

Amoris Laetitia - Comment of Jesus Moran

Chapter 1 – The Joy

On the occasion of an international convention of families, Professor Jesus Moran, co-president of the Focolare Movement and a priest, developed a very rich reflection to deepen the contents of the recent apostolic exhortation of the Pope, *Amoris Laetitia* (AL – The joy of love). A reflection that is clearly centered on the charism of unity and that, for the way it develops, could be defined transversal with some keys of interpretation, among which the most important one is the charism of unity. It's obvious that Jesus underlines some aspects, leaving out others, with some constant ways of thinking of theological, pastoral and moral nature.

We have elaborated a synthesis, which doesn't try to express the richness of the document but which offers some keys for reading for a deeper understanding of Pope Francis' thought, hoping that by enriching our thought, it may, above all, be transformed into life and witnessing.

In the text Jesus Moran quotes some paragraphs of AL that, for the transversality of the reflection don't follow one another in the sequence of Francis' exhortation.

1. Joy

As a first fundamental element, we can underline the positive tone of the Exhortation, in line with the other apostolic exhortation of November 2013: *Evangelii Gaudium* (the joy of the Gospel). Joy is in fact one of the characteristic notes of the new document. In it, the Pope didn't want only to face some of the great problems of the family today in the world, but above all he wanted us to fall in love with it again, as the great gift of God to the Humanity of all times. In this sense, Pope Francis introduces himself as the apostle of the Gospel of the family (AL, chapter VI), who announces the great news: through human love, God reveals something of himself to humanity. "... the Gospel of the family is joy that fills the heart and the entire life because in Christ we are freed from sin, from sadness, from interior emptiness, from isolation" (AL 200).

"...Marriage is a precious sign, because when a man and a woman celebrate the sacrament of marriage, God, so to speak, 'reflects' himself in them, He impresses in them His own features and the indelible character of His love. Marriage is the icon of God's love for us. God too, in fact, is communion: the three Persons of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit have lived forever and ever in perfect unity. And it is just this the mystery of Marriage: God makes of husband and wife one existence" (AL 121).

A novelty is the place reserved to Mary. Usually, in the documents of the Church, she appears toward the end, almost like an ornament of which one can do without.

Here on the contrary she is placed at the beginning, at number 30: "... families – the Pope writes – are invited to contemplate the Child and his Mother...Like Mary, they are exhorted to live with courage and serenity their family challenges, the sad ones and the exciting ones, and jealously meditate in their heart the wonders of God (see Luca 2, 19.51). In the treasure of Mary's heart there are also all the events of each one of our families, that She watches over with great care. Therefore, she can help us to interpret them in order to recognize God's message in our family history". And Mary, we well know, is always a figure of tenderness, love and joy.

Chapter 2 - The great value of human love.

The central chapters, the third and the fourth ones, are dedicated to conjugal love which, "after the love that unites us to God,...is the greatest friendship"(AL 123).

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In the long comment to Saint Paul's Hymn to Charity, which is presented as the magna charta of true love, also between husband and wife and in the family relationships, the Pope underlines in a particular way some "virtues" that characterize it: patience, compassion, amiability, the capability to live with your own and the other's imperfections; he underlines the necessity of dialogue, of granting trust and forgiveness; he warns us against the temptation of possession and aggressiveness (AL 90-119).

At the end he deals with conjugal charity, a tie rich in nuances: The love of the friendship type is called 'charity' when one understands and appreciates 'the high value' that the other has...tenderness...is a manifestation of this love when it manages to get rid of the selfish desire of selfish possession" (AL 127).

Enlightened by the Gospel, conjugal love can become a road towards God for each of the two partners and for both of them together:

"A well-lived family communion is a true way of sanctification in ordinary life and of mystical growth, a means for an intimate union with God...those who have deep spiritual desires shouldn't feel that the family hinders their growth in the life of the Spirit, but that it is an itinerary that the Lord uses to take them to the summit of mystical union" (AL 316).

Even if one of the two is not a believer:

"...to love your non-believer partner, give him/her happiness, alleviate his/her suffering and share life with him/her, is a true way of sanctification" (AL 128).

Chapter 3 - Human love is dynamic

It goes through different seasons and expresses itself in always new ways:

"The process occurs in various stages that call for generosity" (AL 220); "A love that fails to grow is at risk" (AL 134) and it's important to realize "that married life is a process of growth, in which each spouse is God's means of helping the other to mature....each marriage is a kind of 'salvation history'," which from fragile beginnings – thanks to God's gift and creative and generous response on our part – grows over time into something precious and enduring. Might we say that the greatest mission of two people in love is to help one another become, respectively, more a man and more a woman? ...love makes each wait for the other with the patience of a craftsman, a patience which comes from God" (AL 221). The definitive aspect that characterizes conjugal love requires being cultivated, trusting above all in the grace of the Holy Spirit:

"Promising love forever is possible when we perceive a plan bigger than our own ideas and undertakings, a plan which sustains us and enables us to surrender our future entirely to the one we love" (AL 124);

"...growth can only occur if we respond to God's grace through constant acts of love, acts of kindness that become ever more frequent, intense, generous, tender and cheerful..." (AL 124).

Chapter 4 - Love and fruitfulness

The pact of conjugal love between the two spouses opens itself "by its nature" to fruitfulness; it expresses itself both through the generation of children, and - when God grants his great gift – through adoption and custody and also to the generous service of the poor and the outcasts (AL cap. V).

The Pope writes:

"The child who is born 'does not come from outside as something added on to the mutual love of the spouses, but springs from the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and fulfillment'. He or she does

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not appear at the end of a process, but is present from the beginning of love as an essential feature, one that cannot be denied without disfiguring that love itself. From the outset, love refuses every impulse to close in on itself; it is open to a fruitfulness that draws it beyond itself” (AL 80).

The fruitfulness of the family overflows spontaneously on society:

“By their witness as well as their words, families speak to others of Jesus...and they show the beauty of the Gospel and its way of life...by their witness of fraternity, their social concern, their outspokenness on behalf of the underprivileged, their luminous faith, and their active hope. Their fruitfulness expands and in countless ways makes God’s love present in society” (AL 184)

Chapter 5 - The family, a school of humanity.

The fruitfulness of the family makes it a school of reciprocal love, fraternity and socialization, tenderness, humanity: “The bond of fraternity that forms in the family between children, if consolidated by an educational atmosphere of openness to others, is a great school of freedom and peace...it is the family itself that introduces fraternity into the world. From this initial experience, nourished by affection and education at home the style of fraternity radiates like a promise upon the whole of society...children do need to be patiently taught to treat one another as brothers and sisters. This training, at times quite demanding, is a true school of socialization .”(AL 194-195); the influence of the family goes beyond the threshold of the house and it accompanies the child and the teenager in the larger social context: “The task of education is to make us sense that the world and society are also our home; it trains us how to live in this greater home. In the family, we learn closeness, care and respect for others. We break out of our fatal self-absorption and come to realize that we are living with and alongside others who are worthy of our concern, our kindness and our affection. There is no social bond without this primary, everyday, almost microscopic aspect of living side by side, crossing paths at different times of the day, being concerned about everything that affects us, helping one another with ordinary little things...” (AL 276).

In particular, the Pope underlines the value given to the elderly as a criterion of civilization: “...attention to the elderly makes the difference in a society. Does a society show concern for the elderly? Does it make room for the elderly? Such a society will move forward if it respects the wisdom of the elderly...” (AL 192).

A family that keeps the historical memory is a social asset to make the world more domestic, and therefore more livable, more humane, since with no memory there is no future and above all there is no humanization.

“A family that fails to respect and cherish its grandparents , who are its living memory, is already in decline, whereas a family that remembers has a future. “ (AL 193).

Chapter 6 - Education to Freedom

The whole family life is, in its entirety, an educational context: It is “the first school of human values, where one learns the good use of freedom” (AL 274).

The Pope clearly expresses the value and the urgency of the educational function of the family, in a world in continuous evolution:

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“Families cannot help but be places of support, guidance and direction, however much they may have to rethink their methods and discover new resources...”(AL 260).

The educational action is not the obsessive attempt to control the children, but rather “...what is most important is the ability lovingly to help them grow in freedom, maturity, overall discipline and real autonomy...education includes encouraging the responsible use of freedom to face issues with good sense and intelligence. It involves forming persons who readily understand that their own lives, and the life of the community, are in their hands and that freedom is itself a great gift...” (AL 261-262).

On the other hand the thinking of Francis is very clear, from the very first pages of *Amoris Laetitia*: “We have been called to form consciences not to replace them” (AL 37).

The most efficient method, the Pope says, is to suggest a path of little steps in line with the real possibility of the child:

“In proposing values we have to proceed slowly, taking into consideration the child’s age and abilities without presuming to apply rigid and inflexible methods” (AL 273).

Yes to sexual education. As already indicated by the document of Vatican Council II it is necessary and urgent to accept this challenge, in a time when people tend to trivialize and impoverish sexuality:

“It can only be seen within the broader framework of an education for love, for mutual self-giving...at the same time, we must accept that the need of a new and more adequate language presents itself first of all at the moment of introducing children and teenagers to the subject of sexuality...a sexual education that fosters a healthy sense of modesty has immense value...it is a natural means whereby we defend our personal privacy and prevent ourselves from being turned into objects to be used” (AL 280-282).

Chapter 7 - Sexuality in marriage

Husband and wife live day by day a “nuptial mystery” in their normal daily existence and therefore also in the loving and full exercise of their sexuality. They are accompanied by the action of the Spirit, who leads to completion the work of the Father and of the Son:

“Sexual union, lovingly experienced and sanctified by the sacrament, is in turn a path of growth in the life of grace for the couple. It is the ‘nuptial mystery’. The meaning and value of their physical union is expressed in the words of consent, in which they accepted and offered themselves each to the other, in order to share their lives completely” (AL 74).

Even if it denounces and refuses very clearly “... any sexual submission” (AL 156) in the document there is a very positive evaluation of the conjugal meaning of the body and therefore of its erotic dimension, consistently with a consolidated conception in the Church referring in particular to the teaching of Saint John Paul II on the theology of the human body, in the 80’s:

“God himself has created sexuality, which is a wonderful gift for His creatures” (AL 150);

“...Saint John Paul II taught that sexual differentiation not only is a source of fruitfulness and procreation, but also possesses the capacity of expressing love: that love precisely in which the human person becomes

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a gift. A healthy sexual desire, albeit closely joined to a pursuit of pleasure, always involves a sense of wonder, and for that very reason can humanize the impulses” (AL 151);

“Christian marriage is a sign of how much Christ loved his Church in the covenant sealed on the Cross, yet it also makes that love present in the communion of the spouses. By becoming one flesh, they embody the espousal of the Son of God with human nature” (AL 73)

“...moments of joy, relaxation, celebration, and even sexuality can be experienced as a sharing in the full life of the resurrection. Married couples shape with different daily gestures a God-enlightened space in which to experience the hidden presence of the risen Lord” (AL 317).

Chapter 8 - Christian Marriage: a sign and an instrument of God’s love for mankind.

The family was created by the Father and redeemed by Jesus.

For the Pope it is fundamental to turn your eyes to Jesus to find the vocation of the family in Him:

“Natural marriage... is fully understood in the light of its fulfillment in the sacrament of matrimony: only in contemplating Christ does a person come to know the deepest truth about human relationships” (AL 77).

In Him the covenant of the spouses becomes a sign and an instrument of God’s love for Mankind and of the love of Christ Spouse for his spouse:

“Jesus, who reconciled all things in himself, restored marriage and the family to their original form (Cf.Mt 10: 1-12). Marriage and the family have been redeemed by Christ (Cf.Eph 5:21-32) and restored in the image of the Holy Trinity, the mystery from which all true love flows. The spousal covenant, originating in creation and revealed in the history of salvation, takes on its full meaning in Christ and his Church. Through his Church, Christ bestows on marriage and the family the grace necessary to bear witness to the love of God and to live the life of communion”(AL 63).

“The sacrament of marriage is not a social convention, an empty ritual or merely the outward sign of a commitment...it’s a gift for the sanctification and the salvation of the spouses...it’s a vocation, inasmuch as it is a response to a specific calling to live conjugal love as an imperfect sign of the love between Christ and his Church...it isn’t a ‘thing’ or a ‘power’, for in it Christ Himself ‘now encounters Christian spouses. He dwells with them, gives them strength to take up their crosses and so follow Him, to rise again after they fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another’s burdens” (AL 71-73).

Jesus Himself lived the family communion in Nazareth: it’s the wonderful mystery of Christmas, which is at the beginning of the human itinerary of the Man-God.

“The incarnation of the Word in a human family, in Nazareth, by its very newness changed the history of the world. We need to enter into the mystery of Jesus’ birth...we need to peer into those 30 long years when Jesus earned his bread by the work of his hands, reciting the traditional prayers and expressions of his people’s faith in coming to know that ancestral faith until he made it bear fruit in the mystery of the Kingdom. This is the mystery of Christmas and the secret of Nazareth exuding the beauty of family life!“(AL 65).

Chapter 9 - Family and Eucharist

The total gift of themselves of Christian spouses finds its perfect inspiration and its nourishment in the gift of the Eucharist:

“Jesus knocks at the door of family, to share with them the Eucharistic supper (CF. Rev. 3:20). There spouses can always seal anew the paschal covenant which united them and which ought to reflect the covenant which God sealed with mankind in the cross. The Eucharist is the sacrament of the new covenant, where Christ’s redemptive work is carried out (CF. Lk 22:20). The close bond between married life and the Eucharist thus becomes all the more clear. For the food of the Eucharist offers the spouses the strength and incentive needed to live the marriage covenant each day as ‘domestic church’ (AL 318).

Furthermore the Eucharist has a deep social dimension, which requires Christian families to choose a sober and generous life style, open to the needs of others.

The Pope comments a text by Saint Paul: Chapter 11 of the First Letter to the Corinthians, from verses 17 to 34:

“...The celebration of the Eucharist thus becomes a constant summons for everyone ‘to examine himself or herself’, to open the doors of the family to greater fellowship with the underprivileged, and in this way to receive the sacrament of that Eucharistic love which makes us one body. We must not forget that the mysticism of the sacrament has a social character. When those who receive it turn a blind eye to the poor and suffering, or consent to various forms of division, contempt and inequality, the Eucharist is received unworthily. On the other hand, families who are properly disposed and receive the Eucharist regularly, reinforce their desire for fraternity, their social consciousness and their commitment to those in need” (AL 186).

Chapter 10 - The Couple “a living sculpture” of the Mystery of God.

From the introduction on, the document presents the family as the reflection of God, who is Trinity.

The Pope writes: “The couple that loves and begets life is a true, living icon – not an idol like those of stone or gold prohibited by the Decalogue – capable of revealing God the Creator and Savior. For this reason, fruitful love becomes a symbol of God’s inner life...the triune God is a communion of love, and the family is its living reflection” (AL 11).

This motif appears very frequently with different hews: From chapter 3, dedicated to the vocation of the family:

“Scripture and Tradition give us access to a knowledge of the Trinity, which is revealed with the features of a family. The family is the image of God who is a communion of persons...In the human family gathered by Christ, ‘the image and likeness of the Most Holy Trinity has been restored, the mystery from which all true love flows’ (AL 71)”,

to a deeper understanding of the lines of spirituality that the Pope suggests as the proper lines of family life; among these, he states:

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“The Trinity is present in the temple of marital communion. Just as God dwells in the praises of his people, he dwells deep within the marital love that gives him glory.” (AL 314).

Finally, “Social love, a reflection of the Trinity, is in reality what unifies the spiritual meaning of the family and its mission outside itself...The family lives its peculiar spirituality being, at the same time a domestic Church and a vital cell to transform the world” (AL 186?).

Chapter 11 - The Church is good for the family, the family is good for the Church.

In several passages, the Exhortation presents the teaching of the Catholic Church about the family as a domestic church:

“Within the family ‘which could be called a domestic church, individuals enter upon an ecclesial experience of communion among persons...The Church is a family of families, constantly enriched by the lives of all domestic churches. In virtue of the sacrament of matrimony, every family becomes, in effect, a good for the Church. From this standpoint, reflecting on the interplay between the family and the Church will prove a precious gift for the Church in our time. The Church is good for the family and the family is good for the Church. The experience of love in families is a perennial source of strength of the life of the Church...” (AL 86-88).

We also find precious references to the family as a witness of faith among its members and mankind:

“The work of handing on the faith to children, in the sense of facilitating its expression and growth, helps the whole family in its evangelizing mission. It naturally begins to spread the faith to all around them even outside the family circle. Children who grew up in missionary families often become missionaries themselves; growing up in warm and friendly families, they learn to relate to the world in this way, without giving up their faith or their convictions.” (AL 289).

The document refers the Pope’s words at the general audience of August the 26th, 2015, with a touching image: “...it is beautiful when mothers teach their little children to blow a kiss to Jesus or to Our Lady. How much love there is in that! At that moment the child’s heart becomes a place of prayer” (AL 287).

Christian families are effective carriers of the Gospel in society”...by the grace of the sacrament of matrimony...above all through their joy-filled witness as domestic churches” (AL 200).

The Church is grateful “...to the families who remain faithful to the teachings of the Gospel, encouraging them and thanking them for the testimony they offer. For they bear witness, in a credible way, to the beauty of marriage as indissoluble and perpetually faithful.” (AL 86);

And at number 290: “The family is thus an agent of pastoral activity through its explicit proclamation of the Gospel and its legacy of varied forms of witness...openness to a diversity of people, the protection of creation, moral and material solidarity with other families, including those most in need, commitment to the promotion of the common good...all this is an expression of our profound Christian belief in the love of the Father who guides and sustains us, a love manifested in the total self gift of Jesus Christ, who even now lives in our midst and enables us to face together the storms of life at every stage...All of us should be able to say ‘Thanks to the experience of our life in the family: “We come to believe in the love that God has for us.” Only on the basis of this experience will the Church’s pastoral care for families enable them to be both domestic churches and a leaven of evangelization in society”.

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Chapter 12 - Mercy.

Amoris Laetitia is incomprehensible without the reference to what represents the fundamental heart of this pontificate. Not for nothing it was published in the year of Mercy and wants to be a milestone of it. If there's a need of mercy in a human environment it is the one of the family:

"This exhortation capital is especially timely in this Jubilee Year of Mercy. First because it represents an invitation to Christian families to value the gifts of marriage and the family, and to preserve in a love strengthened by the virtues of generosity, commitment, fidelity and patience. Second, because it seeks to encourage everyone to be a sign of mercy and closeness wherever family life remains imperfect or lacks peace and joy" (AL 5).

It isn't anyway a naïve document. It speaks up clearly about "...the cultural decadence that doesn't promote love and dedication..." (AL 39). with its consequences on the family, and about all the ideologies that threaten it, as the gender ideology (AL 56) and the attempt to deny the sexual difference without considering the original design of the body with its language naturally oriented to the gift and to the reciprocity.

"...to respect the dignity of a child means to assert its need and its natural right to have a mother and a father..." states Francis (AL 172).

The concrete situation of families is dealt with extreme realism: "...The perfect families proposed by deceptive consumerists propaganda...It's much healthier to be realistic about our limits, defects and imperfections and to respond to the call to grow together, to bring love to maturity and to strengthen the union, come what may" (AL 135),

And crises may reveal themselves as chances of growth: "The life of every family is marked by all kinds of crises, yet these are also part of its dramatic beauty. Couples should be helped to realize that surmounting a crisis need not weaken their relationship; instead, it can improve, settle and mature the wine of the union. Life together should not diminish but increase their contentment; every new step along the way can help couples find new ways to happiness" AL 232).

It is fundamental to sustain in the couple "the desire to grow old together" because in this way they reflect God's own faithfulness" (AL 319).

Even in every day difficulties "...if the family is centered on Christ, He will unify and illumine its entire life. Moments of pain and difficulty will be experienced in union with the Lord's Cross, and his closeness will make it possible to surmount them. In the darkest hours of a family's life, union with Jesus in his abandonment can help avoid a breakup. Gradually with the grace of the Holy Spirit the spouses grow in holiness through married life, also by sharing in the mystery of Christ's Cross, which transforms difficulties and sufferings into an offering of love" (AL 317).

Chapter 13 - The mystery of human fragility.

The verbs of Mercy: "...understand, forgive, accompany, hope, and above all, integrate" (AL 312).

The attitude required by Francis from the Church to the "wounded" is to welcome them and accompany them on a path of 'healing':

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“...although she constantly holds up the call to perfection and asks for a fuller response to God, the Church must accompany with attention and care the weakest of her children, who show signs of a wounded and troubled love by restoring in them hope and confidence...Let us not forget that the Church’s task is often like that of a field hospital” (AL 291), “...making room for the Lord’s mercy, which spurs us on to do our best...Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated” (AL 308).

The “logic” of the Gospel “commits us not to judge nor condemn, but rather to always welcome one another, so that everyone may find a place in the Christian community:

“Nobody can be condemned forever, because this is not the logic of the Gospel” (AL 297),

Rather “...experience shows that with proper assistance and acts of reconciliation, through grace, a great percentage of troubled marriages find a solution in a satisfying manner. To know how to forgive and to feel forgiven is a basic experience in family life”(AL 236).

Welcoming and brotherly accompaniment are also achieved by walking together on the path of solidarity. In fact: “Fraternal charity is the first law of Christians...Let us not forget the reassuring words of scripture: “Above all maintain constant love for one another for love covers a multitude of sins”(1 Pt 4,8) (AL306).

Chapter 14 - And those who do not get married?

“Many people who are unmarried are not only devoted to their own families but often render great service in their group of friends, in the Church community and in their professional lives...Many put their talents at the service of the Christian community through charity and volunteer work. Others remain unmarried because they consecrate their lives to the love of Christ and neighbor. Their dedication greatly enriches the family, the Church and society” (AL 158-164).

Chapter 15 - Let’s go on walking.

Echoing Saint John Paul II words: “Family, become what you are!” (CF.Familiaris Consortio, third part)”Francis concludes Amoris Laetitia with a warm, fatherly encouragement:

“...No family drops down from Heaven perfectly formed...Our contemplation of the fulfillment which we have yet to attain allows us to see in proper perspective the historical journey which we make as families...it also keeps us from judging harshly those who live in situations of frailty...Let us keep walking together! What we have been promised is greater than we can imagine. May we never lose heart because of our limitations, or ever stop seeking that fullness of love and communion which God holds out before us”(AL 325).

