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ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC PRIESTS

Summary of Pope Francis' "The Joy of Love" (Amoris Laetitia):

Apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis, on Married Life Today

Summary of the document's 325 paragraphs (9 chapters), intending to provide the main thrust, and some of the key phrases, of this most encouraging papal teaching on family life today. I feel that this inspirational text has not yet been widely publicised or read here in Ireland. The *emphases* in this summary are by the redactor (Pat Rogers), and are not in the document itself. The full text of the papal *exhortation* can be found [here in PDF format](#), also on the [Irish Bishops' website](#) and also on [the Vatican website](#).

Introduction (par. 1-7)

Pope Francis first sets out the *complexity of a topic in urgent need of thorough study*. The interventions of the Synod Fathers were a "multifaceted gem" a precious polyhedron to be preserved. But he cautions that "*not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium*." For many questions, "each country or region ... can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs. For ... *every general principle ... needs to be inculturated*, if it is to be respected and applied." This principle applies also to how problems are formulated and, apart from dogmatic issues already defined by the Church's *magisterium*, solutions cannot be "globalised." In his address at the end of the 2015 Synod, Francis said that "What seems normal on one continent, is considered strange and almost scandalous – almost! – on another; what is considered a violation of a right in one society is an evident, inviolable rule in another; *what for some is freedom of conscience is for others simply confusion*."

To avoid complete *impasse*, he says we need to *avoid a sterile juxtaposition of demands for change and the general application of abstract norms*. He writes about two extremes: "The debates carried on in the media... and even among the Church's ministers, range from an immoderate desire for total change without sufficient reflection or grounding, to an attitude that would solve everything by applying general rules or deriving undue conclusions from particular theological considerations."

Chapter 1: "In the light of the Word" (par. 8-30)

Following his introduction, Francis offers a *meditation on Psalm 128* (which features in the Jewish wedding liturgy as well as in Christian marriages). He notes that the Bible "is full of families, births, love stories and family crises." These stories invite us to meditate on how the *family is not an abstract ideal* but rather like a practical skill, to be practiced with tenderness, but one that has also from the beginning been confronted with sin, when the relationship of love turned into domination. The Word of God, he says, "is not a series of abstract ideas but a source of comfort and companionship for every family that experiences difficulties or suffering. For it shows them the *goal of their journey....*"

Chapter 2: "The experiences and challenges of families" (par. 31-57)

Pope Francis then considers the current situation of families. Intending to remain firmly grounded in the reality of experience, he draws on the Reports of the two Synods, mentioning many hot topics that impact on family life, such as migration; the denial of differences between the sexes ("*ideology of gender*"); the *culture of the provisional*; the effect of an anti-birth mentality and the impact of biotechnology on procreation; the lack of housing and work; pornography and abuse of minors; inattention to persons with disabilities and lack of respect for the elderly; the legal dismantling of the family, and violence against women. For him, it is *concreteness, realism and daily life* that make the substantial difference between acceptable "*theories*" to explain reality and arbitrary "*ideologies*" that distort it.

Citing *Familiaris Consortio* (John Paul II), he states that "through the call and the demands of the Spirit... the *Church can be guided to a more profound understanding* of the mystery of marriage and the family." Conversely, if we fail to listen to reality, we cannot understand the movements of the Spirit. He notes how *rampant individualism makes it difficult today for a person to give oneself generously* to another. Here is an interesting, realistic insight about how people can be fearful of commitment: "*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*."

A genuine realism will avoid presenting an "artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families." The idealist approach does not allow marriage to be understood for what it is, as a "dynamic path to personal development and fulfilment." It is unrealistic to think that families can sustain themselves simply by stressing doctrinal and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace. Gently chiding those who do not attend to the lived experience of

marriage and family, Francis calls us to make room for the conscience of the faithful: “We have been called to *form consciences, not to replace them.*” Jesus proposed a demanding ideal but “never failed to show compassion and closeness to the frailty of individuals like the Samaritan woman or the woman caught in adultery.”

Chapter 3: “Look to Jesus: The vocation of the family” (par. 58-88)

This chapter treats of the Church’s ideals for marriage and the family. Its 30 paragraphs concisely depict the vocation of the family according to the Gospel and as affirmed by the Church over time. It speaks of indissolubility, the sacramental nature of marriage, the transmission of life and the education of children. The *Gaudium et Spes* document of Vatican Council II is quoted, along with Paul VI’s *Humanae Vitae*, and John Paul II’s *Familiaris Consortio*.

Alongside this, Pope Francis suggests that “*imperfect situations*” should be sympathetically evaluated and says that we can learn some marriage values from other cultural traditions. “Discerning the presence of ‘seeds of the Word’ in other cultures can also apply to the reality of marriage and the family. In addition to true natural marriage, positive elements exist in *the forms of marriage found in other religious traditions.*” He speaks about “wounded families” about whom – quoting the Final Report of the 2015 Synod – Francis recalls this general principle: ‘*Pastors .. are obliged to exercise careful discernment of situations.*’ The degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases and factors may exist which limit the ability to make a decision. While clearly stating the Church’s teaching, pastors should avoid judgements that do not take into account the complexity of various situations, and be keenly “*attentive to how people experience and endure distress, because of their condition.*”

Chapter four: “Love in marriage” (par. 89-164)

This chapter reflects on love in marriage, illuminated by St. Paul’s Hymn to Charity in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. Its opening section is a richly poetic exegesis of the Pauline text, linking brief passages which describe human love in absolutely concrete terms. A quality of psychological insight marks this poetic exegesis, seeking to enter into the emotional world of the spouses and including the erotic dimension of their love. This valuable, realistic reflection on Christian married life is unprecedented in previous papal documents.

The Pope is against judging the day-to-day *experience of married love* against *ideal standards*: We must not lay upon two limited persons the tremendous burden of having to reproduce perfectly, at each moment, the union between Christ and his Church, since “marriage as a sign entails “a *dynamic process...*, one which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God.” On the other hand, Pope Francis holds that conjugal love by its very nature defines the *partners in a richly encompassing and lasting union*, precisely within that “mixture of enjoyment and struggles, tensions and repose, pain and relief, satisfactions and longings, annoyances and pleasures” which make up a marriage in reality.

He adds a reflection on the need for a “*transformation of love*” because “*Longer lifespans now mean that close and exclusive relationships must last for four, five or even six decades; consequently, the initial decision has to be frequently renewed.*” As people age, the loving attraction changes as *sexual desire can be transformed over time into the desire for togetherness and mutuality*: “There is no guarantee that we will feel the same way all through life. Yet if a couple can come up with a shared and lasting life project, they can love one another and live as one until death do them part, enjoying an enriching intimacy.”

There is an earthy realism in the sentence (par. 157) that “the ideal of marriage cannot be seen purely as generous donation and self-sacrifice, where each spouse renounces all personal needs and seeks only the other’s good without concern for personal satisfaction. We need to remember that authentic love also needs to be *able to receive the other, to accept one’s own vulnerability and needs, and to welcome with sincere and joyful gratitude the physical expressions of love found in a caress, an embrace, a kiss and sexual union.*”

Chapter 5: “Love made fruitful” (par. 165-198)

Here the Pope speaks in both a spiritual and psychological tone about welcoming new life, about the waiting, expectant time of pregnancy, about the love of a mother and a father. He also speaks of the expanded fruitfulness of adoption, inviting families to promote a “*culture of encounter,*” and of family life in a broad sense which includes aunts and uncles, cousins, relatives of relatives, friends. Beyond the so-called “*nuclear*” family, Francis sees the family as a *network of many relationships*. For him, the spirituality of marriage has a deeply *social character*. And within this social dimension he emphasises the specific relationship between youth and the elderly, as well as the relationship between siblings as a training ground for relating with others.

Chapter 6: “Some pastoral perspectives” (par. 199-258)

Pope Francis proposes some approaches aimed at forming solid and fruitful families according to God’s plan, using the Reports of the two Synods and the teachings of Pope John Paul II as well as his own. Families, he says, should not only be evangelised, they should also evangelise. He regrets that ordained ministers “often lack the training needed to deal with the complex problems currently facing families.” The psycho-affective formation of seminarians needs to be improved, and families need to be more

involved in formation for ministry. Significantly too, “the experience of the oriental tradition of a married clergy could also be drawn upon.”

He then deals with *the preparation of the engaged for marriage*; and the need to accompany couples in the first years of married life; also with complex situations and crises, knowing that “each crisis has a lesson to teach us; we need to *learn how to listen for it with the ear of the heart*.” Some causes of marriage problems are listed, among them a delay in maturing affectively.

He urges the pastoral accompanying of abandoned, separated or divorced persons and stresses the recent reform of the procedures for marriage annulment. Very aware of the suffering of children in situations of conflict, the Pope notes how troubling is the increasing number of divorces. “Hence, our most important pastoral task with regard to families is to strengthen their love, helping to heal wounds and working to prevent the spread of this drama of our times”. He comments on mixed marriage (between a Catholic and a Christian of another denomination), and on disparity of cult (between a Catholic and one of another religion). About persons with homosexual tendencies, he affirms the need to respect them and refrain from unjust discrimination and every form of aggression or violence. Then comes a poignant reflection on the theme of the loss of dear ones and of widowhood.

Chapter 7: “Towards a better education of children” (par. 259-290)

He turns now to the education of children: their ethical formation, the learning of discipline and patience, sex education, passing on the faith and more generally, that family life should be an *educational context*. Practicality shines through each paragraph, as he advises *gradual, small steps* “that can be understood, accepted and appreciated.”

Francis offers the pedagogical insight that *obsession is not education*. “We cannot control every situation that a child may experience... If parents are obsessed with always knowing where their children are and controlling all their movements, they will seek only to dominate space. But this is no way to educate, strengthen and prepare their children to face challenges. What is most important is the ability lovingly to help them grow in freedom, maturity, overall discipline and real autonomy.”

His section on education in sexuality is entitled: “*Yes to sex education*.” The need is there, and we must ask our schools “to take up this challenge ... in an age when sexuality tends to be trivialized and impoverished.” Sound education needs to be offered “within the broader framework of an education for love, for mutual self-giving.” He warns that the expression ‘safe sex’ conveys “a negative attitude towards the natural procreative finality of sexuality, as if an eventual child were an enemy to be protected against. This way of thinking promotes narcissism and aggressiveness in place of acceptance.”

Chapter 8: “Guiding, discerning and integrating weakness” (par. 291-312)

Here, the Pope invites all to mercy and pastoral discernment in situations that do not fully match what the Lord proposes. Francis uses three verbs: *guiding, discerning and integrating*, which are fundamental in addressing fragile or irregular situations. He states the need for *gradualness* in pastoral care; the importance of discernment; norms and mitigating circumstances; and finally what he calls the “logic of pastoral mercy.”

He urges us to remember that “***the Church’s task is often like that of a field hospital***.” Here he grapples with the clash of opinions on controversial issues. He reaffirms the ideal of Christian marriage and admits that “some forms of union radically contradict this ideal, while others realise it in at least a partial and analogous way.” The Church must see the positive elements even in those situations which do not yet correspond to her teaching on marriage.

Pope Francis wishes pastors to “*avoid judgements which do not take into account the complexity of various situations*” and to “be attentive to how people experience distress because of their condition.” Our task is to reach out to everyone, “needing to help each person find his or her proper way of participating in the ecclesial community, and thus experience being touched by unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous mercy.” Along these lines he says further: “The divorced who have entered a new union can find themselves in a variety of situations, which should not be pigeonholed or fit into overly rigid classifications leaving no room for a suitable personal and pastoral discernment.”

In line with the views expressed by many of the bishops at the Synod, Francis states that “*the baptised who are divorced and civilly remarried need to be more fully integrated into Christian communities* in the variety of ways possible, while avoiding any occasion of scandal.” “Their participation can be expressed in different ecclesial services... Such persons need to feel not as excommunicated members of the Church, but instead as living members, able to live and grow in the Church... This integration is also needed in the care and Christian upbringing of their children.”

He quite frankly admits that in light of the variety of concrete situations, “neither the Synod nor this Exhortation could be expected to provide a new set of general rules, canonical in nature and applicable to all cases.” What he urges on us all is a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases, recognizing that, since the degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases, the consequences of a rule need not necessarily always be the same. He speaks of *the journey of accompaniment and discernment* necessary for profound dialogue between the faithful and their pastors.

To help in discernment, Francis recalls Church teaching on “mitigating factors and situations” regarding accountability for actions; and following St. Thomas Aquinas, notes the relationship between rules and pastoral discernment. “It is true that general rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded or neglected, but in their formulation they cannot provide absolutely for all particular situations. But precisely for that reason, what is part of a practical discernment in particular circumstances cannot be elevated to the level of a rule.”

He writes about “the *logic of pastoral mercy*.” To avoid any radical relativism, Pope Francis reiterates that: “To show understanding in the face of exceptional situations never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing less than what Jesus offers to the human being. Today, more important than the pastoral care of failures is the pastoral effort to strengthen marriages and thus to prevent their breakdown.”

On a practical note, he says: “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. They may not always encounter in them a confirmation of their own ideas or desires, but they will surely receive some light to help them better understand their situation and discover a path to personal growth.” He also urges the Church’s pastors to listen “with sensitivity and serenity, with a sincere desire to understand their plight and their point of view, in order to help them live better lives and to recognize their proper place in the Church.”

Chapter 9: “Spirituality of marriage and the family” (par. 313-325)

For Pope Francis, marital and family spirituality, “is made up of thousands of small but real gestures.” People “should not feel that the family detracts from their growth in the life of the Spirit, but rather see it as a path which the Lord is using to lead them to the heights of mystical union.” Everything, “moments of joy, relaxation, celebration, and even sexuality can be experienced as a sharing in the full life of the resurrection.” He speaks of prayer in the light of Easter, of the spirituality of exclusive and free love in the challenge and the yearning to grow old together, reflecting God’s fidelity. And on the spirituality of care, consolation and incentive, he teaches that “all family life is a ‘shepherding’ in mercy. Each of us, by our love and care, leaves a mark on the life of others.” It is a profound “spiritual experience to contemplate our loved ones with the eyes of God and to see Christ in them.”

He ends with the concepts of growth and of journey: “No family drops down from heaven perfectly formed; families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love ... All of us are called to keep striving towards something greater than ourselves and our families, and every family must feel this constant impulse. Let us make this journey as families, let us keep walking together. May we never lose heart because of our limitations, or ever stop seeking that fullness of love and communion which God holds out before us.” The exhortation concludes with a prayer to the Holy Family of Nazareth.

In summary, then, *Amoris Laetitia* emphatically affirms the very rich and complex reality of family life, in a kindly, open-hearted way, profoundly positive, nourished by pastoral attention to reality.