

Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation "Amoris Laetitia" – The Joy of Love

There has been much commentary and some controversy over Pope Francis' latest Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* - The Joy of Love. It is the fruit of two synods of bishops meetings and a process of pastoral inquiry. The letter is close to 300 pages and chock full of very important footnotes. The sky is not falling; he does not make any earth shattering doctrinal changes in regards to divorced Catholics, remarried Catholics, same sex marriages or the church's stance on homosexuality.

The nine chapters of the document deserve a very careful reading, especially the footnotes. Chapters 3-5 are the heart of the document. Pope Francis quotes from many other Popes, the Second Vatican Council documents and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. All in support of the church's teaching on the meaning of the Sacrament of Marriage.

Pope Francis hews to all the traditional teachings of the church. But he also allows for the grey areas of today's familial relationships to be addressed in a pastoral, not a heavy-handed doctrinal manner, with input from the parishioners and families.

Instead of berating people over the head with doctrine, the primacy of a person's conscience is making a return to center stage in Catholic life.

I have always been amazed that no one completely read Paul VI *Humanae vitae* from 1968. Towards the very end of the document, Pope VI says to priest confessors; "If people can not live up to this teaching, urge them to frequent use of Confession and Eucharist." Meaning that in the Sacrament of Confession, the priest may say in this person's very particular circumstance, not to worry about any sin. Pope Francis is using the same reasoning in his *Amoris Laetitia* - The Joy of Love.

For divorced Catholics, section 305 of the document covers irregular family situations. that pastors sometimes encounter that are not in keeping with Catholic Church teaching. These types of irregular situations would be divorce, civil marriages or remarriages, that would normally preclude Catholics from receiving communion. This is a true source of pain for many Catholics who have had to sit in the pew, while others went to receive communion during Mass.

One should read footnote #351 in section 305 of the document may offer a solution. It states that " the Eucharist is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak". At the discretion of the priest, the Eucharist might be offered as a way to help a person to grow in the faith and life of the church. This is an important step for many Catholics who have left the church because they have been barred from the Eucharist.

In the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis is inviting back many Catholic to experience God's Mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. And under the Sacrament of Reconciliation, this internal forum method may be the solution and vehicle for many Catholics to be able to return to the Eucharist.

Amoris Laetitia reiterates that Pope Francis is interested in changing both the tone and reception of peoples and families in the church to a more hospitable, less judgmental environment. Rather than "discipline and punish" Pope Francis has produced a complicated, finely worded document that tries to walk the tightrope between conservatives and liberal Catholics, while trying to keep both sides in the church. But more importantly, to welcome back many Catholics to full active participation at Mass by receiving the Eucharist after having gone to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.