

Bishop Stowe on The “Joy of Love”

The “Joy of Love” is Pope Francis’ latest gift to the Church. The Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, sets forth a very pastoral direction for promoting marriage and family life and accompanying those whose circumstances are less than the ideal as presented in the Church’s teaching. Following upon the two sessions of the Synod of Bishops focused on these themes, Pope Francis cites generously from the discussions at the Synod and states forthrightly that this exhortation is not setting forth universally applicable laws. The Pope has spoken repeatedly in his pontificate about the importance of synodality, and he encouraged the bishops present at the sessions of the synod to speak boldly and listen charitably. He trusts that the Holy Spirit is at work in these sessions and with the variety of voices from all over the world engaged in fruitful discussion and debate, a direction forward would become clear. True to his style, the apostolic exhortation that results from these synodal discussions employs language that is easy to read, is engaging, is quite concrete and invites deeper reflection. He suggests that it be read slowly. Also characteristic of Pope Francis’ teaching, it is both affirming and challenging simultaneously. He affirms the traditional teaching on marriage as the ideal, but challenges the Church and especially priests to work with couples who are not living that ideal and help to form their consciences and to grow towards the fullness of that ideal.

As expected, the Holy Father gives voice to the marginalized of the world. He brings the experience of migrant and refugee families, families burdened with extreme poverty, as well as the issues of contemporary families in the developed world into the conversation. True to the Catholic Tradition, he refuses to choose between canon law and pastoral care, or between justice and mercy. The real challenge is to be faithful to the ideal teachings about marriage and family life while also being pastorally present to those who fall short of the ideal in practice. The Pope basically admits that “one size doesn’t fit all” in pastoral care and that there must be room for the individual consciences to be formed and be accompanied to find the best path forward as disciples who grow stronger in their faith despite being in what are referred to as “irregular” circumstances.

The Pope begins with Scripture as it enlightens the nature of family life. He then discusses the experiences and challenges of the family today in very specific terms, followed by a presentation on the teachings of Jesus and the vocation of the family. The fourth chapter, focused on love in marriage, contains a rich reflection on the Hymn to Love in First Corinthians and an application of its verses to marriage. He discusses the fruitfulness of love in marriage and offers pastoral perspectives and also includes a chapter on improving the education of children. The final chapter (nine) is about the spirituality of marriage and family.

The eighth chapter, titled “Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating Weakness” contains the most anticipated part of the exhortation: the Pope’s direction forward in relationship to the difficulties in family life so thoroughly debated in the synods, especially the situation of the divorced and civilly remarried persons and their role in the Church. While upholding the traditional teaching of the Church, the Holy Father warns against only using moral laws to condemn without pastoral accompaniment that invites greater understanding of God’s will, what failures have occurred, and suggesting a pathway forward. He states emphatically that no one can be condemned forever, because that defies the logic of the Gospel. The Pope promotes a path of discernment with couples in “irregular situations” which involves a process—it is not a quick solution. It has to be about a sincere desire to follow God’s will and a love for the teaching of the Church to incite the desire to make a more perfect response to God’s invitation. It is not about priests granting “exceptions” or “favours” but more about the formation of a good conscience and a path towards a fuller living of the Church’s teaching.

The pope repeatedly mentions that this exhortation comes during the Year of Mercy and reminds the faithful that mercy is not only the work of the Father, but it is how his true children are recognized. He describes tendencies in the Church’s history of either casting off or reinstating sinners; it is the work of reinstating that is most faithful to the example of Jesus.

This dense text will require extensive reading and reflection, there is bound to be discussion about its direction just as lively as at the synod sessions, and its implementation will require genuine listening to people in “irregular” situations so that true discernment can take place.