
Top Ten Takeaways from “Amoris Laetitia”

by

James Martin, S.J.

Pope Francis’s groundbreaking new document “Amoris Laetitia” (“*The Joy of Love*”) asks the church to meet people where they are, to consider the complexities of people’s lives and to respect people’s consciences when it comes to moral decisions. The apostolic exhortation is mainly a document that reflects on family life and encourages families. But it is also the pope’s reminder that the church should avoid simply judging people and imposing rules on them without considering their struggles.

Using insights from the Synod of Bishops on the Family and from bishops’ conferences from around the world, Pope Francis affirms church teaching on family life and marriage, but strongly emphasizes the role of personal conscience and pastoral discernment. He urges the church to appreciate the context of people’s lives when helping them make good decisions. The goal is to help families—in fact, everyone—experience God’s love and know that they are welcome members of the church. All this may require what the pope calls “new pastoral methods” (199).

Here are ten things to know about the pope’s groundbreaking new document.

The church needs to understand families and individuals in all their complexity.

The church needs to meet people where they are. So pastors are to “avoid judgements which do not take into account the complexity of various situations” (296). People should not be “pigeonholed or fit into overly rigid classifications leaving no room for personal and pastoral discernment” (298). In other words, one size does not fit all. People are encouraged to live by the Gospel, but should also be welcomed into a church that appreciates their particular struggles and treats them with mercy. “Thinking that everything is black and white” is to be avoided (305). And the church cannot apply moral laws as if they were “stones to throw at people’s lives”

(305). Overall, he calls for an approach of understanding, compassion and accompaniment.

The role of conscience is paramount in moral decision making.

“Individual conscience needs to be better incorporated into the church’s practice in certain situations which do not objectively embody our understanding of marriage” (303). That is, the traditional belief that individual conscience is the final arbiter of the moral life has been forgotten here. The church has been “called to form consciences, not to replace them” (37). Yes, it is true, the Pope says, that a conscience needs to be formed by church teaching. But conscience does more than to judge what does or does not agree with church teaching. Conscience can also recognize with “a certain moral security” what God is asking (303). Pastors, therefore, need to help people not simply follow rules, but to practice “discernment,” a word that implies prayerful decision making (304).

Divorced and remarried Catholics need to be more fully integrated into the church.

How? By looking at the specifics of their situation, by remembering “mitigating factors,” by counseling them in the “internal forum,” (that is, in private conversations between the priest and person or couple), and by respecting that the final decision about the degree of participation in the church is left to a person’s conscience (305, 300). (The reception of Communion is not spelled out here, but that is a traditional aspect of “participation” in church life.) Divorced and remarried couples should be made to feel part of the church. “They are not excommunicated and should not be treated as such, since they remain part” of the church (243).

All members of the family need to be encouraged to live good Christian lives.

Much of “Amoris Laetitia” consists of reflections on the Gospels and church teaching on love, the

family and children. But it also includes a great deal of practical advice from the pope, sometimes gleaned from exhortations and homilies regarding the family. Pope Francis reminds married couples that a good marriage is a “dynamic process” and that each side has to put up with imperfections. “Love does not have to be perfect for us to value it” (122, 113). The pope, speaking as a pastor, encourages not only married couples, but also engaged couples, expectant mothers, adoptive parents, widows, as well as aunts, uncles and grandparents. He is especially attentive that no one feels unimportant or excluded from God’s love.

We should no longer talk about people “living in sin.”

In a sentence that reflects a new approach, the pope says clearly, “It can no longer simply be said that all those living in any ‘irregular situation’ are living in a state of mortal sin” (301). Other people in “irregular situations,” or non-traditional families, like single mothers, need to be offered “understanding, comfort and acceptance” (49). When it comes to these people, indeed everyone, the church need to stop applying moral laws, as if they were, in the pope’s vivid phrase, “stones to throw at a person’s life” (305).

What might work in one place may not work in another.

The pope is not only speaking in terms of individuals, but geographically as well. “Each country or region...can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs” (3). What makes sense pastorally in one country may even seem out of place in another. For this reason and others, as the pope says at the beginning of the document that for this reason, not every question can be settled by the *magisterium*, that is, the church’s teaching office (3).

Traditional teachings on marriage are affirmed, but the church should not burden people with unrealistic expectations.

Marriage is between one man and one woman and is indissoluble; and same-sex marriage is not

considered marriage. The church continues to hold out an invitation to healthy marriages. At the same time, the church has often foisted upon people an “artificial theological ideal of marriage” removed from people’s everyday lives (36). At times these ideals have been a “tremendous burden” (122). To that end, seminarians and priests need to be better trained to understand the complexities of people’s married lives. “Ordained ministers often lack the training needed to deal with the complex problems currently facing families” (202).

Children must be educated in sex and sexuality.

In a culture that often commodifies and cheapens sexual expression, children need to understand sex within the “broader framework of an education for love and mutual self-giving” (280). Sadly, the body is often seen as simply “an object to be used” (153). Sex always has to be understood as being open to the gift of new life.

Gay men and women should be respected.

While same-sex marriage is not permitted, the pope says that he wants to reaffirm “before all else” that the homosexual person needs to be “respected in his or her dignity and treated with consideration, and ‘every sign of unjust discrimination’ is to be carefully avoided, particularly any form of aggression or violence.” Families with LGBT members need “respectful pastoral guidance” from the church and its pastors so that gays and lesbians can fully carry out God’s will in their lives (250).

All are welcome.

The church must help families of every sort, and people in every state of life, know that, even in their imperfections, they are loved by God and can help others experience that love. Likewise, pastors must work to make people feel welcome in the church. “Amoris Laetitia” offers the vision of a pastoral and merciful church that encourages people to experience the “joy of love.” The family is an absolutely essential part of the church, because after all, the church is a “family of families” (80).