

The Christian Vision of Family According to *Amoris Laetitia*

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Introduction

Joy the fruit of love is not merely an emotion. It is the inner happiness of man; a gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 12). St. Paul says: rejoice always, again I say rejoice (cf. Phil 4:4). Joy attracts every one and it enables people to live in communion. Family is such a community designed by God to experience the joy of love. A Christian family which is grounded on love through its Christian identity expresses its faith in God which is its source of its joy. In a world of sorrow, suffering, and anxiety when each family witness this joy of love through their daily life it becomes a joyful evangelization of Christian life. In this essay, I would like to study the Apostolic Document *Amoris Laetitia*, to see the divine call of Christian family to experience the Joy of Love. For this I would examine the document and its underlying sources such as Scripture, Teachings of the Church, the current challenges of the families to find out the emerging Christian vision the Papal document envisages.

AMORIS LAETITIA

Amoris Laetitia the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis' is an invitation to Christian families to experience God's love and enjoy the fruit of his love in their daily lives. (Cf. *AML*, 5). The Pope signed this Post-Apostolic Exhortation on 8th April 2016 and it was published on 19 March 2016. This exhortation is the fruit of the discussions and analytical studies derived from the two consultative Synods of Bishops on the Family in year 2014 and 2015 and it also embodies the personal experience and reflection of the Pope about family. Through this ground-breaking exhortation the pope also addresses the Church to undertake "new pastoral methods" (*AML* 199) to help Christian families to experience God's love and the love of Church; 'the mother of all Christian faithful'. To convey this joyful Christian message or *Kerygma* to the families and to the Church, Pope Francis adopts a simple, easily readable, theologically rich and pastorally relevant language and style. Consciously he avoids speculative assumptions and theological jargons. All families who live in 'regular' and 'irregular' situation feels welcomed as they all could find an appropriate place in the exhortation. This Apostolic exhortation is comparatively extensive including nine chapters and 325 progressively numbered sections.

The opening chapter is inspired by the Scriptures which give us a wider vision of families of the Old and New Testament period. Chapter two examines the actual situation and some complex realities that family faces which sheds light on the fact, how could the love and joy of the Christian families get dwindled. Chapter three deals with some essential aspects of the Church's teaching on marriage and the family which gives us some basic hints about 'how Church as an agent of joy could sow and preserve the seeds of God's love in families'. Chapter four is dedicated to the teachings on love based on 1 Cor chapter 13. Chapter five is on children and parenting which tells us of God's caring and nourishing love for the families. Chapter six highlights some pastoral approaches that can guide us in building healthy and loving homes and Chapter seven is devoted to the raising of children. Chapter eight offers an invitation to mercy and speaks about the merciful of love of God to be sown in those situations that fall apart from the divine love of God. And Chapter nine is a brief discussion

of the basic characteristics of the spirituality of love which should be practiced in Christian families. The document concludes with a prayer to the Holy Family of Nazareth (*AML* 325).

The Joy of Love in the Families in the Light of Sacred Scriptures

Pope Francis focuses on the Word of God as his primary source to teach about the joy of love in the families. At the outset quoting Psalm 128 the Pope unveils the threshold of a tranquil home, with its family sitting around a table enjoying a festive meal *AML* 9. At the centre sits the father and mother, “a couple with their personal story of love” (cf. Ps. 128:2-3) The couple remind the primordial divine love of God who created man and woman in his own image and likeness (cf. Gen 1:27-31: 2:4-25; Mt 19:4) and called them to existence. At the same time he called them to love God as God is love (1 John 4:8) and in himself he lives a mystery of personal loving communion (cf. FC 11).ⁱ As God created man and woman and called them to existence, he inscribed in their humanity the vocation which involves the capacity and responsibility of love and thus to enter into communion and beget life (GS 12)ⁱⁱ The presence of the Father at the table (Ps.128.3) remind us of the loving presence of God in the family.

Children are like the “shoots of an Olive Tree (Ps 128:3). In the home where husband and wife seated at the table the children appear at their side “like olive shoots” (Ps 128:3) (cf. *AML* 14)., Olive shoots symbolizes the energy and vitality the cause of joy for the couple as well the whole family.” (1 Pet 2:5).

“A Path of Suffering and Blood” (Gen: 4, 2 Sam.12-13) The thread of suffering, bloodshed, violence beginning with Abel’s murder the disputes in the patriarchal families of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the tragedies and violence marking the family of David, the family problems in the Story of Tobias and the miseries and complaints of Job teaches that misery and troubles are part of life but it should enable the family to recognise its call to an unending and everlasting joy which has its source in God who “will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither there shall be mourning nor crying nor pain any more” (Rev 21:4).

“The Work of Your Hands” (Gen 2:15: Ps 127: 2; Ps 128:2) denotes the call man to work along with God in sustaining the physical well-being and tranquillity of the family (cf. *AML* 23). Labour makes man and women to encounter nature and enjoy the beauty of God’s creation. More over it enables the members of the family to share their time, talents and conveniences with one another and to participate in the development of society where family stands as a social unit.

“The Tenderness of an Embrace” (Ps 131:2). “Tenderness” (*gamul* in Hebrew) is another virtue so central to Christian experience of marriage and love (*AML* 28). It is the delicate and tender intimacy between mother and child: the image which is depicted in a symbolic picture of a babe sleeping in his mother’s arm after being nursed. The infant is now fed and clings to his mother, who takes him to her bosom.

The different family related matters based on Old Testament readings given in *Amoris Laetitia* do not merely intend to speak about the various historical or genealogical facts but to lead us to a living experience that the love of God i.e God himself is not an abstract idea. But he is the one who ‘unites man and women’, ‘begets life’, ‘wipe away every tear from one eye’, ‘sustains the physical well-being and tranquillity of the family’, and that ‘quieted one’s soul like a mother’ (*AML* 9-28).

God's love is incarnated in Jesus Christ. Christ the joy of God is the cause of our joy. Hence every Christian family should search and find the joy of God's love in Jesus Christ. The birth of Jesus (Mt.1:18-22); his flight to Egypt (Mt 1: 13-18), his life at Nazareth (Mt 1: 23), and his love towards families, the joy of the families in encountering Jesus (cf. Lk 19:5-6), His involvement in the joyful events of the families (cf. Jn 2), His care for the families who suffer (Mk 1:29-32), his living presence on hearing the death of loved ones (Mk 5:22-24; 35-43; Jn 11:1-44) are examples of Christ's love for the affairs of the families. Moreover, the love of Christ Jesus is revealed in its climax at the time of his passion and death. During the last supper he said to his disciples: "As the father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in me. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be full (Jn 15:9,11). St. Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians reminds the couple to witness "mystery" of the union of Christ and the Church (Eph 5: 21-33) He proposes Christians of Ephesus to aspire for loving homes where parents 'do not provoke their children, children do obey their parents and slaves who also form part of those homes obey and serve their masters. Paul gives them these precepts on the belief that family should remain as the abode of Christ where He lives and rules as the Heavenly Master (cf. Eph 6: 1-9). Hence we see the New Testament passages included in the document remind the reader of the abiding presence of Jesus, the love of God in the midst of human life. He is the source of the joy that family experiences. Hence Pope Francis appeals every family to open their hearts to receive God's love and to look Jesus and the icon of the Holy Family of Nazareth. He invited Christian families to contemplate Child Jesus and his Mother Mary (Mt 2:11). Mary is a model for every mother to face their family challenges with courage and serenity, and to keep in their heart the great things which God has done in their families. The Pope assures that Mary can help us to understand the message God wishes to communicate through our families (AML 30). The document also raises our gaze to contemplate the relationship between human families and the divine Trinity, the profound unity between Christ and his Church, the love and fellowship of the Christian faithful in the early church, and the "pure fraternity existing among the saints of heaven to grow and mature in the ability to love" (AML 325). In order to grow in love and abide in joy the family is called to join in daily prayer, to read the word of God and to share in the Eucharistic communion like those 'churches that met in homes' (1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:5; Col.4:15; Philm 2, AML 15).

In the Light of a Number of Key Church Documents

The Pastoral document *Gaudium et Spes* was concerned to enhance "the dignity of marriage and the family" (cf. *GS* nos. 47-52). The Conciliar document also emphasizes "the grounding of the spouses in Christ" (*GS* 48) According to *Lumen Gentium* spouses are consecrated by means of a special grace to "build up the Body of Christ and to form a domestic Church" (*LG* 11). Pope Paul VI in the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* highlights the intrinsic bond between conjugal love and the generation of life. The exercise of responsible parenthood recognizing their own duties towards God, themselves, their families and human society is emphasized in the document (*HV* no.10). Through the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Paul VI highlighted the bond between the family and the Church (AML 63). St. John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, defined family as the way of the Church and presented a general vision of the vocation of men and women to love and proposed certain guidelines for the pastoral care of the family. Special emphasis is given on conjugal love and he discuss how spouses in their mutual love receive the gift of the Spirit of Christ and live meaningfully their call to holiness" (*FC* no.12-13; cf. AML 69). Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical *Deus Caristas Est*, reminds the Church of the truth that the love of man and woman is fully illuminated only in the love of the crucified Christ (cf. *DC*, no.2). According to the Pope marriage based on an "exclusive" and "definitive love" becomes an icon of the

covenant between God and his people (cf. *DC*, no.11: *AML* 70), In the Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* Pope Benedict speaks of the significance of love as a rule of life in the society (cf. *CV* 44) The inclusion of a number of key Church documents combined with his personal reflection and experience on various complex realities of the families; Pope Francis once again proclaim that Christian family is at the heart of the Church and its call is to experience the love of Christ through the Church. Further we see the concern, commitment and the planning of the universal and of the particular churches from the Second Vatican Council to the publication of *Amoris Laetitia* represent an invitation to Christian families “to value the gifts of marriage and family, and to persevere in a love strengthened by the virtues of generosity, commitment, and fidelity.

Christian Joy : The Identifying Mark of the Family

In the light of Sacred Scripture and Church documents on family including *Amoris Laetitia*, we see that the Christian family is not merely a social unit but it is primarily a place where parents and children live together in joy thus forms an intimate community of life, love and joy.ⁱⁱⁱ The primordial family is designed by God as he created man in his own image and likeness (Gen 1:28) calling him to existence through love and continually keeping it in being. God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation of love and communion so that they may become icons of God’s creating and redeeming love^{iv.v} Christian revelation recognizes the way of realizing the vocation of the human person to love and to live in communion through marriage. The conjugal communion in marriage is characterised by its unity as well as indissolubility and according to the plan of God leads to the foundation of the wider community of the family. Hence the very institution of marriage and conjugal love grounded on the love of Christ are ordained to the procreation and education of children, in whom they find God’s fruitful love and their crowning (cf. *FC* 14). Conjugal communion constitutes the foundation on which is built the wider communion of the family, of parents and children, brothers and sisters and other members of the household (cf. *FC* 21) Thus the family is closely knitted to God’s very being.^{vi} Family manifests the divine mystery of the Triune God as our God in his deepest mystery is “not solitude but a family for he has within himself fatherhood, sonship and the essence of the family, the love represented by the Holy Spirit” (cf. *AML* 11). Every home is a “lamp stand” which holds the light of love and illuminates the dim and dark surroundings with its rays of joy (cf. *AML* 8).^{vii} “And all family life by its love intimacy and care for others is a “shepherding” in mercy” (cf. *AML* 322). Led by the spirit of God the family circle is open to life and at the same time obliged to give life by out-reaching others by caring them and seeking their happiness (cf. *AML* 324). The family community must be of “one heart and soul” (Acts: 4) in the proclamation faith and good works (*FC* 50).

The Christian family is “grafted into the mystery of the Church.” (*FC* 50) and is a “Church in miniature” (*Ecclesia Domestica*) (cf. *FC* 49) Sharing in the life-giving mission of Christ in and through the Church it becomes as an intimate community of life and love at the service of the Church and of society.(cf. *FC* 50) Being a domestic Church by receiving the redeeming love of Christ, the family participates in the prophetic, priestly and kingly mission of Jesus Christ and of his Church thus lives its vital role of transforming the world.

AMORIS LAETITIA: A MESSAGE OF JOY TO CHRISTIAN FAMILIES

Derived from Latin the word *Amoris Laetitia* means Joy of love in English. The title itself guides us to see the underlying Christian identity of this document. The document is in line with Pope Francis’s *Evangelii Gaudium* the Joy of the Gospel. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the

Pope explains what is joy in the light of Pope Benedict's *Deus Caritas Est*. According to the Pope, joy is not the absence of suffering; it is not the result of gaining something that of the world, but it is the experience of a "personal encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (cf. *EG 7: DC 1*). Joy is the gift of the Holy Spirit brought by Christ through his passion and resurrection and is poured out in our hearts (*EG 2*). In the context of Christian families, the couples are invited to encounter the crucified and the resurrected Christ who reflects God's love. This encounter with Christ expands the hearts of the couple and gradually with the grace of the Holy Spirit, the spouses grow in holiness through married life. Moreover, moments of joy, relaxation, celebration and even sexuality can be experienced as a sharing in the full life of the resurrection and this sharing of the life of resurrection is in itself the evangelization of the family.

Challenges in Experiencing the Joy of Love in Family Life

In our time, Christian families have to face numerous hurdles to experience the joy of Christ. Complex realities such as overly individualistic culture, an over-exposure to mass media, secularism, fundamentalism, financial crisis, violence towards women together with globalization, consumerism, migration, commercialisation (cf. *AML 1*) block the families to live faithfully, growing in mutuality, and giving life. According to Pope Francis: "we do well focus on concrete realities since the call and demands of the Spirit resound in the events of history" (*AML 31*).

1. Growing in Mutuality.

In today's families an overly individualistic culture prevails. Accordingly the personality of the individuals are shaped by their egoistic conception that all values, rights and duties originate in themselves and the interests and desires of the individual are ethically paramount and should therefore be considered absolute.^{viii} Individuals are caught up with excessive accumulative tendencies of possessing money, power and positions. This situation creates intolerance and hostility in families and fosters self-centredness, constant suspicion, fear of commitment, and arrogance. Over individualism blocks the family growing in mutuality (*AML 33*). Growth in mutuality enables the person to accept the members of the family as they are and to care for their personal growth.

2. Living Faithfully

"Let no one be faithless to the wife of his youth. For I hate divorce, says the Lord" (Mal 2:16). In the Gospel of Mathew we read: "what God has joined together, let no man put asunder" (Mt 19:6). *Amoris Laetitia* says: "Children not only want their parents to love one another, but also to be faithful and remain together" (*AML 123*). Thus to be faithful to one another and living together of married couple is the divine will of God. God calls man and women personally to the married life but calls them to be united with one another and with others. The reasons they are together as a community is not necessarily because of human compatibility, but as couples they are 'chosen' and 'united' by the Lord. (cf. Jn 15:16) Their entrance to the married life and their lasting union expressed by the marriage is for believers "a covenant before God that calls for fidelity" (*AML123*) Therefore couples are called to respond to this covenantal life through a commitment which by its very nature, both fulfilling and ascetical. Living faithfully means making a commitment of patience and of dependability with regard to 'relationships, responsibilities, structures and boundaries in the family.

3. Giving Life

With the creation of man and women God crowns and brings to perfection his image and work of his hands to a special sharing in his love and in his power as Creator and Father through their free and responsible cooperation in transmitting the gift of human life (cf. FC 28). “God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it’ (Gen.1:28). Life is associated with joy. Pope says the joy of this “contemplative love” needs to be cultivated (AML 129). Thus the fundamental task of family is to serve life, through procreation of the divine image from person to person.”From the outset, love refuses every impulse to close in on itself. It is open to a fruitfulness that draws it beyond itself. Hence no genital act of husband and wife can refuse this meaning, even when for various reasons it may not always infact beget new life” (cf. AML 80) However, the fruitfulness of conjugal love is not restricted to the procreation of children, it is enlarged and enriched by all those fruits of moral, spiritual and supernatural life which the parents are called to transmit to their children and through the children to the whole creation (cf. FC 28). *Amoris Laetitia* also holds the view that family is the ‘sanctuary of life’, the place where life is conceived and cared for (AML 83). According to the Pope, it is a “horrendous contradiction” when this sanctuary of life becomes a place where life is rejected and destroyed (AML 83). He says: “Each child has a place in God’s heart from all eternity, once the child is conceived the Creator’s eternal dream fulfils. We need to think of the great value of that embryo from the moment of conception. “We need to see it with the eyes of God and value his gift of life. God always looks beyond mere appearances” (AML 168).

Conclusion

Amoris Laetitia does not give a new Christian or theological vision on Christian marriage and family. Like other Encyclicals and Church documents on family, *Amoris Laetitia* is also based its study on sources like Word of God, Revelation, Teachings of the Church and other study materials and gives an account of family life based on those teachings. But this document keeps its specific identity as it enlarges the vision of marriage and family life based on the theme *joy of love*. Highlighting the *joy of love* it deepens the Christian identity of family life considering and evaluating the present complex realities that the family encounter. It also advocates the Church and faithful to approach families and their situation with the “joyful love of God”. *Amoris Laetitia* does not undervalue traditions, canon laws and moral laws with regard to marriage and family life but enhance the view that passing of laws and moral judgements do not hinder the merciful love of God which is to be transmitted in and through the Church, the mother of Christian faithful. That is to say the Church should opt for a “law of joyful love”. This approach will enable all those who live in ‘regular as well as irregular situations’ to encounter God who is Love. This encounter creates in them a kind of joy which the world cannot give (cf. Jn 16:22). Hence, it is the duty of all who loves the beauty of family to bring joy to the family and to the world at large.

ⁱ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (22 November 1981) no.17 (Here after Cited as FC)

ⁱⁱ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*, no.12. Hereafter cited as GS

ⁱⁱⁱ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no.17.

^{iv} John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no.11.

^{vi} John Paul II, Homily at the Eucharistic Celebration in Puebla de Los Angelus, 28 January 1979), Pope Francis, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love), (March 19, 2016) no. 11. Here after cited as AML

^{vii} BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est* (25 December 2005), no.250.

^{viii} Third Extra Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Relatio Synodi* (18 October 2014), 2; *Amoris Laetitia* , no. 33.