

Questions & Answers

The following questions and answers may help to focus on some important points of *Amoris Laetitia*, “The Joy of Love: On Love in the Family”, the Exhortation written by Pope Francis after the two Synods of Bishops on that topic in October 2014 and October 2015. Included are questions that might well be asked by journalists.

1. What’s new in this exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*?

AL draws on a long history of Church teaching, and a very intense Synod experience. It draws on both new and old. What’s new above all is an attitude of accompaniment. Pope Francis, like his predecessors, recognizes the complexity of modern family life. But he puts an added emphasis on the need for the Church and her ministers to be close to people no matter what their situation might be or how far from the Church they might feel: to understand, to accompany, to integrate, and to have their arms open especially for anyone who is hurting. (AL 311) AL is not simply a theoretical text with no connection to people’s real problems.

The very title suggests the positive thrust of the document. It continually offers concrete reminders of the beauty of family life, despite all the challenges this vocation can entail. Pope Francis writes eloquently about how forming a family means being part of God’s dream, joining him in building a world “where no one will feel alone.” (AL 320)

2. Why is this such a long document? Can most Catholics read it and benefit from it? Or is it for experts only?

Pope Francis notes in the introduction that nobody should rush through AL, and people should pay attention to what applies most to their specific needs.

While AL is essential reading for bishops, priests, and anyone involved with the family apostolate, it is important that all Catholics see the effort the Church is making to be close to them. For example, married couples will be especially interested in Chapter Four on “Love in Marriage,” Ch Five, on “Love Made Fruitful” and Ch Seven, on the “Education of Children.”

Pope Francis wants to help Christian couples persevere with fidelity and patience, and encourages everyone to be a sign of mercy wherever family life lacks peace and joy. (AL 5)

Readers may be pleasantly surprised by how concrete AL is. Pope Francis, with a pastor’s heart, simply yet deeply enters into the everyday realities of family life.

3. Much of the controversy around the Synod was about Catholics who are divorced and remarried civilly receiving Holy Communion. But AL does not pronounce definitively on the issue. Why not?

The Synod discovered that arguments with winners and losers were not productive. What was productive was a deep, respectful and compassionate examination of family life, marriage, and the People of God as they strive to live out their vocation in troubled and complex times.

Chapter Eight, “Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating Weakness,” offers a very profound look at how general rules do not apply straightforwardly to every particular situation. And so there is need to take the complexity of each situation into account.

The Pope acknowledges that everyone should feel challenged by Chapter Eight. It certainly calls pastors and those working in family apostolates to listen sensitively to anyone who feels wounded, and to help them experience God’s unconditional love.

4. An important word in this document is “discernment.” What does discernment mean for Pope Francis? Does it mean someone can simply look for a compassionate priest to tell him or her that everything is ok?

Discernment is a constant effort to be open to the Word of God to illuminate the concrete reality of everyday life. Discernment leads us to be docile to the Spirit; it encourages each of us to act with all possible love in concrete situations.

Pope Francis asks pastors and faithful to discern each concrete situation carefully. Any priest or pastoral worker who is actively involved in helping people grow spiritually knows that there are no easy recipes, no “one-size-fits-all”, no quick and easy exceptions.

At the same time, discernment can never be separated from the Gospel demands of truth and charity and from the teaching and tradition of the Church. It requires humility and a sincere search for God’s will.

5. There are many Catholics who are divorced and civilly remarried, struggling to try to do things right and bring up their children in the Church. What does AL offer them?

AL offers them the guarantee that the Church and her ministers care about them and their concrete situation. AL wants them to feel and to know that they are part of the Church. They are not excommunicated. (AL 243) Even if they cannot yet fully participate in the Church’s sacramental life, they are encouraged to take active part in the life of the community.

A key concept of AL is *integration*. Pastors need to do everything possible to help people in these situations to be *included* in the life of the community.

Anyone in a so-called “irregular” situation should get special attention. “Helping heal the wounds of parents and supporting them spiritually is also beneficial for children, who need the familiar face of the Church to see them through this traumatic experience.” (AL 246)

6. For a Synod that at one moment seemed to offer broad new acceptance for gays in the Church, AL seems to present precious little. What happened?

Church teaching remains clear: marriage is between a man and a woman, and homosexual unions cannot be placed on the same level as Christian marriage. (AL 250)

That said, it is important that we all learn to imitate God's unconditional love, for everyone. "The Church makes her own the attitude of the Lord Jesus, who offers his boundless love to each person without exception." (AL 250)

While its focus is on marriage and family, AL also speaks to countless people who aren't married. These include single parents, widows and widowers, celibate men and women – all of whom have family links. Everyone is a son or daughter; everyone has a family history; everyone has bonds of love with family members; and everyone has friends in difficult and painful situations.

7. AL is critical in talking about past practices (nn 36, 37, 38) including an emphasis on doctrinal and moral issues, and denouncing a decadent world without offering much that is positive. Is that a criticism of past papacies?

A quick look at the footnotes shows how extensively John Paul II is quoted in AL, especially *Familiaris Consortio*. Pope Francis also makes use of *Deus Caritas Est* from Pope Benedict.

AL offers hope, and hope in abundance. It is not a list of rules or of condemnations but a call for acceptance and of accompaniment, involvement and integration. Even when people -- for so many different reasons -- have not been able to live up to the ideals of Christ's teaching, the Church and her ministers want to be at their side to help them on their journey.

"The way of the Church is not to condemn anyone for ever; it is to pour out the balm of God's mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart." (AL 295)

8. One of the biggest concerns of many couples is spacing births, yet it's not a major subject in AL. Why not?

AL actually deals with this subject in several different sections, including nn. 42, 68, 82 and 222. While noting that greater emphasis has to be given to the fact that children are a gift from God and a joy for parents, it also cites *Humanae Vitae*, stressing that spouses be aware of their obligations concerning responsible parenthood. (AL 68)

Moreover, a decision about the spacing of births "takes place as the result of a consensual dialogue between the spouses." (AL 222)

AL cites the Second Vatican Council in this regard, emphasizing the importance of the formation of conscience, where each person is alone with God.

The exhortation also encourages natural methods of regulating births, since they respect the bodies and indeed the "whole person" of the spouses.

9. What's the greatest challenge of *Amoris Laetitia*?

The biggest challenge is for everyone to read it without rushing and put it into practice. AL lays out proposals for the Church and her pastors to **change its focus** regarding the family: to accompany, to integrate, to remain close to anyone who has suffered the effects of wounded love.

Above all, AL challenges us to be understanding in the face of complex and painful situations. Pope Francis would have us approach the weak with compassion, and not judgement, to “enter into the reality of other people’s lives and to know the power of tenderness.” (AL 308)

+ + +