today, the jobs that are less stable and which, so often, require the separation of the spouses for more or less long periods, the experience of the bride and groom who often comes from unstructured families, the widespread mentality in which quality of life corresponds to the

accumulation of material goods, the low birth rate with the corresponding absence of the brothers in an education that we want to be a fraternal one, the fragility of fidelity to the commitments assumed for life. These characteristics of our time compel us to question some contents and ways of preparing the bride and groom for marriage and to find, with creativity and depth, the appropriate means for an adequate accompaniment that will, in fact, help the couple to start a new stage of life.

9. Experience has shown that, often, the immediate preparation of the bride and groom for marriage is manifestly incomplete or very conditioned by the circumstances of their preparation for the wedding day. This fact points out to the need for a serious commitment in a courtship pastoral, in which all catechists, leaders of youth groups, vocation promoters and other pastoral workers join forces and work together so that the preparation and discernment of young people for dating, engagement and marriage starts sooner. It would be really important to arise a new dynamism in order to promote groups of unmarried couples, activities and meetings that could help reflect and live a real preparation, even in the medium-long term, for married life.

10. “The timely preparation of engaged couples (...) should also assist them to recognize eventual problems and risks”. While emphasizing the beauty of marriage and how it is a true vocation that leads to mutual happiness, it should alert to the possibility that dazzlement or initial passion may tend to relativize difficulties or differences which, in some cases, may reveal themselves as genuine incompatibilities. “They should be strongly encouraged to discuss what each expects from marriage, what they understand by love and commitment, what each wants from the other and what kind of life they would like to build together. Such discussions would help them to see if they in fact have little in common and to realize that mutual attraction alone will not suffice to keep them together” (AL 209). The decision to marry and the agreement to share the whole life with another person also “entails a willingness to face eventual sacrifices, problems and situations of conflict; it demands a firm resolve to be ready for this” (AL 210). Thus, a proper preparation for marriage should lead the bride and groom to:

- a) be able to read and evaluate the affective, psychological and spiritual maturity, their own and the other one;
- b) be able to read and evaluate the relationship itself, its strengths and its weaknesses, as

well as to foresee possible potentialities and consequences that can arise from these strengths and weaknesses;

- c) outline a family life project: guiding principles, “non-negotiable” values and goals to be achieved as a family;
- d) a methodology for a greater family maturity: pausing moments to evaluate and do in the future. Only this way it’s possible to see “danger signals in their relationship and to find, before the wedding, effective ways of responding to them” (AL 210);
- e) establish “strategies” of managing and overcoming conflicts;
- f) discover the christian community as a place where the family can put itself at the service of others, where it can seek help for its needs and crises, and where the celebrations of the different family occasions and community events gain deep meaning;
- g) to clarify the Church’s doctrine on the sacraments: the properties and purposes of marriage, specially what is meant by the bond of indissoluble unity, as well as the *sine qua non* conditions for the sacrament’s validity, namely freedom, fidelity and fecundity.

11. Finally, the gradual and growing dimensions of marriage should be emphasized. Marriage celebration is not a goal, but a starting point: so that “the couple do not view the wedding ceremony as the end of the road, but instead embark upon marriage as a life-long calling based on a firm and realistic decision to face all trials and difficult moments together” (AL 211).

12. After insisting that “by the grace of the sacrament of matrimony, christian families are the principal agents of the family apostolate” (AL 200), Pope Francis returns to the concern of the Synod Fathers and points out that “the main contribution to the pastoral care of families is offered by the parish, which is the family of families, where small communities, ecclesial movements and associations live in harmony” (AL 202). But this pastoral cannot be limited to a purely theoretical announcement that is disconnected from people’s real problems, so a true missionary conversion is required from the whole Church (AL 201). This conversion must begin precisely in the seminary and parishes, since it recognizes the lack of “a more adequate formation... of priests, deacons, religious men and women, catechists and other pastoral workers” (AL 202) in this very sensitive and delicate matter. The Archdiocesan Department of Family Pastoral Care

will prepare a training program that will follow up on number 204 of the AL when it expresses “the need for training lay leaders who can assist in the pastoral care of families, with the help of teachers and counsellors, family and community physicians, social workers, juvenile and family advocates, and drawing upon the contributions of psychology, sociology, marital therapy and counseling. Professionals, especially those with practical experience, help keep pastoral initiatives grounded in the real situations and concrete concerns of families.” It will be up to the Archpriests, parishes and lay movements to select lay people who can attend these formations and become local agents of family apostolate.

III Accompaniment of young couples

13. The first years of marital life bring, besides great joys, some added difficulties. The illusions and dreams of those who marry “descend” into concrete life and it’s necessary to be prepared to live the truth that states that “reality is superior to the idea” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 231). It is, therefore, necessary to accompany the couples in this encounter with real life and help them “set aside all illusions and accept the other as he or she actually is: an unfinished product, needing

to grow, a work in progress” (AL 218). Far from being a disillusionment, this allows the spouses to assume “an active and creative role in a lifelong project. Their gaze now has to be directed to the future that, with the help of God’s grace, they are daily called to build” (AL 218).

14. At these times, where the feelings and immediacy prevail as criteria for life, it becomes essential to form and educate for true love. Because “when love is a merely physical attraction or a vague affection, spouses become particularly vulnerable once this affection wanes or physical attraction diminishes” (AL 217). In fact, rather than a feeling, love is an option that leads to action (see AL 94). Spouses cannot promise that they will always feel a great warm affection for each other every day of their lives. But they really can promise to love each other until the end. The feeling is of a more superficial order, it comes and goes. But love depends on the will and remains beyond, and even against all obstacles that life can bring. Ultimately, a marriage lasts because the spouses decide that it lasts. Therefore, “it is all the more essential that couples be helped during the first years of their married life to enrich and deepen their conscious and free decision to have, hold and love one another for life” (AL 217).

15. It’s urgent to form for freedom. Fear of making a commitment for life grows understandably at a time

where everything is changing quickly and in which the most credible institutions ultimately prove themselves as fragile. In addition, the imposed demands on the families, already mentioned above, reinforce this hesitation. As if that was not enough, personal success and the right to autonomy are exalted today in a way that reveals an individualism that has never been before so explicitly defended. “The fear of loneliness and the desire for stability and fidelity exist side by side with a growing fear of entrapment in a relationship that could hamper the achievement of one’s personal goals” (AL 34). Repeating and emphasizing what is said above, one must dismantle false concepts and help others to grow in true freedom. Freedom cannot be reduced to the possibility to choose between two or more options. Nor, much less, freedom can be measured itself by the idea of choosing the things that are the most wanted. On the contrary, to be free is precisely to be able to carry on without one’s own appetites, being faithful to a commitment. It’s not possible to be free without compromising. There is no greater freedom than to manifest, as do spouses in the Marriage Consent (and throughout life), that they really want to be bounded to each other until death do them part. It’s about this freedom that Pope Francis speaks when he states that

“only those who freely choose and love one another may marry” (AL 217). Freedom in time is called fidelity. And it is in the fidelity of the small moments of life (AL 231) that a couple’s relationship is built.

16. On this path of growing mutual love and freedom, each Archpriest and each Parish must draw on all possible human resources and reflect deeply about plenty of activities that can and should be carried out to support and revitalize families. Pope Francis offers many examples: couple meetings, retreats, conferences of experts on conjugal and family life’s matters, pastoral workers prepared to talk to couples about their difficulties and aspirations, consultations on different family situations (dependencies, infidelity, family violence), spaces of spirituality, formation schools for parents, etc. (see AL 229). We know that it’s not possible to do everything everywhere. But it’s possible to have an organization at the level of an archpriest or diocese so that the offer of instruments on family apostolate is more effective and efficient.

17. Even with all possible help, marital and family life’s normality will inevitably go through some crises. How can couples learn to overcome these crises? Their own experience of life, the relationship that is growing, the foundations and principles accepted in the remote

and near preparation for marriage are, along with the grace of God, the most immediate instruments. But it is parishes, movements, and other Church’s institutions’ responsibility to support the families of the christian community. It is useful to entrust older couples the accompaniment of younger couples (see AL 230), especially when crises arise. “The life of every family is marked by all kinds of crises, yet these are also part of its dramatic beauty” (AL 232). Through the experienced testimony of these couples and, when necessary, specialized aids, it’s possible to recall that marriage was assumed as a path, as a two-pronged task that involves overcoming obstacles (*ibid.*). And that a crisis does not represent the end of the relationship, but an opportunity to begin again and renew the commitment of mutual love and mutual fidelity. “Inevitably, situations will arise involving human weakness and these can prove emotionally overwhelming” (AL 237). The presence and dialogue with more experienced couples can teach others to relativize such situations and overcome many crises. To prevent spouses to close themselves but, instead, to learn again, with humility, to communicate and to forgive each other, is an essential service of any family apostolate, more or less formal. “The arduous art of reconciliation, which requires the

support of grace, needs the generous cooperation of relatives and friends, and sometimes even outside help and professional assistance” (AL 236).

**IV Pastoral orientation criteria
for the application of chapter VIII
of Apostolic Exhortation Amoris Laetitia**

18. We know, however, that despite all efforts and attempts of the spouses to remain united, some situations arise “in which separation is inevitable. Sometimes it might become morally necessary when it comes to defending the most fragile spouse, or the small children” (AL 241). That is why “although she constantly holds up the call to perfection and asks for a fuller response to God, the Church must accompany with attention and care the weakest of her children, who show signs of a wounded and troubled love, by restoring in them hope and confidence” (AL 291).

In the title of chapter VIII, “Accompanying, discerning and integrating weakness”, the method is already pointed. However, the Exhortation also offers criteria to differentiate situations and accompany people in order to discern each case. We can achieve this by proposing the following pastoral guidelines.¹

¹ This text took into account the pronouncements of other episcopates: the document of the bishops of Buenos Aires pastoral region, approved by the

19. The first aid to offer to the divorced people that live in a new union is to make available in our diocese a service of information and counseling, in order to check whether or not there is any basis for introducing the cause of a declaration of nullity of marriage in the ecclesiastical court. To this end, at the Archdiocese’s level, it has been created an office that will be available to help out anyone who wishes to go through its various services. We ask priests to inform the faithful about these services. They are a primordial tool in helping and counseling these couples.

20. To those who cannot obtain a declaration of nullity but want to live the christian faith in a good relationship with God and the Church, a “responsible personal and pastoral discernment” (AL 300) is proposed. The goal of this journey is to achieve greater christian integration in Church’s life by helping each one find the proper way of participating in the ecclesial community.

21. The notion of a general authorization to access sacrament is to be avoided. In fact, this is a process of personal discernment, in the internal forum, that is accompanied by a pastor, with regular meetings, who

_____ Pope and recently elevated to the category of Authentic Magisterium, as well as the bishops of Malta and Germany.

helps to distinguish each individual case appropriately in the light of the Church's teaching.

An appropriate distinction must be made between different situations because not all cases are the same as it is specified in number 298 of *Amoris Laetitia*. For example, "one thing is a second union consolidated over time, with new children, proven fidelity, generous self-giving, Christian commitment, a consciousness of its irregularity and of the great difficulty of going back without feeling in conscience that one would fall into new sins (...). Another thing is a new union arising from a recent divorce, with all the suffering and confusion which this entails for children and entire families, or the case of someone who has consistently failed in his obligations to the family".

22. Through this journey of discernment, "humility, discretion and love for the Church and its teachings, in a sincere search for God's will and a desire to make a more perfect response to it" (AL 300) must be guaranteed. This will avoid the idea of quick "exceptions", privileges or double morals of the Church. This shows that the whole process of discernment leads to conversion and that it is a serious work of conscience.

23. The pastoral accompaniment is an exercise of the "via caritatis", an invitation to follow "the way of Jesus, the

way of mercy and reinstatement" (AL 296). This itinerary calls for the pastoral charity of the priest who welcomes the faithful, listens attentively to them and shows them the maternal face of the Church, as long as he accepts his right intention and his good purpose in illuminating all life with the light of the Gospel and to practice charity (see AL 306, 312). The priest should appear as a shepherd and not as a "controller of grace", because "the Church is not a customs house, but a paternal house where there is room for everyone with their stressful life" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 47).

24. It should be kept in mind that the fundamental assumption of discernment is that AL is not only focused on a problem, but it must take into account one's personal life, a concrete person who is on the road to God. For this very reason, in order to identify where and how God invites that concrete person to conversion and to life, the order of the stages and the dimensions of this journey are up to one's discernment. More than holding to a particular moment or event, one's discernment should consider the internal motions happening within a person in all its particularities and in one's historical course. In short, discernment concerns the concrete history and the inner dynamism of the person, not the ideas. It has to go beyond the cases.

25. In the path of discernment, the shepherd should emphasize the fundamental proclamation, the *kerygma*, the proclamation of Christ's love and tenderness, which stimulates or renews the personal encounter with living Christ (see AL 58), and not the juridical or moral aspect of the law. It is necessary to take into account the situation of faith of each person, "otherwise, it becomes nothing more than the defense of a dry and lifeless doctrine" (AL 59). We face people who find themselves in difficulty with the christian life, who feel the need to be welcomed, to hear repeatedly that the Lord is not far from them, loves them and offers them a new possibility to grow in faith to a further integration in His Church.

26. In this itinerary, it's convenient and useful to "carry out an examination of conscience" according to the points stated on number 300 of the Apostolic Exhortation:

- a) "Through moments of reflection and repentance". This is the step of the presentation to the Church and of the demonstration of being available to conversion. This begins by recognizing, in a faith and prayer's climate, that the situation itself does not respond objectively to the Gospel proposal, recognizing also the possible responsibilities or

faults. One must stand as a beggar who expects to receive an "unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous mercy" (AL 297), without the right to claim it. We all need to convert and say: "My God, have mercy on me, for I am a sinner" (Lk 18, 13).

- b) "Ask themselves: how did they act towards their children when the conjugal union entered into crisis", which means questioning the parents own's responsibility to understand how the relationship with the children in the family was managed during the crisis and after the new union. Children's welfare is not an object to be used in situations of dispute or pressure: "Never ever, take your child hostage! You separated for many problems and reasons. Life gave you this trial, but your children should not have to bear the burden of this separation or be used as hostages against the other spouse. They should grow up hearing their mother speak well of their father, even though they are not together, and their father speak well of their mother" (AL 245).
- c) "Whether or not they made attempts at reconciliation". An evaluation of reversibility or irreversibility of the relationship must be made in order to find the reasons why a no turning point

has been reached, despite numerous attempts to repair the rupture.

- d) “What has become of the abandoned party”. The criteria of charity and justice are very important to establish the consequences of the rupture: if justice and charity duties are respected in what concerns the spouse and children. If there were unresolved injustices, the access to the sacraments would be particularly scandalous.
- e) “What consequences the new relationship has on the rest of the family and the community of the faithful”. The public effects of separation must be evaluated, within the family and in the Christian community, partly to avoid feelings and situations of conflict and scandal.
- f) “What example is being set for young people who are preparing for marriage”. It is the criteria of testimony: if the couple or young people that are in preparation for marriage receive from these separated people reasons for discouragement or distrust regarding the sacrament.

27. This path does not necessarily ends with sacraments. Instead, it can be redirected towards other forms of greater integration in Church’s life: a greater presence in the community, participation in groups

of prayer or reflection, commitment in the various ecclesial services, etc. (see AL 299).

It cannot be ruled out that people who have traveled this route or who have expressed their intentions to walk through it, and who are integrated in the community, can be considered suitable to be stepmothers or godmothers.

28. In discernment, we must evaluate the conditions and mitigating or aggravating aspects that may exist in each particular situation, relating to the responsibility, culpability and imputability of an act (AL 301-302, 305). “Because of conditioning or extenuating factors, it is possible for a person to be in an objective situation of sin – but subjectively not guilty or not fully – and to live in the grace of God, to love and to grow in the life of grace and charity, receiving the help of the Church” (AL 305). In these cases one may have access to the sacraments of reconciliation and Eucharistic communion (see note 351). “The Catechism of the Catholic Church clearly mentions these factors: “imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, unbalanced affections, and other psychological or social factors” (AL 302).

29. When the concrete circumstances of a couple make it feasible, especially when both are Christians

with a solid path of faith, the possibility of a commitment to live in conjugal continence can be examined. The Apostolic Exhortation does not ignore the difficulties of this option (see footnote 329) and leaves the door open to the possibility of accessing the sacrament of reconciliation even when this purpose is missed (see note 364). In fact, it recognizes that there are situations in which “if certain expressions of intimacy are lacking, it often happens that faithfulness is endangered and the good of the children suffers” (AL 329).

30. The conjugal stability of the new union and the good of the children are particularly important among the criteria that guide personal and pastoral discernment in what concerns the admission to reconciliation and Eucharistic communion. In this regard, time is an essential factor. A minimum of five years of duration of the new union (although with the use of the pastoral flexibility of those who know and follow each case) seems to be a good time frame to assess the marital stability necessary to begin the path of discernment that may eventually lead to accessing the sacraments. Because “this process takes time. Love needs time and space” (AL 224).

31. The Apostolic Exhortation invites us to value again the importance of personal conscience in the

christian life of the faithful and the Church: “Only by recognizing the influence of such concrete factors, we can add that individual conscience needs to be better incorporated into the Church’s praxis in certain situations which do not objectively embody our understanding of marriage” (AL 303). In the itinerary of discernment, the task of pastors is not “to replace consciences” (AL 37) or “to offer easy recipes” (AL 298), but to help people, patiently, on how to illuminate and to form their consciences so that they may come to make a sincere decision before God while doing the best they can (AL 37).

32. It might be convenient that the access to the sacraments takes place in a reserved manner, especially in situations of scandal or conflict. However, at the same time, one should accompany and educate the community so that it grows in the spirit of understanding and acceptance, without causing confusion in the Church’s teaching on indissoluble marriage. The community is an instrument of mercy that is “unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous” (AL 297).

33. The formation of christian communities is essential so that Peter’s Boat does not drift. Knowing how to convey this pastoral path is of particular

importance because only that avoids “the grave danger of misunderstandings, such as the notion that any priest can quickly grant «exceptions», or that some people can obtain sacramental privileges in exchange for favors (...). [And the] risk that a specific discernment may lead people to think that the Church maintains a double standard” (AL 300) is avoided. Priests in the community should announce the possibility of initiating discernment processes for people living in the so called “irregular” situations. With this announcement, some will be able to begin this journey and, thus, the community will understand that this is not a question of facilitation but, as mentioned above, of the authentic “via caritatis”. “The Church’s pastors, in proposing to the faithful the full ideal of the Gospel and the Church’s teaching, must also help them to treat the weak with compassion, avoiding aggravation or unduly harsh or hasty judgements” (AL 308)².

34. In the process of carrying out this ministry of discernment, we have a responsibility to avoid falling into two extremes: in severity or in laxity. “By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close

² The Archbishop-Abbot of the Italian diocese of Modena-Nantola, Erio Castellucci, in the Pastoral Letter “È il Signore che costruisce la casa”, for the years 2016-2017, presents a suggestive image: “We are called to a pastoral of conversion: the goal, the doctrine, continues the same, but it is evident

off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God” (AL 305). Therefore, we must work, with cautious, on the “law of gradualness”, in order to discover the presence, grace, and action of God and help people to become closer to God, even when they don’t “understand, appreciate, or fully carry out the objective demands of the law” (AL 295).

35. In any case, this discernment is not enclosed because “is dynamic; it must remain ever open to new stages of growth and to new decisions which can enable the ideal to be more fully realized” (AL 303), according to the “law of graduality” and also relying on the help of God’s grace to progress in christian life. Pastors and believers must therefore open their hearts to welcome the invitation of Pope Francis: “I encourage the faithful who find themselves in complicated situations to speak confidently with their pastors or with other lay people whose lives are committed to the Lord (...). I also encourage the Church’s pastors to listen to them with sensitivity and serenity, with a sincere desire to understand their plight and their point of view, in order

the need to follow towards the goal and not to sit on the goal to point the finger to who is making the way. It is the style of our communities, not the content of the message, that should show greater adherence to the Gospel”.

to help them live better lives and to recognize their proper place in the Church” (AL 312).

Conclusion

In the closing speech of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis mentioned the need for a new articulation to “transmit the beauty of Christian novelty, sometimes covered by the rust of an archaic language or simply incomprehensible”. We know that, for the Pontiff, the language of mercy is the one that best embodies the Gospel in the concrete lives of people and families. Mercy, the identity of God himself and the one that involves all our existence, allows us to put in context again the doctrine in the service of the Church’s pastoral mission. The Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* should be read in this light.

To prepare the bride and groom for marriage, to accompany married couples in the early years of marriage, and to discern in order to help at the integration of the most fragile families is an urgent task of the Church at a particularly demanding time for families. While accepting the message of the Apostolic Exhortation, this document seeks to invite christian, pastoral, religious and lay communities to take this mission as a priority. This is followed by the Pope’s

recommendation: “Priests have the duty to accompany [the divorced and remarried] in helping them to understand their situation according to the teaching of the Church and the guidelines of the bishop” (AL 300). Above all, let us remember that “the Christian proclamation on the family is good news indeed” (AL 1) and that we must “all feel called to love and cherish family life, for families are not a problem; they are first and foremost an opportunity” (AL 7) to the world!

ATTACHMENT

Proposal: practical elements for a process of accompaniment, discernment and integration of divorced people in a new civil union

Introduction

1. The principle defended by Pope Francis that “time is greater than space” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 221; *Amoris Laetitia* 3) makes it precisely possible to recognize that you can always open processes at various levels. A process requires and develops itself over time. And if it is a true process of discernment, it is necessary to accept that one does not have the answer at the beginning; if that was the case, there wouldn’t be nothing to discern. In this particular theme, the various elements involved in the process (the couple of “remarried” and the spiritual assistant) must accept that it is not a process to have access to the sacraments, but a way to seek the will of God – which may or may not allow this access to the sacraments. This is the purpose of a process of discernment: to seek the will of God.

2. The first requirement for any discernment is inner freedom. Without it, the whole process becomes vitiated and, that way, it is sought that God comes to the will of those who “discern” and not the opposite. Only freedom allows us to create a critical affective distance from the situation so as to truly accept what is perceived to be the will of God.

3. For this reason, it is therefore necessary that the discernment is accompanied by an external element to the couple, experienced in accompaniment and spiritual direction. The confrontation with this third person is essential (see AL 300). The job of this minister of the Church is then to guide the process since the beginning and to serve as a reference for confrontation in order to unlock the personal inner processes of one of the elements or the couple, to “dismantle spiritual traps” that blocks the process, to reveal escapes from the truth that they are not seeing themselves, to help free themselves from disorganized affections and desires concerning the matter, wounds that obliterate reality, etc..

4. Naturally, the guidelines offered here will always have to be adapted to each situation and to each person. That is the essence of discernment. Age of parties involved, current relationship’s duration, if

both were sacramentally married or only one of them, whether the relationship includes children or not, life of faith and the participation in Church's life are some of the things to bear in mind when putting into practice the process of discernment.

The discernment and accompaniment process

5. How does God "speak" to us? Firstly, through life: events, conversations, situations, relationships... But, also and especially, through prayer. God can manifest Himself there by "signs" of His presence and His will. These "signs" can come in three great dimensions: signs directed at the intellect (when "light is made" on a particular subject that we are praying upon, when we realize that God seems to be speaking directly to us through a Gospel book we had read many times ...); signs directed at affection (when, by praying, we are invaded with feelings of great joy or sadness, of deep peace or restlessness ...); and signs directed at our will (when by praying, we truly commit ourselves to a cause, we become determined to change something in our behavior, we finally decide to venture in that certain field that we have been postponing ...). These "signs" are movements, spiritual motions. The essential

spiritual motions are consolation and desolation. Spiritually, these motions are not merely a wellbeing or a malaise, but authentic spiritual movements that allow us to perceive the presence of God. A difficult decision can cause malaise and, at the same time, a great peace on a deepest level. This deep consolation, confirmed in time, gives us the direction of God's will with probability.

God is always greater. Therefore, it is impossible to say with any certainty that this or that motion comes unquestionably from God. Ultimately, the great filter consists in the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. The decision I propose myself to take brings me closer to God and His truth (faith)?; does it bring me closer to a meaningful life, wanting to build the Kingdom of Justice and Peace dreamed by Jesus, hoping that it will come to its fullness at the end of time (hope)?; does it bring me closer to my brothers, loving my neighbors as I love myself, freeing me from my selfishness (charity)? Or, on the contrary, this decision does not bring me closer to the presence of God, does not let me see beyond the here and now, and isolates me from my brothers? This is, far beyond of what I can feel (the feeling is always fallible), the difference between consolation and desolation. The consolation brings me closer to God, to Life and to my Brothers.

Spiritual discernment is the “art” of reading these signs. Therefore, we emphasize the need for inner freedom so that we can be particularly attentive to the motions of the Spirit so that we aren’t “deceived” by the not so free desires or the more superficial feelings that don’t come from the Spirit. Throughout the process, as one prays, and for the accompaniment of the counselor, it’s important to take note of these motions, of the consolations and spiritual desolations that arise in prayer.

6. The process of accompaniment and discernment takes place in five stages:

- a) prayer and exercise for the acquisition of inner freedom;
- b) memory and examination of conscience about the sacramental marriage and its consequences for the acceptance, internal reconciliation and “cure” of all the wounds that may exist;
- c) “evaluation” of the present relationship: its stability, its strengths and weaknesses, dangers and potentialities, as well as the awareness of God’s presence and the spiritual life of the two involved in this relationship and in the family that they may already have formed (especially children);

- d) with these data, one should question what is God’s will at the moment and the best way to put it into practice: decision-making processes regarding access to the sacraments, which can be “yes”, “no” or “not yet, because we recognize that there are still steps to take” (in this case, the discernment is post-poned), since the process of discernment “is dynamic; it must remain always open to new stages of growth and to new decisions which can enable the ideal to be more fully realized” (AL 303);
- e) in order to finish the process of discernment, the confirmation of the decision is still missing: before God, the whole process is summed up and the decision is given to Him while asking for His confirmation at the same time that interior movements, motions of the Spirit, are evaluated.

The methodology could always be the same in all stages: first, the reading and personal prayer while taking notes of “spiritual motions”; then, the sharing between the two elements of the couple on what was read and prayed, with each one taking more notes on this conversation; finally, sharing this process with the spiritual advisor, from the experience and the notes taken in those fifteen days, receiving feedback and new “tasks” for the next two weeks.

First step: the grace of inner freedom

7. In a first phase, it is essential to rectify the intention. As Pope Francis has quoted from the Synod of Bishops (2015), in order to a true discernment, respecting Curch's proposal about truth and charity, the following conditions must necessarily be present: "humility, discretion and love for the Church and its teaching, in a sincere search for God's will and a desire to make a more perfect response to it... 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" (AL 300). In order to facilitate the acquisition of this straight intention and the request of grace of inner freedom through prayer, the spiritual advisor can propose some texts of the Scripture with clues for prayer and reflection in person and in couple. This stage can be extended for a month (obviously, this is only a very broad reference, it may be of more time if it is convenient), with a daily prayer done personally on the theme and then shared as a couple. We propose biweekly meetings are proposed with the

spiritual counselor so that the couples can expose their personal prayers and what they have been sharing between them. This way they become aware of the course taken and thus reorient it by correcting the form and "theme" of prayer. The sharing in these meetings will be about the spiritual experience of this month, highlighting the most relevant aspects: difficulties, joys, fears, obstacles, relevant differences that may have been born during the spiritual interpretation of the texts and the prayer that each one has felt. It is the counselor's duty to hear, "read" the presence of the Spirit of God in the said and the unsaid, and to adjust the situation to reality by proposing new steps.

Freedom is not simply doing what is most wanted. Freedom is, ultimately, to free myself from my selfish desires, from myself and my ego. Freedom or detachment are words that express the state of a person so attached to God that there is no reality, no matter how captivating and "holy" it is, that the person is not willing to leave if He asks. It does not mean to suppress all desire or inclination, but to have such an attachment to God, that any other attachment has to be subordinated to it, and harmonized with it (even the will to have access to the sacraments). It's not a matter of apathy at all. It is a matter of recognizing preferences

and valuing personal desires. But, having recognized my preferences, I must be able to offer them to God, abdicating them, unless – and only if – God confirms them to me.

Some texts of Scripture, for example only:

- Gen 22, 1-19 (What is my absolute? “Offer it” – even if it is not being able to take in communion)
- 1Cor 10, 23-33 (All is permitted, but not all suits me)
- Philippians 3, 7-14 (God’s plan of salvation)
- Mt 6, 25-34 (Divine providence: total trust that His will will be for my sake)
- Mk 2, 23-28 (Jesus and the Saturday)
- Mk 2, 27 (Jesus as a model of integrated freedom facing the primacy of Love. Saturday was done for man, not the man for Saturday)
- Lk 19, 1-10 (Like Zacchaeus, from what do I have to free myself so that, in fact, is God’s will the center of my life?)

As I see it, I try to understand where I put my absolutes and where I have my heart. I want to “put my desires ahead of the common good of the Church,” (AL 300), or am I free to accept the will of God, whatever it may be?

Lord God, teach me where and how to seek You, where and how to find You... You are my God, You are

my Lord, and I never saw You. You molded me and you are molding me. You have given me all the good things that I have, and yet I do not know You... Teach me how to seek You... because I do not know how to seek You if You do not teach me, nor I can find You if You do not even introduce Yourself to me. May I seek You in my desire, may I desire You in my search. That I seek Thee loving Thee and that I love Thee when I find Thee.

(Saint Anselm of Canterbury)

Step two: make memory and conscience exam of Sacramental Marriage

8. It is not about being a masochist and live again the things that went wrong. On the contrary, the purpose is precisely the internal (and external, if possible) reconciliation with everything one has been through, with everyone involved and with situations that may have been badly resolved. It’s wishing for the good of the other spouse, wishing for the peace of Christ to accompany him. And, yes, to acknowledge the share of guilt in the process that led to the bankruptcy of marriage, taking responsibility and even deciding new acts of generosity in the present towards children

or people who may have suffered from the breakup of marriage in the past. Although it has become an “irreparably destroyed marriage” (*Familiaris Consortio*, 84), there is also a recognition, far beyond guilt, that there existed a dream that was very beautiful at the beginning, ended up not being fulfilled, but gave positive results: children (if any), living moments, generosity, kindness and joy. And become aware of what you have learnt from this relationship.

To frame this examination of conscience, which AL itself offers, some texts are proposed as a possibility of prayer.

Texts: [Is 43, 1-7](#); [Lk 10, 25-37](#)

Ask for the Grace to open myself to the mercy of God. The Grace of feeling the need of this mercy and feeling / knowing myself free and grateful for the privilege of forgiveness.

[Is 43, 1-7](#)

- “Fear nothing, for I have redeemed Thee, and called Thee by thy name; you are mine. (...) Since you are precious in my eyes, and I love and cherish you, I give kingdoms in your place, and nations instead of you. Do not be afraid, for I am with you”. The certainty that God loves me and only wants my good will make me open into His

mercy. To trust fully in His Love for me/us in order to not leave anything without praying, visiting or reconciling because He is with us.

- “If you must cross the waters, I will be with you, and the rivers will not overwhelm you. If you walk through the fire, you will not burn yourself, and the flames will not consume you. For I, the Lord, am your God; I, the Holy One of Israel, am your savior”. The waters and the fire that life has given me do not block the presence of God, even though sometimes His presence is imperceptible. I relish His presence in my life, even in the difficult times I and my marriage have spent.

[Lk 10, 25-37](#)

- Normally, we are used to read this text in a moralistic tone. The Good Samaritan has done this way, so go and do the same just like him. But there is another interpretation, much older, which comes already from the Fathers of the Church. The Good Samaritan is Jesus. It’s He who heals my wounds. Olive oil and wine symbolize the sacraments, the guest house is the Church... More than being called to do in others, I am called to let Jesus do it in me.
- Bring to memory the times I have already felt the mercy of God in my life. Savor. To thank.

- Put me (to myself, to the other spouse and to the marriage) in the skin of the man who was assaulted. What really stalked me / us? What has hurted me / us? What has put me / us down? There may be several things, but surely my / our sin is among the most disfiguring. The robbers of my / our life (and our marriage), who steal from us our dignity and who leave me / us on the edge of life's road. Look at them in the eyes. Imagine the "robbers" and give them names.
- The wounds this situation has left. To have humility to show them to the Good Samaritan, since only He can heal me. With great transparency and total confidence, surrender to the mercy of God, letting Jesus heal me, even if it burns. To welcome mercy.

With this framework of God's word, we now propose the more concrete examination of conscience presented by Pope Francis in the Exhortation:

"Useful in this process is an examination of conscience through moments of reflection and repentance. The divorced and remarried should ask themselves:

- how did they act towards their children when the conjugal union entered into crisis;

- whether or not they made attempts at reconciliation;
- what has become of the abandoned party;
- what consequences the new relationship has on the rest of the family and the community of the faithful;
- what example is being set for young people who are currently in preparation for marriage.

«A sincere reflection can strengthen trust in God's mercy, which is not denied anyone».³

We are speaking of a process of accompaniment and discernment which «guides the faithful to an awareness of their situation before God. Conversation with the priest, in the internal forum, contributes to the formation of a correct judgment on what hinders the possibility of a fuller participation in the life of Church and on what steps can foster it and make it grow» (AL 300).

Third stage: "evaluation" of the current relationship

9. When we talk about "evaluation", it is not intended a merely quantitative or qualitative calculation on

³ *Relatio finalis* 2015, 85.

family life. This is a process of spiritual discernment. Hence the instruments are not the statistics or the numbers, nor only the interpretation of sociological phenomena lived in the family. The “evaluation” is spiritual, that is, by the inner motions, to realize where God reveals Himself and reveals His will to us. The instruments are God’s word, the documents of the Church, the personal prayer, the sharing between the couple and the sharing with the spiritual counselor. What we want to “evaluate” is essentially the stability of the couple and the family, the education of the children, the religious practice, the spiritual life and the mission of the family.

For this stage of the process, it is proposed a guided and accompanied reading, with time and calmness, of chapters 3, 4, 5 and 9 of the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. This document includes several references to God’s word and to Church documents that are also important to read, as they are quoted or referenced by Pope Francis. This may be a longer stage in time that, in fact, seeks to spiritually assess the quality of family life. But it goes much further. It also wants to arise feelings of gratitude for the way in which God, although this is not the ideal situation (which would be the sacramental marriage), has been present and has accompanied

family life. With the reading of the mentioned chapters of the AL and with prayer made from that reading, it’s also important to understand where one can grow more as a family and in the relationship with God. And, as in all families, this one will also need reconciliation, to ask for forgiveness and to forgive. It may be a time to make simple purposes for the future, to question whether and how one can integrate himself more into the Church’s life, etc.. This stage (the whole process, by the way) can actually be a phase of reinvestment in the relationship and family life, whatever the outcome of discernment.

Step Four: The process of decision-making by God’s will

10. Having followed the first three steps, collected all data, having become more aware of the presence of God, having spiritually digested as individuals, as a couple and as Church, the various stages of life and the various “inner movements”, the decision-making phase arrives. Here again, it is not too much to insist on the need for inner freedom. It is not about doing my will, but the will of God. We can always deceive ourselves, but we have an obligation to do our utmost to reduce the margin of error. The steps of this phase may be (always in prayer):

- Review the notes taken over this time and summarize the process, noting and emphasizing the most relevant and meaningful.
- Become aware of the consolations and desolations that have been experienced or remembered.
- Read and meditate on chapter 8 of the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*.
- Pray [Lk 12, 33-34](#). Where is my treasure?
- Pray [Mt 19, 1-9](#) e [Mt 12, 1-8](#). What do I feel when I pray these texts?
- Now, ask myself and ask God what should I do about the access to the sacraments. What do I feel, honestly and freely, to be God's will for me?
- What causes me consolation / desolation in all this?

Arriving here, two final steps are proposed:

10.1. It is important to make a discernment conclusion exercise, as it follows: for a week, pray and live as if the decision was not to access the sacraments. To become aware of what one is feeling, of spiritual motions, of peace or restlessness... The next week, do the opposite: pray and live as if the decision was to have access to the sacraments. And, as in the previous week, take note of the spiritual motions. This way, one notices where God

calls, what gives himself more peace, what draws closer to himself, Life and others.

10.2. In order to confirm – or in a situation where there are no obvious consolation and desolation –, through a rational process, and from all that has been read, prayed, shared and listened to, make a list in two columns of pros and cons of accessing the sacraments. Compare. It doesn't matter the amount of factors that are in each column, but the "weight" of each. A pro can equal many cons or vice versa. At another time, do the same process with the possibility of not accessing the sacraments. It is very important not to mix the two possibilities. This is what often confuses and makes discernment a maze. Jumping from one possibility to another will prevent you from advancing. Only in the end, after "selecting" the pros and cons of one and the other possibility, you may be able to see what is most evident.

After these steps, with honesty before God and with all freedom, based on what has been lived in the whole process, a decision that seems to be more in conformity with the will of God is taken. As stated at the beginning, it may be 1) access to the sacraments; 2) not to accept the sacraments; 3) not yet, there are still steps to take in our lives, the discernment must continue.

Confirmation of the decision taken

11. The discernment process ends with the confirmation of the decision made. A strong time of prayer (a retreat is proposed) before the Risen Lord, offering Him the decision. Allow yourself to touch His presence and ask Him to confirm the decision. Again, freedom, consolation and desolation take an essential place here. If the process has been well lived, and if the Lord hasn't shown signs on the contrary to the decision taken, then, with freedom, assume it.

It is not a responsibility of the spiritual counselor to make the decision but, through accompaniment, to ensure that the whole process was spent as it should be, while recognizing the role of people's conscience, since "we are called to form consciences, not to replace them" (AL 37). If that is so, he must also confirm the decision as a Church's representant. And, in this way, finishing the process of accompaniment, discernment and integration.

Final note

12. This path was designed to be followed over the course of a few months, for example, to start at the beginning of the pastoral year (October-November)

and to end at Easter (Holy Thursday could be a suitable day for those whose discernment said they were able to receive Eucharistic communion). But, of course, this would have to be adapted to each situation. More than true discernment, this time can certainly emerge as a possibility to form and invest in one's personal and family spiritual life.

From Braga, Solemnity of Saint Gerard, bishop of Braga and major patron of the city, 5 December 2017.

† D. Jorge Ortiga, Primate Archbishop

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