

*AMORIS LAETITIA*: A GUIDE FOR CATECHISTS AND  
CATECHETICAL LEADERS ON THE APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION  
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## INTRODUCTION

In the first paragraph of *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis affirms the positive message of the family, stating, “the Christian proclamation on the family is good news indeed.”

Pope Francis immediately puts to rest sensationalist rumors about what will be contained in the document, stating, “The debates carried on in the media, in certain publications 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” (2). He goes on to effectively state that what he will write will not absolutely settle the argument with general rules, because “each country or region... can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to local traditions and local needs.”

Following that caveat about what he will not do, Pope Francis spells out what he will do in the apostolic exhortation and why:

He feels the Synods raised “many legitimate concerns and honest questions,” and wishes “to gather the contributions” of the Synods and add “other considerations as an aid to reflection, dialogue and pastoral practice, as a help and encouragement to families in their daily commitments and challenges” (4).

Pope Francis states that this Exhortation is fitting for the year of mercy, “because it represents an invitation to Christian families to value the gifts of marriage and the family, and to persevere in a love strengthened by the virtues of generosity, commitment, fidelity and patience” and “because it seeks to encourage everyone to be a sign of mercy and closeness wherever family life remains imperfect or lacks peace and joy” (5).

He lays out his outline in paragraph 6:

I will begin with an opening chapter inspired by the Scriptures, to set a proper tone. I will then examine the actual situation of families, in order to keep firmly grounded in reality. I will go on to recall some essential aspects of the Church’s teaching on marriage and the family, thus paving the way for two central chapters dedicated to love. I will then highlight some pastoral approaches that can guide us in building sound and fruitful homes in accordance with God’s plan, with a full chapter devoted to the raising of children. Finally, I will offer an invitation to mercy and the pastoral discernment of those situations that fall short of what the Lord demands of us, and conclude with a brief discussion of family spirituality.

He closes the introduction with a salient and hopeful quote from his address last year at the Meeting of Families in Santiago de Cuba: **“families are not a problem; they are**

**first and foremost an opportunity” (7).**

## **CHAPTER ONE – IN THE LIGHT OF THE WORD**

In Chapter One, Pope Francis recounts the family in salvation history, noting that the family is present from the first page, in the story of Creation, to the last, in the marriage feast between the Bride and the Lamb. He points out that Genesis presents the human couple in its deepest reality – God has created man and woman in his image, and they, as a couple, reflect his image in that the fruitfulness of the human couple images the Creator (10). Pope Francis elaborates on this in paragraph 11, in which he points out that the family is a “living reflection” of the triune God, who is a “communion of love.” He quotes Pope John Paul II in describing the Trinity as “a family, for he has within himself fatherhood, sonship, and the essence of the family, which is love. That love, in the divine family, is the Holy Spirit”

In paragraphs 12 and 13, Pope Francis discusses marriage as an encounter between man and woman, and **a relationship of “voluntary self-giving love” (13).**

Pope Francis then speaks of children and the family as “domestic church” and “the place where children are brought up in the faith. He discusses the biblical instruction for children to honor their parents, and states that the Gospel reminds us “children are not the property of the family, but have their own lives to lead” (18).

Pope Francis asserts that the ideal of the family presented in Scripture is “a source of comfort and companionship for every family,” because “it shows them the goal of their journey” (22).

### Work

Pope Francis points out that Scripture presents work as ‘an essential part of human dignity’ (23) and says that labor “also makes possible the development of society and provides for the sustenance, stability and fruitfulness of one’s family” (24). For this reason, he cites unemployment as a threat to family life (25). He also

### Tenderness of an Embrace

Pope Francis points out that Jesus proposes his Law of Love as the “distinctive sign of his disciples.” He adds, “love also bears fruit in mercy and forgiveness” (27).

**Here, Pope Francis points to a virtue he states is “overlooked in our world of frenetic and superficial relationships” – tenderness.** Pope Francis cites God’s own presentation of his relationship with us as one of parental love

In the last paragraph of Chapter 1, Pope Francis points to the Holy Family of Nazareth as an example for today, as this family “had its share of burdens and even nightmares.” He

directs us to look especially to Mary, whose heart “contains the experiences of every family” (30).

### **Reflection Questions for Catechists/Catechetical Leaders:**

1. In what ways can I more effectively communicate Catholic teaching on marriage and family, especially as it relates to the communion of the Holy Trinity and the self-giving love of Jesus and the Church?
2. How might I make the Holy Family more prominent in my own work as a catechist, with special attention to the way they endured struggles and challenges with grace and love?

## **CHAPTER TWO – THE EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES OF FAMILIES**

**This chapter opens with a key quote: “The welfare of the family is decisive for the future of the world and that of the Church” (31).**

Here, Pope Francis quotes the synod in saying that the “tensions created by an overly individualistic culture, caught up with possessions and pleasures, leads to intolerance and hostility in families” (33). Here is another key quote:

**“Freedom of choice makes it possible to plan our lives and to make the most of ourselves. Yet if this freedom lacks noble goals or personal discipline, it degenerates into an inability to give oneself generously to others” (33).**

Here is another related statement in the next paragraph:

**Ultimately, it is easy nowadays to confuse genuine freedom with the idea that each individual can act arbitrarily, as if there were no truths, values and principles to provide guidance, and everything were possible and permissible (34).**

Regarding the Christian advocacy of marriage in the larger society, Pope Francis says this:

**“As Christians, we can hardly stop advocating marriage simply to avoid countering contemporary sensibilities, or out of a desire to be fashionable or a sense of helplessness in the face of human and moral failings. We would be depriving the world of values that we can and must offer. It is true that there is no sense in simply decrying present-day evils, as if this could change things. Nor it is helpful to try to impose rules by sheer authority. What we need is a more responsible and generous effort to present the reasons and motivations for choosing marriage and the family, and in this way to help men and women better to respond to the grace that God offers them (35).”**

He adds that we must be humble and realistic as we do this, and have a “healthy dose of self-criticism” (36).

Hinting at what is to come in his discussion of “irregular marriages,” Pope Francis says this:

**“We have long thought that simply by stressing doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace, we were providing sufficient support to families, strengthening the marriage bond and giving meaning to marital life. We find it difficult to present marriage more as a dynamic path to personal development and fulfillment than as a lifelong burden. We also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them” (37).**

Pope Francis goes on to discuss some of the threats to marriage and family in society today, including the “throwaway culture,” the discouragement of young people to marry, and a contraceptive mentality (39-42). He mentions the failures of social and political systems to uphold the family, and cites especially lack of affordable housing and problems with access to education (43-44). He also discusses children born out of wedlock, the exploitation of children and forced migration as serious threats to family (45-46). He discusses the need to support families of persons with special needs and families caring for elderly members (47-48).

In paragraphs 50 and 51, Pope Francis discusses the challenges of parent-child communication, family stress, substance abuse and domestic violence.

In paragraph 52, Pope Francis reaffirms the nuclear family as the basis for the future of society. In paragraph 53, Pope Francis addresses the growing number of alternatives to marriage being proposed, and again cautions against a disparagement of traditional marriage.

Pope Francis decries the unequal treatment of women that continues in many places around the world. He states:

There are those who believe that many of today’s problems have arisen because of feminine emancipation. This argument, however, is not valid, “it is false, untrue, a form of male chauvinism”. The equal dignity of men and women makes us rejoice to see old forms of discrimination disappear, and within families there is a growing reciprocity. If certain forms of feminism have arisen which we must consider inadequate, we must nonetheless see in the women’s movement the working of the Spirit for a clearer recognition of the dignity and rights of women (54).

Pope Francis also discusses the critical role men play in the family (55).

In paragraph 56, Pope Francis addresses current trends towards a fluid definition of gender and gender identity. Quoting the Synod, he states, “It needs to be emphasized that “biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated” (56). He adds, “Let us not fall into the sin of trying to replace the Creator. We are creatures, and not omnipotent. Creation is prior to us and must be received as a gift. At the same time, we are called to protect our humanity, and this means, in the first place, accepting it and respecting it as it was created (56).

Here is another key quote, from paragraph 57:

**“There is no stereotype of the ideal family, but rather a challenging mosaic made up of many different realities, with all their joys, hopes and problems.”**

### **Reflection Questions for Catechists/Catechetical Leaders:**

1. What challenges do families face in our parish and community? How can we better support families in these circumstances?
2. How do I provide for learners with special needs in the catechetical setting? How might I support and encourage families of individuals with special needs?

## **CHAPTER THREE – LOOKING TO JESUS: THE VOCATION OF THE FAMILY**

In Chapter 3, Francis points to the Kerygma as the center of all teaching on the family, as it is the center of all evangelizing activity. He states:

**The mystery of the family can be fully understood only in the light of the Father’s infinite love revealed in Christ, who gave himself up for our sake and who continues to dwell in our midst (59).**

Here Francis discusses the New Testament’s presentation of marriage as a gift, and Jesus’ own teaching on the indissolubility of marriage, which Francis asserts should also be seen as gift (62).

Francis affirms prior teaching on love, marriage, and the family, including the teaching found in *Lumen Gentium*, *Humanae Vitae*, *Familiaris Consortio*, and *Deus Caritas Est*.

In summarizing the theology of the Sacrament of Matrimony, Francis states, “The family is the image of God, who is a communion of persons” (71) and “The sacrament is a gift given for the sanctification and salvation of the spouses, since ‘their mutual belonging is a real representation, through the sacramental sign, of the same relationship between Christ and the Church’” (72).

Pope Francis discusses marriage as a vocation, saying that the decision to marry and to have a family “ought to be the fruit of a process of vocational discernment.” He states, “the engaged couple promise each other total self-giving, faithfulness and openness to new life” (73).

Pope Francis then turns to pastoral care for those living in what are sometimes called “irregular situations” – cohabiting couples, couples who are civilly married, or are divorced and remarried. Foreshadowing the lengthier discussion of these issues in Chapter 7, he advocates an affirmation of Church teaching with pastoral care and careful discernment of individual situations (78-79).

This is followed by a discussion of children as the fruit of conjugal love, and the responsibility of parents to provide for their children. Finally, the need for the entire Christian community to safeguard and support families is emphasized, both for the good of the family and for the good of the Church and society as a whole (87-88).

### **Reflection Questions for Catechists/Catechetical Leaders:**

1. What are we doing to support and involve the family in catechesis? How might we better evangelize families and help them evangelize one another?
2. How do we promote the view of marriage as a vocation in our work as catechists?

## **CHAPTER FOUR -- LOVE IN MARRIAGE**

This is perhaps the chapter *par excellence* of the Apostolic Exhortation. Here, Pope Francis begins by emphasizing the importance of “encouraging the growth, strengthening and deepening of conjugal and family love” (89). Using St. Paul’s discourse on love from I Corinthians 13, and drawing connotations of the original Greek, Pope Francis provides detailed commentary on each quality of love discussed in the passage, applying each quality of love in the Pauline text to the specific love of the family. What results is a beautiful treatise on the qualities of love in a marriage and family. This section would be edifying to all couples and families.

Pope Francis then turns again to the teaching that marriage is a sacramental sign of the communion of the Holy Trinity and the union of Christ and the Church, but, quoting St. John Paul II, adds that this is a dynamic process for the couple, and cautions against laying “upon two limited persons the tremendous burden of having to reproduce perfectly the union between Christ and his Church” (122).

In paragraphs 123-125, Pope Francis makes the case that a marriage relationship is, by nature, a lifelong one, and one that needs grace to sustain itself and grow in the face of today’s challenges, including the “culture of the ephemeral,” in which everything is treated as temporary and disposable (124).

Pope Francis discusses the difference between pleasure, which is fleeting, and joy, which is an “expansion of the heart” (126). He states, “Loving another person involves the joy of contemplating and appreciating their innate beauty and sacredness, which is greater than my needs” (127). He also discusses how joy can grow through pain and sorrow, as the couple can grow closer as they suffer and struggle together (130).

In the next section, Pope Francis answers those couples (especially in the youngest generation) that might shun the formal institution of marriage, saying they don't need a formal commitment or piece of paper to prove their love. He states:

“Naturally, love is much more than an outward consent or a contract, yet it is nonetheless true that choosing to give marriage a visible form in society by undertaking certain commitments shows how important it is. It manifests the seriousness of each person's identification with the other and their firm decision to leave adolescent individualism behind and to belong to one another” (131).

Francis adds that marriage, as a social institution, “protects and shapes a shared commitment to deeper growth in love and commitment to one another, for the good of society as a whole” (131).

In paragraph 133, Francis discusses three words that are necessary in families: “Please,” “Thank you,” and “Sorry,” adding “the right words, spoken at the right time, daily protect and nurture love” (133). He also discusses dialogue as essential for the growth of love in marriages and families (136), encouraging families to take quality time to be together (137) and cultivate habits of “giving real importance to the other person” (138). Francis counsels family members to “keep an open mind” in disagreements, and points out that a competitive spirit that is oriented towards winning an argument against the other is incompatible with the love to which we are called in families (140).

The next section is devoted to a discussion of passion and emotions, particularly in the way that they deepen love when they lead us to loving actions (144-146). Because God delights in our joy, *eros*, properly ordered, is embraced, not rejected by the Church, Pope Francis says (147). He goes on to discuss God's will for us to enjoy ourselves, but the necessity of integrating enjoyment with generous commitment (148). Pope Francis further elaborates on the erotic dimensions of love, saying that sexuality is a gift from God (150), but requires self-discipline and self-mastery, because it is not “a means of gratification or entertainment; it is an interpersonal language wherein the other is taken seriously, in his or her sacred and inviolable dignity” (151).

In paragraph 156, Pope Francis decries “every form of sexual submission,” and states that Ephesians 5, properly understood, is about mutual submission of the spouses to one another. Still, he says, the ideal of marriage is not simply self-sacrifice, because “authentic love also needs to be able to receive the other” (157).

What follows is a discussion of marriage and virginity, in which Pope Francis asserts that both states of life “complement one another” and neither is absolutely superior to the other (159).

In the final section of this chapter, Francis discusses the ways in which married love grows and changes over the life of a marriage, saying that with the grace of the Holy Spirit, we find the strength to “confirm, direct and transform our love in every new

situation” (164).

### **Reflection Questions for Catechists/Catechetical Leaders:**

1. How might I share Pope Francis’ teaching on love in the family from I Cor. 13?
2. How might we use Pope Francis’ words on the importance of marriage both to the couple and society in order to encourage young people to consider marriage in a society that increasingly shuns the institution of marriage?

## **CHAPTER FIVE -- LOVE MADE FRUITFUL**

Pope Francis begins this section by stating, “Love always gives life” (165). He discusses the openness to life that is characteristic of sacramental marriage and stresses the importance of caring for the children we have. Next he discusses pregnancy and discusses each child as a gift from God, for whom God has a dream (168).

In the next section, Pope Francis states that every child “has a right to receive love from a mother and a father, affirming the necessity of both parents, who “show their children the maternal and paternal face of the Lord” (172). Pope Francis goes on to discuss some unique qualities of mothers and fathers.

In paragraph 178, Pope Francis discusses the suffering of couples facing infertility, but, quoting *Gaudium et Spes*, affirms that these couples still have a whole marriage with value and indissolubility (178). Pope Francis mentions adoption and foster care as generous ways in which couples with or without their own biological children can be fruitful and generous. In paragraph 186, Pope Francis points to the Eucharist as a call to “open the doors of the family to greater fellowship with the underprivileged.”

Pope Francis discusses the importance of our larger extended families (187) and especially admonishes children not to forget their parents even though they must leave them. He goes on to remind us to value and care for the elderly. Francis also discusses the relationships between brothers and sisters and the relationship of the family to the larger community.

### **Reflection Questions for Catechists/Catechetical Leaders:**

1. What support does our community offer couples that are facing infertility? How might we better encourage and support those couples?
2. How does my ministry support and involve elderly members of our community? How might we better use their talents and build a parish that more closely resembles an “extended family”?

## **CHAPTER SIX -- SOME PASTORAL PERSPECTIVES**

Pope Francis opens Chapter Six by calling for renewed efforts in evangelization and catechesis within the family, encouraging the faithful to propose “values that are clearly



needed today” and to “denounce cultural, social, political and economic factors...that prevent authentic family life and lead to discrimination, poverty, exclusion and violence (201).

The parish is called “the family of families,” and Pope Francis states that this is where the primary contribution to the pastoral care of families is offered (202). This is followed by a discussion of the need for support of deacons and priests and the training of seminarians in dealing with the complex challenges facing families today, as well as a need for the training of “lay leaders who can assist in the pastoral care of families” (204).

The following paragraphs are devoted to the preparation of engaged couples for marriage, as well as remote preparation for marriage through the family. Here there is emphasis on not merely preparing for the wedding, but for a life together. Pope Francis also highlights the importance of supporting and forming the couple in the early years of marriage, which can be especially challenging. IN paragraph 220, Pope Francis discusses various stages in the life of a marriage and also offers some guidelines for young couples on discerning responsible parenthood (222).

Paragraphs 232-238 discuss crises in marriage and the necessity for the couple to face these crises together in order to stay together and grow in love. Pope Francis also acknowledges the challenges that can be caused by past trauma or dysfunction in the family of origin of one or both spouses (239-240).

Paragraphs 241-246 discuss the pastoral care of separated and divorced persons. Regarding those who have divorced and remarried, Pope Francis states, “It is important that the divorced that have entered a new union should be made to feel part of the Church. “They are not excommunicated” and they should not be treated as such, since they remain part of the ecclesial community. These situations “require careful discernment and respectful accompaniment” (243). Special attention is also given to the effects of divorce and separation on children. Pope Francis emphasizes that “the good of the children should be the primary concern” (245).

In paragraphs 247-252, certain complex situations are discussed, including mixed marriages and disparity of cult, as well as a divorced and remarried person who is seeking baptism. Same sex attraction is also discussed in this section. Here, Pope Francis quotes the Synod Fathers, who said, “there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God’s plan for marriage and family” (251). Even so, Francis reaffirms that every person’s dignity should be respected, and recommends families of persons with same sex attraction be given “respectful pastoral guidance” (250).

In the remaining paragraphs of this chapter, Pope Francis calls for support of single parent families and families that are grieving the death of a loved one.

### **Reflection Questions for Catechists/Catechetical Leaders:**

1. How are families dealing with separation and divorce acknowledged and supported in our community? Are we flexible with children in the catechetical program who are able to attend only periodically due to joint custody or visitation arrangements? How else do we support children of divorced parents?
2. What can our parish do to better accompany couples that are struggling in their marriages, particularly young couples in their first years of marriage?

### **CHAPTER SEVEN – TOWARDS A BETTER EDUCATION OF CHILDREN**

Pope Francis begins this chapter by citing the key role of parents in the moral development of their children. He calls parents to consider what influences they want their children to be exposed to, expressing particular concern about the media habits of children (television and other electronic devices). However, he cautions against overcontrolling the environment of children, saying that, “what is most important is the ability lovingly to help them grow in freedom, maturity, overall discipline and real autonomy” (261). He encourages parents to be aware of their children’s goals, desires, and dreams.

Francis speaks about cultivating a “good habits and a natural inclination to goodness” in their children, including delay of gratification, or what Pope Francis calls “the habit of foregoing an immediate pleasure for the sake of a better and more orderly life in common” (264).

Considerable attention is given to the development of good habits and virtues, as well as a discussion of discipline and correction. Pope Francis encourages parents not to fall into extremes of either catering to all of the child’s desires or “depriving the child of an awareness of his or her dignity, personal identity and rights” (270). He advises parents to proceed slowly, taking into account the stages of the child’s development (273). Pope Francis highlights the roles of catechists and Catholic Schools in supporting the family in the task of raising their children in faith (279).

The next section of this chapter focuses on sex education, stating that it should be presented “within the broader framework of an education for love, for mutual self-giving” (280). Francis cautions attention to the development and maturity of the child, not presenting too much information too soon, and highlights the value of a sex education that fosters “a healthy sense of modesty” (282). He contrasts a Christian sex education with one that is merely focused on “safe sex,” saying, “It is always irresponsible to invite adolescents to toy with their bodies and their desires, as if they possessed the maturity, values, mutual commitment and goals proper to marriage” (283). He adds that sex education should “foster respect and appreciation for differences” and an acceptance of one’s own body (285).

In the closing paragraphs of this chapter, Pope Francis highlights the value of family catechesis and states, “It is essential that children actually see that, for their parents, prayer is something truly important” (288).

**Reflection Questions for Catechists/Catechetical Leaders:**

1. As a catechist or catechetical leader, what tools can I give parents that will assist them in forming the consciences of their children?
2. How does our parish partner with parents to help children learn about God’s plan for love and sexuality?

**CHAPTER EIGHT – ACCOMPANYING, DISCERNING AND INTEGRATING WEAKNESS**

At the beginning of this chapter, Pope Francis evokes the image of the Church as a field hospital. He points out that some forms of union faithfully reflect the union between Christ and his Church, some “radically contradict this ideal, while others realize it in at least a partial and analogous way” (292). He calls pastors to enter into “pastoral dialogue with these persons” in order to “distinguish elements in their lives that can lead to a greater openness to the Gospel of marriage in its fullness” (293).

Pope Francis discusses various reasons people might be living together without marriage, and cites the “law of gradualness” of Pope John Paul II as a pastoral response. He goes on to say, “This is not a “gradualness of law” but rather a gradualness in the prudential exercise of free acts on the part of subjects who are not in a position to understand, appreciate, or fully carry out the objective demands of the law” (295).

Pope Francis cites the mercy of God and the “logic of the Gospel” in relation to dealing with “irregular situations.” He expresses his agreement with the Synod Fathers, who concluded, ““In considering a pastoral approach towards people who have contracted a civil marriage, who are divorced and remarried, or simply living together, the Church has the responsibility of helping them understand the divine pedagogy of grace in their lives and offering them assistance so they can reach the fullness of God’s plan for them”, something which is always possible by the power of the Holy Spirit” (297). He recommends a process of accompaniment in which the pastor “guides the faithful to an awareness of their situation before God” (300), and mentions conversation with the priest in the internal forum. However, he cautions against the notion that any priest can quickly grant ‘exceptions’” (300).

Pope Francis discusses factors that may mitigate culpability, and cautions against a “black and white” view of these situations (305). However, Pope Francis again stresses the importance of proposing the ideal, saying anything less “would be a lack of fidelity to the Gospel and also of love on the part of the Church for young people themselves” (307).

**Reflection Questions for Catechists/Catechetical Leaders:**

1. How can I, as a catechist, work to form consciences for discernment of moral situations, offering my learners a path to independent decision-making rooted in principles of Catholic morality, versus simply providing rules?
2. How do we “accompany” youth and young adults who are already expressing opinions or making decisions contrary to the Christian life? How do we gently guide them to a realization of what God has called them to be?

**CHAPTER NINE – THE SPIRITUALITY OF MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY**

In the second paragraph of this chapter, Pope Francis states, “We have always spoken of how God dwells in the hearts of those living in his grace. Today we can add that the Trinity is present in the temple of marital communion” (314). He goes on to say, “The Lord’s presence dwells in real and concrete families, with all their daily troubles and struggles, joys and hopes” (315).

Pope Francis encourages families to center themselves on Christ (317), and recommends family prayer as a “special way of expressing and strengthening this paschal faith” (318). He states, “to want to form a family is to resolve to be a part of God’s dream, to choose to dream with him, to want to build with him, to join him in this saga of building a world where no one will feel alone” (321). He admonishes families not to stay closed in on themselves, but to live their faith in society: “The family lives its spirituality precisely by being at one and the same time a domestic church and a vital cell for transforming the world” (324).

**Reflection Questions for Catechists/Catechetical Leaders:**

1. How do I nurture the spiritual lives of the families I serve by providing resources for prayer and Catholic practices in the home?
2. How are families at our parish equipped to share their faith with the larger world? What strategies can we give families for living their faith in the community?

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