

## Study guide for 'Amoris Laetitia'

Thomas Reese | Apr. 21, 2016 Faith and Justice  
Amoris Laetitia

When I received a copy of Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation, [Amoris Laetitia](#) [1], I had to do an "all-nighter" reading of it so I could write a [column](#) [2] to be posted when the embargo expired at 6 a.m. Eastern time. That is not how you should read the exhortation. Rather, you want to take your time, as I did in reading it the second time.

Like his earlier writings, this exhortation, "The Joy of Love," is written in a personal, pastoral style and is accessible to most readers. It is not an academic tome, but it is long -- 260 pages. It would be best to read it a chapter at a time rather than all at once as I was forced to do.

This document cries for discussion in families, parishes, and schools. There is no need for people to wait while the bishops and pastors organize a response to the document. Anyone can [download the exhortation](#) [3], call their family and friends and say, "Let's read and discuss the exhortation." Anyone part of a book club can recommend that the exhortation be their next selection.

To assist you in your reading, I have drawn up a list of study questions that will be helpful for individual reading or group discussions. The numbers in parentheses refer to paragraphs in the exhortation.

For background, it is important to remember that this exhortation comes after a process that went on for more than three years, beginning with a worldwide questionnaire on family issues that was sent out by the Vatican to bishops in order to get input from experts and the laity.

Then came the synod of bishops that took place in October of 2014, followed by another questionnaire and another synod in October of 2015. Each synod issued a report, called a "*relatio*." The reports were not binding on the pope, but he took them and all he heard from the synod delegates and used them in writing his exhortation.

He quotes extensively from the Second Vatican Council, popes, and the synod, which is normal in any papal document, but he also quotes from bishops' conferences and even authors like Martin Luther King, three Latin American poets, Josef Pieper, Erich Fromm, and Gabriel Marcel.

The exhortation is divided into nine chapters.

The first looks at the family from a scriptural perspective. Next comes an examination of the actual situations of families. The third recalls some essential aspects of the church's teaching on marriage and family, paving the way for what the pope calls the two central chapters on love.

If you are not going to read the whole exhortation, you should certainly read chapter 4, and if you have children, chapter 5.

Chapter 6 highlights some pastoral approaches "that can guide us in building sound and fruitful homes." Chapter 7 deals with the raising and education of children. The next chapter offers "an invitation to mercy and the pastoral discernment of those situations that fall short of what the Lord demands of us."

Priests and those who are divorced should especially read chapter 8.

And the final chapter concludes with a brief discussion of family spirituality.

## **Introduction**

The pope begins his exhortation by saying, "The joy of love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church." He says that complexity of the issues discussed at the synod "revealed the need for continued open discussion of a number of doctrinal, moral, spiritual, and pastoral questions."

Questions:

1. The pope says in dealing with family issues, some people have an "immoderate desire for total change without sufficient reflection or grounding," while others wanted to "solve everything by applying general rules or deriving undue conclusions from particular theological considerations" (2). To which group are you closest?
2. The pope asserts that "not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium" (3). Do you like this approach, or do you prefer to have clear answers?
3. "Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it" (3). How do you think unity and diversity should be balanced in the church?

## **Chapter 1: In the light of the Word**

The Bible is full of stories about families and passages directed at families. Pope Francis cites many of these in this chapter.

Questions:

1. Which biblical family do you like? Which speaks to you and your family?
2. What Scripture passages did you use (or plan to use) at your wedding? Why?
3. What does Francis mean when he writes, "The couple that loves and begets life is a true, living icon ... capable of revealing God the Creator and Saviour" (11)?
4. Many feminists note that the Bible comes out of a patriarchal culture. How does Francis respond to this critique (9-10, 12-13)?
5. Does what the Bible says about children reflect your experience (14-18)?
6. Do you find comfort in what the pope says about suffering (19-22)?

## **Chapter 2: The experiences and challenges of families**

Facts are important to Francis, so in chapter 2 he looks at the current reality of families. He notes that at the same time that families have come to enjoy greater freedom, they have come to receive less support from social structures. He discusses what the church and the state can do to respond to the challenges families face.

Questions:

1. How are families more free today than in the time of your parents and grandparents? How do they

- receive less support from social structures (32-34)?
2. Francis says, "The fear of loneliness and the desire for stability and fidelity exist side by side with a growing fear of entrapment in a relationship that could hamper the achievement of one's personal goals" (34, 39). How do you see this in the lives of your family and friends?
  3. How has the way the church presented its beliefs and treated people contributed to the problem (36-38)?
  4. What does Francis mean by saying, "We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them" (37)? There is more about conscience in chapter 8.
  5. What moves younger people to postpone marriage, family, or children (40-42)?
  6. What can government in the United States do "to ensure the future of young people and help them realize their plan of forming a family" (43-47)?
  7. What does your community do in welcoming and helping migrants and persons with special needs (47)?
  8. What are the special challenges of the elderly and single parents (48-49)?
  9. Stress, drugs, violence within families, and fears about employment and the future of their children -- all are threats to families, according to Francis. What are the threats to families in your community?
  10. Francis speaks of the advances in women's rights but notes that much remains to be done (54). What are the things you think need to be done? Do you see the Spirit at work in the women's movement?
  11. What do you think of Francis' description of the role of women and men in marriage (55-56)?

### **Chapter 3: Looking to Jesus: The vocation of the family**

In this chapter, Francis recounts the life and teachings of Jesus and how they relate to family life. He also describes what is said about the family in church documents, especially Vatican II and recent papacies.

Questions:

1. Do you find the teachings of Jesus on the family hopeful, inspiring, full of love and tenderness (58-66)?
2. Does the language of church documents speak to you (67-75)? What makes sense or moves you? What is abstract, boring, or unintelligible? What is flat out objectionable?
3. What do you think about the way Francis talks about "imperfect situations" and "seeds of the Word" in other cultures (76-79)?
4. What do you think about the way Francis writes about the transmission of life and the rearing of children (80-85)? More on that in chapter 5 and 6.
5. Do you experience the church as a "family of families" (87-88)?

### **Chapter 4: Love in marriage**

Francis says that we cannot express the Gospel of marriage and family without speaking of love. He begins this chapter with a meditation of St. Paul's hymn to love (1 Cor. 13:4-7). The meditation is part exhortation, part examination of conscience. He speaks of the joy and passion of married love as well as the dark side of violence and manipulation in sex.

Questions:

1. What part of his meditation on Paul's hymn to love moved you most (90-119)?
2. Pope Francis says we become impatient "whenever we think that relationships or people ought to be perfect, or when we put ourselves at the center and expect things to turn out our way" (92). Is this your experience?
3. Pope Francis quotes St. Ignatius of Loyola who said, "Love is shown more by deeds than by words" (94). Do you agree?

4. "Envy is a form of sadness provoked by another's prosperity; it shows that we are not concerned for the happiness of others but only with our own well-being" (95-96). What makes you envious?
5. "Love is not boastful" (97-98). What do you boast about?
6. "Loving ourselves is only important as a psychological prerequisite for being able to love others" (101). Agree? Disagree?
7. Francis talks a lot about the need for forgiveness in families (103-108). Is he right? What do you find helpful in his advice? What do you forgive? For what have you been forgiven?
8. "Love does not have to be perfect for us to value it. The other person loves me as best they can, with all their limits, but the fact that love is imperfect does not mean that it is untrue or unreal" (113). Is imperfect love enough to hold a marriage together?
9. What does Francis mean by "trust enables a relationship to be free" (115)? Does that match your experience?
10. Francis has a long quote from Martin Luther King (118). Are we as individuals, as a nation, able to observe what he says? What does this say about our political culture and our response to terrorism?
11. "After the love that unites us to God, conjugal love is the greatest form of friendship," says Francis quoting St. Thomas Aquinas (123). Describe a couple you know who are truly friends.
12. What do you think of Francis' argument for "indissoluble exclusivity" in marriage (123-124)?
13. Francis, the celibate, speaks of the passion, joy, and beauty of marriage (125-130, 142-152). Does he get it right? What rings true? What doesn't?
14. Francis speaks to young people about the importance of marriage (131-132). Is he convincing?
15. Francis says the three essential words in a family are: "Please," "thank you," and "sorry." Do you agree? How have these words been important in your family?
16. How can you encourage dialog in your family (136-141)?
17. Is Francis realistic in his description of violence and manipulation in sex (153-157)?
18. What do you think of Francis' exegesis of St. Paul's women "be subject to your husbands" (156)?
19. What do older couples think of Francis' treatment of love and aging (163-164)?

## Chapter 5: Love made fruitful

"Love," the pope says, "always gives life" (165). "The family is the setting in which a new life is not only born but also welcomed as a gift of God" (166). He speaks of role of mothers, fathers, and grandparents in a family, the experience of pregnancy, and feminism.

### Questions:

1. How does Francis describe the love of parents for their children being a reflection of God's love for us (166)?
2. "Large families are a joy for the Church," writes Pope Francis, but he also speaks of "responsible parenthood" (167). How are these two balanced?
3. How does Francis describe pregnancy (168-171)? Do mothers agree with what he says?
4. The pope describes the roles of mothers and fathers in a family (172-177). Where does he get it right? Wrong?
5. Despite women's "wish to study, work, develop their skills and have personal goals," he writes, "we cannot ignore the need that children have for a mother's presence, especially in the first months of life" (173). Do you agree? How do women balance their own needs and goals with those of their children?
6. Francis says he values "feminism, but one that does not demand uniformity or negate motherhood" (173). What does he mean? Do you agree?
7. What does he mean by "feminine genius" (173)?
8. What does Francis have to say to couples who are unable to have children (178-181)?
9. How does Francis want families to interact with the world around them (181-186)?
10. What is the role of the extended or wider family (187, 196-198)?

11. What is the relationship of children to their parents (188-190)?
12. What is the role of grandparents in a family (191-193)?
13. Does an "only child" miss something by not having brothers and sisters (194-195)?

## **Chapter 6: Some pastoral perspectives**

Pope Francis says that he will not offer a pastoral plan for families, but rather reflections on some more significant pastoral challenges. It is then up to different communities to devise more practical and effective initiatives that respect both the church's teaching and local problems and needs (199). He looks at the formation of priests, marriage preparation programs, crises in marriages, as well as the situations of single parents and gay couples.

Questions:

1. What suggestions would you make for improving the formation of priests and lay ministers so that they could help families more (200-204)?
2. What preparation for marriage does Francis see as necessary for engaged couples (205-211)?
3. What preparation did you get for marriage? What was helpful? How could it be better (205-211)?
4. Francis criticizes elaborate and expensive weddings (212) and urges couples to focus on the spiritual and theological import of the ceremony (213-216). Is this realistic? How can we help couples do this?
5. Francis speaks of marriage as "a life-long project" (218) that moves through various stages (220). What stages has your marriage gone through?
6. Francis warns against "unduly high expectations about conjugal life" (221). Was this true with your marriage? How did you deal with it?
7. What is the role of conscience in decisions about responsible parenthood (222)?
8. Francis speaks of the role of "experienced couples" in helping younger couples (223). How were you helped by experienced couples in the early years of your marriage? How have you helped other couples?
9. What does Francis mean by "Love needs time and space; everything else is secondary" (224-226)?
10. Francis says every family faces crises (232), which can either weaken the couple's relationship or strengthen it. How does he encourage couples to face crises (232-238)? How have you dealt with crises in your family?
11. Francis writes about how "old wounds" and "scars" can affect a couple's relationship (239). How does he advise dealing with them?
12. When is divorce "inevitable" and even "morally necessary" (241)? What is the proper pastoral care in such situations (242-243)?
13. Have you or anyone you know gone through the church's annulment process (244-245)? What was your experience?
14. How can we keep children from being hurt by divorce (245-246)?
15. Marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics have special challenges (247-249). What can help or hurt such marriages?
16. How well does Francis balance church teaching on same-sex attraction with the desire to "reaffirm that every person, regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be respected in his or her dignity" (250-251)?
17. How can the Christian community encourage and support single parents (252)?
18. How can the Christian community help surviving spouses deal with the death of a loved one (253-258)?

## **Chapter 7: Toward better education of children**

Parents play an essential role in the moral development of their children. Francis encourages parents to be "vigilant" but not "obsessive" over what their children are doing and what they are exposed to (260-261). He

discusses the role of discipline, technology, sex education, as well as the role of parents in passing on values and the faith.

Questions:

1. What is the difference between being "vigilant" and "obsessive" in supervising children (260-262)?
2. How do parents instill "trust and loving respect" (263), foster "good habits and a natural inclination to goodness" (264-266), and develop true freedom in their children (267)?
3. How do parents teach their children that "misbehavior has consequences" (268-270)?
4. What does Francis mean by saying, "by demanding too much, we gain nothing" (271-273)?
5. What does Francis mean by saying, "the family is the first school of human values" (274)?
6. How does technology help or hinder the educational process that occurs between parents and children (278)?
7. What is the proper role of sex education (280-286)?
8. What do you think of Francis' discussion of masculinity and femininity (286)?
9. What are the challenges for parents in passing on the faith to their children (287-290)?
10. Francis says that "older resources and recipes do not always work" in education in faith (288). What does work in your experience?

## **Chapter 8: Accompanying, discerning, and integrating weakness**

This chapter, where the pope discusses divorce, is perhaps the most controversial and most discussed section of the exhortation. Conservative rigorists wanted no change in the church's practice of barring divorced and remarried Catholics from Communion, while pastoral do-gooders had an "immoderate desire for total change without sufficient reflection or grounding" (2). Francis rather speaks of the need for reflection, discernment, and the role of individual conscience.

Questions:

1. Rather than condemnations for "living in sin," Francis wants the church to turn "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" (291). Does this make sense to you or do you think it will encourage more people to not follow the church's teaching on marriage?
2. Francis says that some forms of union "do not yet or no longer correspond to the church's teaching on marriage" but "realize it in at least a partial and analogous way" (292-293). Can you give examples of such unions? On the other hand, what would be an example of a union that "radically contradicts" the ideal?
3. What does the pope mean by "pastoral discernment" (293), by "cultural and contingent situations" (294)? More on discernment below.
4. What do Popes John Paul and Francis mean by "the law of gradualness" (295)?
5. What is the role of discernment in "irregular situations" (296)?
6. Francis says, "I am not speaking only of the divorced and remarried, but of everyone, in whatever situation they find themselves" (297). Who else would be included?
7. What are the cases to which Pope Francis seems to be most sympathetic (298)?
8. How does the church more fully integrate the divorced and remarried into the Christian community while also avoiding any occasion of scandal (299)?
9. In describing the process of discernment, Pope Francis offers some questions the divorced and remarried should ask themselves (300). Are these helpful? What other questions might they ask themselves?
10. What is the role of a priest in this process of discernment (300)?

11. Pope Francis says, "It can no longer simply be said that all those in any 'irregular' situation are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace" (301). Does this surprise you? Do you agree?
12. What are factors that might limit the ability to make a decision or mitigate a person's moral responsibility for his or her actions (301-302)?
13. What is the role of individual conscience in situations that do not objectively embody the church's understanding of marriage (303)?
14. What is the role of discernment in the application of general principles and rules (304-305)?
15. Francis concludes that "it is possible that in an objective situation of sin -- which may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such -- a person can be living in God's grace, can love and can also grow in the life of grace" (305). Does this reflect the lived experience of couples in "irregular situations"?
16. Pope Francis says such couples should receive the church's help, and in footnote 351 says, "In certain cases, this can include the sacraments," including the Eucharist. How do such couples determine whether they can go to Communion?
17. How does "love cover a multitude of sins" (306)?
18. How can the church continue to propose the full ideal of marriage while at the same time showing compassion and mercy to those who don't meet that standard (307-310)?
19. How does Francis respond to those who prefer "a more rigorous pastoral care which leaves no room for confusion" (308-311)?
20. Francis proposes "a pastoral discernment filled with merciful love, which is ever ready to understand, forgive, accompany, hope, and above all integrate" (312). Is this a game changer for couples in irregular unions?

## **Chapter 9: The spirituality of marriage and the family**

In this chapter, Francis describes certain basic characteristics of the "specific spirituality that unfolds in family life and its relationships" (313).

### **Questions:**

1. How does the Lord's presence dwell "in real and concrete families, with all their daily troubles and struggles, joys and hopes" (315)? How have you experienced his presence in your family?
2. "The fraternal and communal demands of family life are an incentive to growth in openness of heart and thus to an ever fuller encounter with the Lord," writes Francis (316). Is this your experience?
3. "Moments of pain and difficulty will be experienced in union with the Lord's cross," while "moments of joy, relaxation, celebration, and even sexuality can be experienced as a sharing in the full life of the resurrection," says Francis (317). How has this been true in your life?
4. Does your family pray together (318)? How? If not, would it help?
5. What does Francis mean by a "spirituality of exclusive and free love" (319-320)?
6. How does "a spirituality of care, consolation, and incentive" help families (321-324)?
7. "No family drops down from heaven perfectly formed; families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love," writes Francis. At the same time, we must "stop demanding of our interpersonal relationships a perfection, a purity of intentions and a consistency which we will only encounter in the Kingdom to come" (325). Does Francis strike a proper balance between the ideal and the reality of marriage in his exhortation?

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