Amoris Laetitia

THE JOY OF LOVE

A series of reflections on themes from the Apostolic Exhortation
Joy, Love, Mercy, Realities and Discernment, Mission

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FOREWORD

✠ *DAVID J OAKLEY*

CHAIR, COMMITTEE FOR MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

Amoris Laetitia is a relatively long Apostolic Exhortation, representing the fruits of a two-year Synod process. And so, it is recommended that we receive this text with a reflective attitude of patient and careful reading (cf AL 7). During a year dedicated to reflection on Amoris Laetitia and the family, the CBCEW Department of Social Justice Committee for Marriage and Family Life has been reflecting on Amoris Laetitia in preparation for the Tenth World Meeting of Families in June, 2022. Although this will take place in Rome, we are all invited to take part within our diocesan and parish families. This will be an opportunity to strengthen the living stones of family life within our Church. The following reflections simply offer some words about five themes in Amoris Laetitia: Joy, Love, Mercy, Realities and Discernment and Mission. There are some questions at the end of each theme to encourage personal reflection within family settings or group discussion of the Exhortation. May I take this opportunity to thank the resource and policy work stream of the Committee for Marriage and Family Life, who along with myself, have kindly produced these reflections. They are Dr Keith Chappell, Fr Philip Harris, Canon Brendan Killeen and Dr Clare Watkins. When we reflect on these themes, may we echo the invocation of Our Lady, made by Pope Francis when he announced this year of Amoris Laetitia and the Family during his Angelus Message on the Feast of the Holy Family on December 27th, 2020, 'May the Virgin Mary grant that families throughout the world be increasingly fascinated by the evangelical ideal of the Holy Family, so as to become a leaven of a new humanity and of a genuine and universal solidarity.'

✠ *David J Oakley*
Chair, Committee for Marriage and Family Life

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INTRODUCTION

Amoris Laetitia – or The Joy of Love – is a document that celebrates married and family love and their central role in the life of the Church and the wider world. In seeking to engage with family life Pope Francis encourages us to be open to all the realities of this life, embracing the joys and not shying away from the difficulties faced by couples and families in the world today. The following short pamphlet highlights five themes of the document:, Joy, Love, Mercy, and Realities and Discernment, and Mission. Each of these runs like a thread through Amoris Laetitia, sometimes being discussed explicitly but always present as part of family life and loving relationships. The aim of what follows is to introduce these themes of Amoris Laetitia in an engaging and constructive way. We are not trying to offer a complete analysis of the text or a complete summary of the document and its teaching. This is, rather, an aid to reflection, discussion and prayer for individuals, couples and families, and parish-based groups. The hope is that it may also encourage readers to look at Amoris Laetitia in more detail themselves and to discover aspects that are not covered here.

The pamphlet is in five parts and each section sets out some elements of a key theme in Amoris Laetitia and links them to some questions for reflection and discussion. If you are using this by yourself you may wish to reflect quietly, perhaps write down some thoughts, and pray about the subject raised. As a couple or family you may wish to do likewise but also discuss the questions in light of your own experiences, and share something of your thoughts with others in your household. The sections of this pamphlet could also be used by small groups, perhaps especially by groups of people engaged in supporting couples and families as part of their own formation. Relationships and family life are rarely simple and can be troubled, as well as full of laughter and affection. This is acknowledged here and throughout Amoris Laetitia. Yet this family way of life is also and always a call to a love which is deeply joyful. Couples and families know this mysterious mixture well!

How you use the text and questions here is up to you but hopefully the joy of love will shine through as you reflect on God's gift of love in the family.

THE WHOLE DOCUMENT CAN BE FOUND HERE

ABBREVIATIONS

AL
Amoris Laetitia

MV
Misericordiae Vultus

CCC
Catechism of the Catholic Church

JOY

As you read and reflect on the materials you follow you may find yourself troubled by memories and feelings. Further help with family and couple relationships can be accessed through the various agencies of the Alliance of Catholic Marriage Organisations - allianceofcatholicmarriageorganisations.org.uk.

Family Life and Joy

Finding love is a joyful thing. It brings with it the knowledge of being valued by another and of valuing the one we love; it also brings the joy of sharing experiences, values, humour and of hope and building a future for your relationship. As love grows and matures it brings new joys as a family life develops, sometimes with the gift of children and the joy of parenthood. These joys bring with them demands and challenges, but with these comes the strength of facing them together and the often unexpected fruits of caring for others – from the excitement of first words, laughter at family meals, celebration of successes, through to the next generation finding their own love and joys. Parenthood can be hard work, whether together or alone, but the selfless giving involved can transform our lives as parents and children, and echo out to all who encounter it – bearing witness to Christ's presence in the world (AL 88). This happens too in our families without children where the love present looks outward with generosity and self-giving. This is what we mean by the 'domestic church', a place where mutual love, sacrifice and joy spill out to enrich the lives of others.

When does God feel most present in your family life?

Can you think of a time when the love and joy of another family has felt like a gift to you?

The growth of the joy of love in real-life situations

The discovery of loving and of being loved, just as we are, are the most profound joys of human living. These are the joys at the heart of marriage, and family relationships! This joy is often more easily felt in the early months and years of 'falling in love'; but marriages and families involve people in lifelong relationships and practices of love. So it is important for us that, "in marriage, the joy of love needs to be cultivated" (AL 126). Couples and families are called to reflect on those practices of joy and love which build up their "domestic church": these might be hospitality, sharing, expressions of affection, practical help, laughter, and shared leisure. We also know the depth of this joy, paradoxically, when we are supporting one another through life's difficulties. This joy, which comes from participating in God's love, can help us through the many challenges of life, the ups and downs we experience, inspiring us to help and care for one another. So the cultivation of love between spouses and within families is vital because it helps us to understand the dignity and value of other human beings and to bring profound joy into others' lives.
It can be hard to find joy in troubles but often, even mysteriously, we do find joy when as a couple or family we face difficulties together. Joy is, then, perhaps more than feeling happy but instead something deeper and something best shared.

What are the moments in your own household experience when facing difficulties has led to something deeper in your feelings for each other?

Longer lifespans also mean that married couples are spending more years together and, amid the various challenges that this presents, accompanying each other in love through the challenge and graces of growing older together. Gratitude for, love of and support of the elderly is important, and a source of deep joy. Pope Francis reminds us of this: "how I would like a Church which challenges the throw-away culture by the overflowing joy of a new embrace between young and old!" (AL 191).

What kind of family culture do we need to help us to experience the joy of life-long love, care and friendship? What does this say about how we use our time, our money, and material resources?

The spirituality of marriage and family life

The true expression of marital and family love opens up a place where the Lord dwells even in times of struggles and challenges (AL 246). This is a place where we are called to imitate Christ with openness and tenderness towards others, both our family members and those to whom we open our homes in hospitality, inspiring joy in their lives for knowing they are loved. This, of course, may be hard to believe when we are in the middle of an argument or worrying about how to pay a bill; but we can always help each other to see God in our family lives.

Can you recall a moment when another family member has helped you see God at work in your life?

One of the joys of family life is that the "spiritual moments" are often the very practical ones as we serve each other, support each other or laugh with each other. Daily prayer in families and the regular sharing in the Eucharist at Mass are also important ways in which faith is strengthened and, with the maturing of love, space is made that enables all to grow in their faith and trust in God. This is the practical spirituality of family life. All families are called to grow and mature in their love: this is very much a journey through the whole of life, a journey spurred on by the joy of love that leads to the "fullness of love and communion which God holds out before us" (AL 325).

Looking back, where do you see change and growth in your family life?

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LOVE

Love Reveals God to Us, and Us to Ourselves

Pope Francis explores the nature of love in marriage and families through the reading of 1 Cor 13:4-7 – 'Love is patient, love is kind…'- perhaps the most popular of wedding readings. This is a powerful reference for couples preparing for marriage and helps to reinvigorate the passage for those who are more familiar with it. It is worth taking time to read the passage from 1 Corinthians, set out in full in paragraph 90 of Amoris Laetitia, and to reflect on our own experiences of hearing it before and the memories, and feelings, it brings back – these may be positive or negative depending on the associations you have.

If you know the passage from 1 Corinthians, what memories did it bring back? What struck you in the reading, especially if it was your first time?

This section of Amoris Laetitia is titled "Our Daily Love", and it alludes to the fundamentally sustaining nature of love in everyday living. The reality is that our experience of real love in family life is a sharing in the eternal love that is God. It may be that our experiences in family life do not always feel like this; but whenever we encounter genuine love then it makes God present to us. What genuine love looks like is something Pope Francis is keen to draw out in Amoris Laetitia.

What does 'real love' look like in your experience?

Each part of St Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians, illuminates for us a characteristic of the nature of God. Thus: Love is Patient (AL91) exhorts each person not to act on impulse and to avoid angry responses, in direct imitation of God's patience shown in His mercy towards sinners. Love, allows us to recognise God in the world, in others and, indeed, in ourselves (AL 114) and gives us a perspective on events and the behaviour of others that is charitable (AL 113). This perspective goes beyond empathy and even compassion, lifting the person to share in a supernatural perspective of hope for the other and the self (AL 117). Marriage and family love, with its focus on the other and the life of mutual love, brings the lover and the beloved to encounter the love of God and receive the many graces that emanate from it.

How have you experienced someone's hope for you?

When have your loving hopes for someone else raised you above your concerns for yourself?

‘LOVE IS PATIENT, LOVE IS KIND’
1 COR 13:4-7

Love is Generous

"Love is not jealous or boastful" (1 Cor 13: 4) leads us to reflect on the generosity inherent in love. Love allows us, indeed compels us, to take joy in the successes of others and especially in those of the ones we love (AL 95- 96]. Perhaps some of the greatest joys we experience are sharing in the joys of those we love.

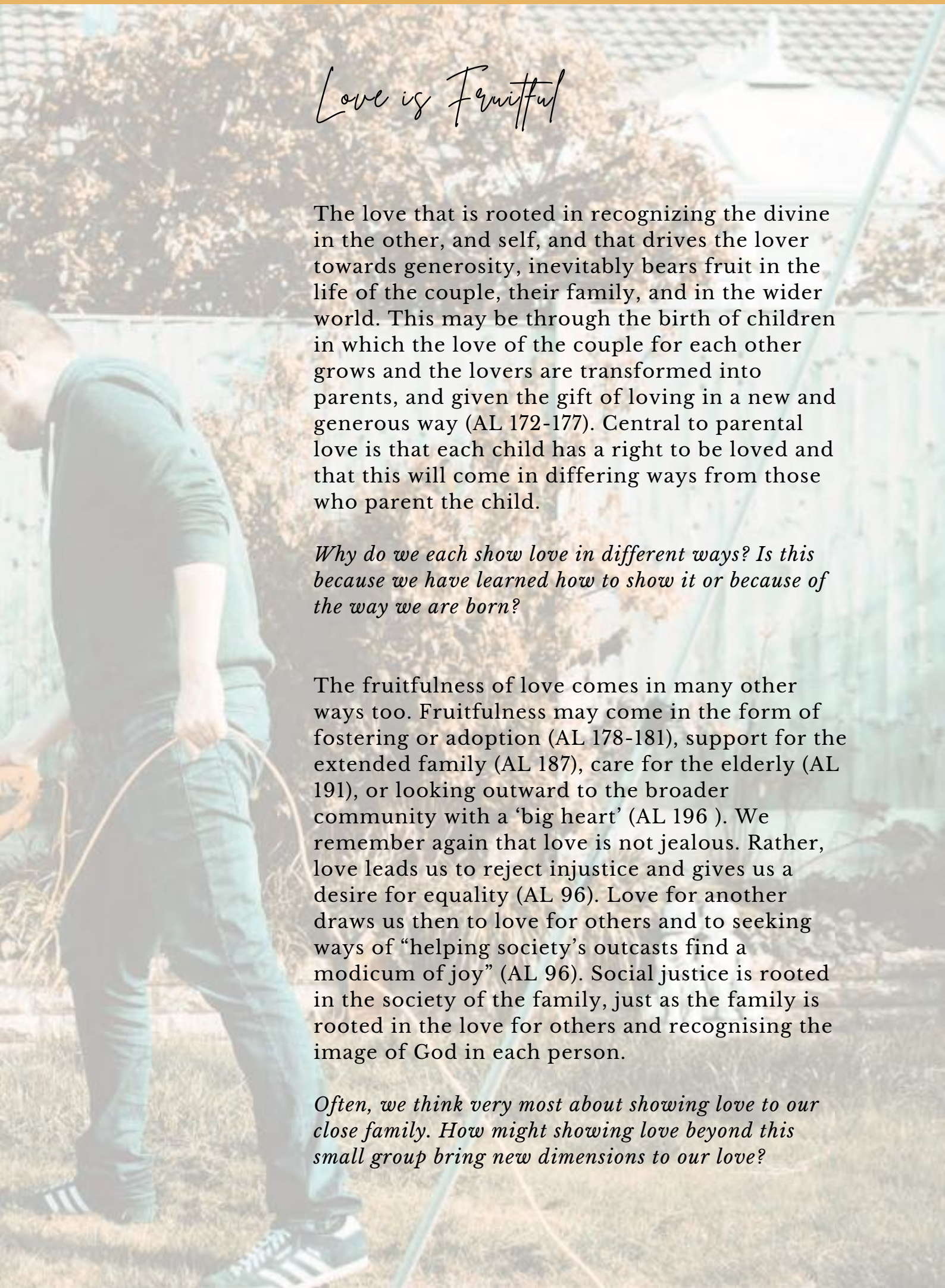
When have been the greatest moments of joy in life for you?

This delight in the happiness of others frees us from envy and lifts us to naturally embrace the commandment against coveting the possessions or loved ones of others (Ex 20:17). Love does not seek to possess the other but to seek their flourishing. There is no place for control or coercion in a loving relationship as this seeks to limit the other person and reduce them to a possession (AL 153-157).

Sometimes it can be scary to give freedom to someone you love. Why is that?

Perhaps the ultimate sign of the generosity of love is seen in the sacrament of marriage in which we "surrender our future entirely to the one we love" (AL 124). In this surrender each is lifted up through grace to achieve more than they could individually and enabled to endure hardships in a way beyond their individual capacity. Love lifts us beyond individualism to share in the joys and sorrows of others and to allow others to share in ours. We need, too, to be realistic about love in marriage: it comes with its own sorrows, challenges, and frustrations (AL 126). The mutual generosity of this love, however, and the friendship that binds the couple, allow joy to be experienced. Indeed, at times those joys won through mutual effort can be the greatest of all (AL 130). A generous love also lasts through changes, whether that is aging, illness, financial difficulties or any number of challenges faced through married life. A generous love can transform and embrace those we love in new ways: "love rejoices every step and in every new stage" (AL 163-164).

Can you think of times when you have experienced how love changes when faced with different stages of life, crises, or other changes?



Love is Fruitful

The love that is rooted in recognizing the divine in the other, and self, and that drives the lover towards generosity, inevitably bears fruit in the life of the couple, their family, and in the wider world. This may be through the birth of children in which the love of the couple for each other grows and the lovers are transformed into parents, and given the gift of loving in a new and generous way (AL 172-177). Central to parental love is that each child has a right to be loved and that this will come in differing ways from those who parent the child.

Why do we each show love in different ways? Is this because we have learned how to show it or because of the way we are born?

The fruitfulness of love comes in many other ways too. Fruitfulness may come in the form of fostering or adoption (AL 178-181), support for the extended family (AL 187), care for the elderly (AL 191), or looking outward to the broader community with a 'big heart' (AL 196). We remember again that love is not jealous. Rather, love leads us to reject injustice and gives us a desire for equality (AL 96). Love for another draws us then to love for others and to seeking ways of "helping society's outcasts find a modicum of joy" (AL 96). Social justice is rooted in the society of the family, just as the family is rooted in the love for others and recognising the image of God in each person.

Often, we think very most about showing love to our close family. How might showing love beyond this small group bring new dimensions to our love?

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MERCY

The Mystery of God's Mercy, the gaze of love

Amoris Laetitia was issued during the Jubilee Year of Mercy (AL 5), a year when we were all invited "constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy" (MV2). The mercy speaks of the great and unstoppable love God has for all people, a love we are called to participate in and share with others:"'at times we are called to gaze even more attentively on mercy so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father's action in our lives" (MV3). Such loving mercy is part of God's great power, the mark of his omnipotence. There is no weakness in such mercy (MV6; AL 91).

Both the text which introduced the Jubilee Year of Mercy and *Amoris Laetitia* consistently use the word 'gaze'. We are called to "*gaze* even more attentively on mercy so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father's action in our lives." (MV3); and the Synod Fathers reflecting on marriage and family began with the *gaze* of Jesus, remembering how he "looked upon the women and men whom he met with love and tenderness, accompanying their steps in truth, patience and mercy as he proclaimed the demands of the Kingdom of God" (AL 60)." This gaze of love from the Trinity to all women and men is echoed in the gaze of romantic love between spouses, and the loving gaze of parents towards their children.

Think about when you really gazed at your spouse, your children, a beloved family member? What do you see? How do you see?

This gaze of love is directed in a particular fashion when we remember that the Lord looks upon his people with the love which is mercy. We are invited to echo this same gaze of merciful love within the family (AL 60). And this mercy, Pope Francis tells us, is directly related to the restoration of the covenant – God's faithful, loving relationship with His People. Reflecting on the Gospel we can see more of this true meaning of mercy, which restores relationship and loving commitment: the moments where Jesus shares in the suffering of others and brings new life; the miracle of Cana; friendship with the family in Bethany, and the family of Peter; sympathy with grieving parents.

When have you experienced a love that heals relationships in your family?

How might this help us understand God's merciful love more deeply?

Marriage and Redeeming Love

The mystery of mercy then, nestles within the divine covenant made between the Lord and his people – a covenant of steadfast love and enduring promise. Such promise and faithfulness have always been difficult for human beings – but Jesus reconciles us to the fullness of a covenant relationship with the Trinity. In Jesus' life, death and resurrection the Father pledges and makes possible the sharing of all people in the divine love and life of the Trinity. This is the heart of God's mercy.

Jesus' ministry of redemption includes the experience of marriage and the family. His work during his life on earth involved families, couples, and relationships. There is also a biblical tradition which links the spousal covenant to the relationship between Christ and his Church; just as the husband and wife are bound in love and material living, so too are Christ and his 'bride' the Church (AL 63). This new covenant of Christ and his Bride draws us into the things of heaven, where this nuptial relationship is fulfilled as the culmination of history: "The Gospel of the family spans the history of the world, from the creation of man and woman in the image and likeness of God, to the fulfilment of the mystery of the covenant in Christ at the end of time with the marriage of the Lamb." (AL 63) What characterises this covenant relationship between Jesus and the Church is the love which is forged within the laying down of life for others (AL 27) - a self-giving love which husbands, wives and parents will recognise as the pattern of their daily living.

What might it mean to understand our 'ordinary' daily family love as a participation in the love and life of the Trinity, a sharing in the things of heaven?

God – Father Son and Spirit – is continuously seeking people out, so that we may all share the divine life of love and joy. God's love for us is such that he gives himself so that we can be with him, whether we are 'worthy' or not. Mercy is just this self-giving and unquestioning love; it is this that is the basis of deep and enduring relationship.

When have you needed to be compassionate, forgiving, self-giving in your family relationships? When have you needed this form others? What does this teach us about God's loving mercy?

“ [WE] MUST BE PARTICULARLY CONCERNED TO OFFER UNDERSTANDING, COMFORT AND ACCEPTANCE”
(AL 49)

The Call to Pastoral Welcome

Another fundamental understanding of mercy in Amoris Laetitia is found in the theme of welcome – and welcome not only of our friends and those deemed socially acceptable, but of all. Jesus expresses forgiveness towards those who have failed to live the commandments, welcoming them into community and family in a new way. And because God is welcoming of those who have not fully lived the covenant, we are called to share in this expansive pastoral welcome of others (see AL 27). Again, we are here reminded of the way in which God shows his omnipotent power in the exercise of mercy – a power of love which breaks down barriers of exclusion and prejudice.

What are the ways in which our families can offer wide and generous hospitality, which breaks down the barriers of our society?

This focus on mercy is also an invitation to consider the places where we have not fully responded to what is asked of us by the Lord. The family today faces many challenges. Some of these are spiritual, including our struggle to live our faith with complete integrity, and many are material and practical. Questions of fair wages, housing and healthcare (AL44) are practical matters of mercy and love for our world, upon which the health and joy of marriage and family depends. What should be the ecclesial and personal responses to those who experience such material and spiritual poverty? “In such difficult situations of need”, following Jesus’ embodying of the Father’s merciful love, we “must be particularly concerned to offer understanding, comfort and acceptance, rather than imposing straightaway a set of rules that only lead people to feel judged and abandoned by the very Mother called to show them God’s mercy.” (AL 49) This is what mercy looks like.

What are the ways in which family households can practice an inclusive and generous hospitality, which embodies God’s merciful love? Where have you seen this – in your own family and in others?

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REALITIES AND DISCERNMENT

"Realities are more important than ideas."

(POPE FRANCIS, EVANGELIUM GAUDIUM 231)

Amoris Laetitia insists on the practical realities of marriage and family. This is clear right from the start, when Pope Francis asked that, as part of the process for the synods on marriage and family life, the stories, experiences and practical wisdom of lay people who live marriage and family should be gathered and listened to by the Bishops. When Pope Francis writes in the document about marriage and family in scripture (AL 8-30) he doesn't offer abstract 'biblical teaching'. Rather he reminds us of the many real-life stories of men and women and their households, so that "…we can see that the word of God is not a series of abstract ideas but rather a source of comfort and companionship for every family that experiences difficulties or suffering." (AL 22). The reflections on the beautiful Corinthian passage about love (AL 89-164) is full of practical images of how families embody God's love in their daily lives. Marriage and family are places of real people - with all their struggles and humour and happiness. Christian families seek to follow Jesus, who is God made man, with a family and friends, and human experiences like our own. Christian households and couples 'incarnate' – make flesh and blood –the realities of God's love for the world.

For this reason when Pope Francis speaks about marriage and family he is not so much concerned with the ideals with which we are familiar in 'church teaching'; indeed it is the case that "at times the way we present our Christian beliefs and treat other people has helped contribute to today's problematic situation", proposing "a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families." (AL 36) We are called to be concerned with the realities of this family way of life in its social contexts: the need for affordable housing, just working hours and conditions, support for the care of the ill, the very young, the elderly and the disabled (AL 44-48). Marriage and family as a way of holiness, is a way of grace and real-life loving where it is the practical, the 'real', that matters. "The Lord's presence dwells in real and concrete families, with all their daily troubles and struggles, joys and hopes." (AL 316)

Where can the particular realities of family living be more clearly proclaimed, celebrated and understood?

Can you identify places where are the 'ideals' in our communities have become the enemy of 'the real'?

Reality, muddles and the Holy Spirit

Because Amoris Laetitia recognises the practical realities of marriage and family as the real stuff of this way of Christian life and love, it also has to speak about the 'messiness' of these realities. As soon as we move from ideals and aspirational visions to the concreteness of 'ordinary' lives, we all know that the home, the couple's relationship, and kinship of all kinds is never without struggles, imperfections, and even significant hurt and suffering. Part of the charism of Christian family life is a practical spirituality of 'making-do' and being 'good-enough', as we learn slowly to love with all our own faults, and the imperfect natures of those we are called to love in this place. This is why simply 'measuring' a person's, couple's, or family's life against a "general law or rule" is "reductive", failing to take account of the concrete complexities of lives of love and faith that call for careful discernment. (AL 304) Such is the nature of practical, real-life commitment to love!

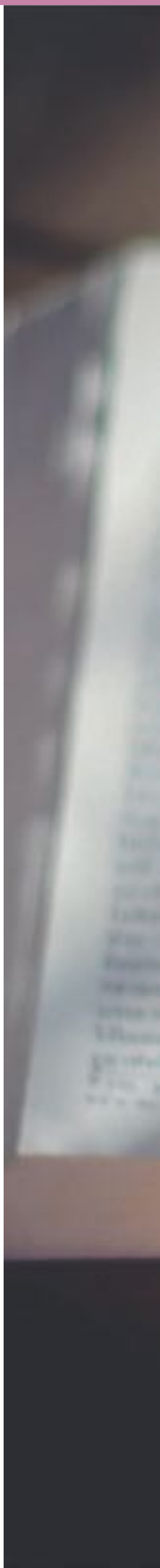
How can we reflect on the realities of the holiness of marriage and family in ways true to the mess and muddle?

What Pope Francis teaches in this document is that – far from being alarmed by, or even despairing because of such struggles and apparent imperfections – these are the very deeply human places in which we encounter God's great love. It is in the nooks and crannies of domestic living and loving that the Holy Spirit meets us with God's own perfect love, mercy, consolation, and joy. Here is the truest encounter with our Lord, rather than our vain striving for perfection, or our pretence that all is well all the time. Indeed, we are encouraged to reflect on the ways in which God can work in the lives of those many people whose family lives don't seem to 'measure up' to the Church's teaching: "conscious of the frailty of many of her children" the Church "turns with love to those who participate in her life in an incomplete manner, recognizing that the grace of God works also in their lives by giving them the courage to do good, to care for one another in love and to be of service to the community in which they live and work". (AL 311)

Where do I see the Holy Spirit's work of love, reconciliation, justice, and care in the variety of households?

But this is hard. For this reality of grace-in-ordinary we all need, as a whole Church, to be able to be honest and open to the concrete truth about how people struggle to live domestic life and love – even when it looks odd, strange, or even repellent to us. This is, Pope Francis makes clear, especially important for pastors, and all who care for married and family lives. There is a call here to come close to the honest, muddled realities of life so as to encounter more truthfully what God is doing in the lives of people. The call is to help people "understand the divine pedagogy of grace in their lives" (AL 295).

What kind of community do we need to be to help us recognise God's grace in the 'broken', and muddled places of marriages and families?



Called to be a discerning church

If God meets us with love and grace in the invariably broken daily realities of our lives, and imperfect practising of love, then we must be called to look at these same muddled, messy realities in a new way. Pope Francis calls the whole church to attend to this human 'messiness' as a place where we can come to know the Holy Spirit and work in the 'ordinariness' of marriages and families. To attend to these realities in this way is to practise discernment. This discernment can be seen as the key to Amoris Laetitia: the word itself – discernment – occurs 32 time in Amoris Laetitia, and is given an especially important place in the difficult eighth chapter, where the church laws around marriage and family are reflected on (Chapter 8, Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating Weakness). Discernment calls us beyond a fixed adherence to 'black and white' rules in all circumstances, as it is through such a position that "we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God." (AL 305) Rather, the Church is like a Mother who "attentive to the goodness which the Holy Spirit sows in the midst of human weakness…"always does what good she can, even if in the process her shoes get soiled by the mud of the street"." (AL 308)

How do we learn this gift of discernment as a Church community together?

To discern is an essential and key part of lay Christian living – especially in our own diverse, and often secularised contexts. Living out the radical call to love-in-practice in concrete socio-economic circumstances, and with our own weaknesses, wounds, and tendency to sin, requires that we learn a practical wisdom. This wisdom knows, above all, how to go on loving 'when things go wrong' – because this is what God does in the messiness of human lives. Discernment is not just about making up our own minds. Rather it is about a prayerful seeking after the next step into which God's Spirit is calling us. In this we have guides, which help us with navigating the realities which are – importantly - the starting and ending of our discernment. Scripture, the teaching and traditions of the Church, 'natural law' (AL 305) and conscience (AL 303), are called together in the practices of discernment, in prayer and in loving attentiveness to particular contexts and persons. Learning the practices of discernment is an increasingly urgent call to Christians, and especially to lay people who live their vocations in the practical complexities of the world. And, as Pope Francis points out to his fellow bishops and clergy, "We have been called to form consciences, not replace them!" (AL 37)

How can the 'ordinary discernments' of family life – how we find ways forward with each other when things 'go wrong' - teach the wider Church about this gift?

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MISSION

Mission within the family

The greatest mission of two people in a loving relationship is to help 'fashion' or shape each other to better reflect what they are called to be in God, just as God, out of love, fashioned Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:7). This life-long loving of one's spouse for who they are, not what we want them to be, is a particular kind of mission which requires "the patience of a craftsman, a patience which comes from God" (AL 221).

What examples can you think of where spouses help to shape each other in a positive way?

This mission extends through a whole life, so that, as a couple age, we are to love each other for who we are most deeply, and not just for what we look like. We are called to see each other with the eyes of love, inspired by God's love, so that true affection does not diminish. Through prayer to the Holy Spirit we have a mission to find new forms of expressing our love and to seek new ways to grow in strength together (AL 164). At the marriage feast in Cana the best wine came later (John 2:1-11).

How do married couples express their love through life so that it is strengthened, enabling each to respond to God's call?

Parents also have an important mission to their children, as they are uniquely placed to evangelize their own family. The task of handing on the faith to children makes the whole family grow in its mission to evangelize. This naturally leads to the spread of the faith to all around them - including those outside their family (AL 289). Indeed, evangelisation is a call for every generation in a family, as members witness, discuss and learn together the ways of love and faith. In practice, this is made difficult, as Pope Francis recognises, by current lifestyles and work “where many people keep up a frenetic pace just to survive” (AL 287). However, despite these difficulties, it is within the home that we appreciate our faith and learn to pray and serve others. This spiritual journey begins with baptism, and is nurtured through symbols, actions, stories, and shared history. Of course, we all know that “adolescents usually have issues with authority and rules”; Pope Francis suggests that it is best to encourage them to reflect on their own experiences of faith and to share with them testimonies which by their beauty attract them (AL 287). Amoris Laetitia speaks of the power of family prayer and acts of devotion which “can be more powerful for evangelization than any catechism class or sermon” (AL 288).

As we are called to contemplate the complexities of our modern world one question in particular might be helpful to reflect upon: How do children help evangelize their own parents?

Families' mission in the Church and the world

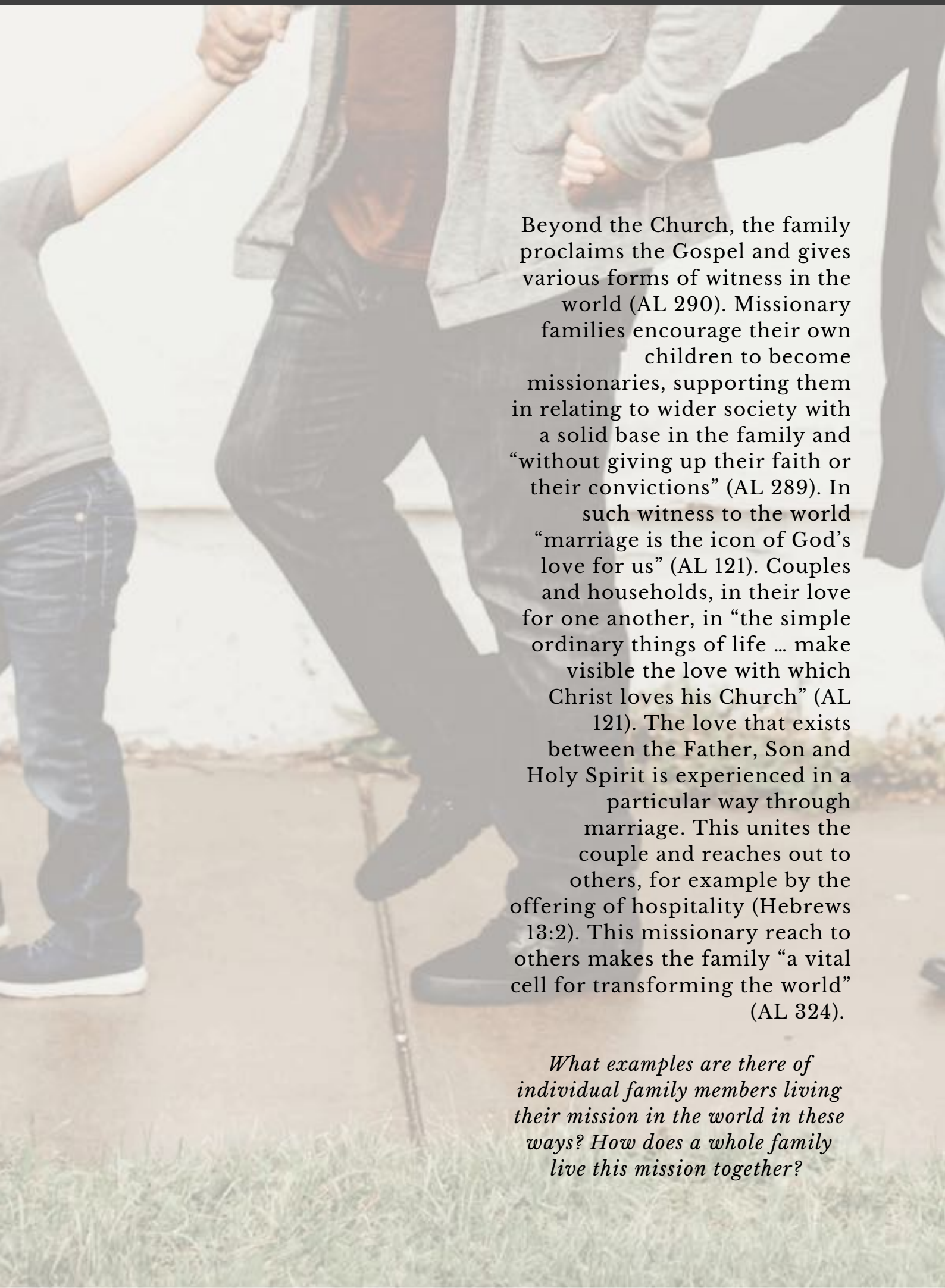
Amoris Laetitia uses the term "missionary families".

In what ways might a family see itself as missionary?

Families have a mission both within the Church and within the world. Within the Church community they provide essential help to others - for example, by assisting with marriage preparation (AL 208), and the informal support of friendship between couples, parents and young people. Parents also have their own educational mission which builds up the Church (AL 85). "Without mothers, not only would there be no faithful, but the faith itself would lose a good part of its simple and profound warmth" (AL 174). By reaching out and looking after their children parents "are the strongest antidote to the spread of self-centred individualism" (AL 174). This educational role goes beyond the parent-child relationship. For example, the witness of parents can encourage those in the celibate state to be more open and generous so that they avoid "a comfortable single life" (AL 162). Indeed, Christ stated a principle that parents embody: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13 quoted in AL 27).

How might we make this great witness to love in the family be more clearly seen in our communities?

What is the particular mission for those spouses who are either without children or unable to have children?



Beyond the Church, the family proclaims the Gospel and gives various forms of witness in the world (AL 290). Missionary families encourage their own children to become missionaries, supporting them in relating to wider society with a solid base in the family and "without giving up their faith or their convictions" (AL 289). In such witness to the world "marriage is the icon of God's love for us" (AL 121). Couples and households, in their love for one another, in "the simple ordinary things of life … make visible the love with which Christ loves his Church" (AL 121). The love that exists between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is experienced in a particular way through marriage. This unites the couple and reaches out to others, for example by the offering of hospitality (Hebrews 13:2). This missionary reach to others makes the family "a vital cell for transforming the world" (AL 324).

What examples are there of individual family members living their mission in the world in these ways? How does a whole family live this mission together?

The Church's mission to families

Families are essential to the mission of the Church; the parable of the sower is a reminder that families help sow the seed (Matthew 13:13-9; see AL 200). Church communities and organisations are, therefore, given the important mission of nurturing marriage and family relations (AL 44). Amoris Laetitia lists many challenges to family life such as the lack of affordable housing, economic hardship, long hours of work, crime, religious persecution, and drugs; the Church must reach out to every family to help it discover the best way to overcome any such difficulties. This requires evangelization and catechesis within the family (AL 200), but we need also to remember that the parish - a "family of families" (AL 202) - is the main source of pastoral care for families. The task is such that it calls for everybody in the Church to participate in the care of families and household relationships. There must be missionary conversion of everyone in the Church so that pastoral care for families is not just theoretical but is practical by addressing the real problems families face (AL 201). In this respect, pastoral care for families has to be missionary - going out to where they are (AL 230).

What sort of difficulties and challenges can families near us face? In each case, how can we reach out to them to give practical support?

In this support we should remember that we can no longer "be like a factory, churning out courses that for the most part are poorly attended" (AL 230). Rather we are called to seek "new forms of missionary creativity" (AL 57), to support and nurture loving relationships in families in all of the many circumstances they find themselves. Throughout Amoris Laetitia is the call to pray to the Holy Spirit for new energy in serving both God and neighbour.

In which ways does modern society challenge family life? What are the new ways in which we can assist families?

CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

OF ENGLAND AND WALES

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