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HONOURABLE COURTSHIP IN THE CHURCH: TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT

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Abstract

Following the Church's traditional teaching on the sacrament of marriage, *Amoris Laetitia* eulogises marriage as an esteemed vocation, which needs proper discernment and sustained preparation. The document devotes space to the discernment phases of betrothal and newly married. This contribution argues that *Amoris Laetitia* misses out on a necessary phase prior to betrothal. This is a specific period of discernment which has not been given its pastoral attention. This contribution offers a possible framework for pastorally assisting parties in courtship to discern adequately as they view marriage on the horizon. This vocational discernment consists of the features of what *Gaudium et Spes* calls honourable courtship, pastoral care for honourable courtship, and specific challenges to courtship in an African context.

Keywords: *Amoris Laetitia*, Christian Marriage, Conjugal Morality, Courtship, Discernment, Fertility Culture, *Gaudium et Spes*, Sexual Ethics, 'Theology of the Body'

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1. Introduction

*Amoris Laetitia*¹ speaks eloquently of marriage as a vocation “to experience conjugal love as an imperfect sign of the love between Christ and the Church” (no. 72). Since marriage is a vocation, there is the obligatory phase of vocational discernment before one makes the decision to embrace it. This contribution argues that *Amoris Laetitia* misses out in its reflection the particular phase in sexual relationships where this discernment mostly takes place – the period of courtship. Engagement is the phase that comes closest to courtship period in *Amoris Laetitia* (nos 73, 205-211). Vocational discernment during the phase of engagement, which presupposes an established commitment to marriage, is not the same as the courtship stage, where the parties, not yet a couple, are viewing marriage on the horizon. Honourable courtship is a key issue that lots of unmarried youths are confronted with everyday and sometimes they are just too overwhelmed to know how to think their way through courtship as they inch toward marriage. From a moral theological perspective, today’s youths need some formation regarding honourable courtship according to the mind of the Church before they get to the engagement phase.

2. Courtship as Sexual Relationship and Church Teaching

Courtship is an extended discernment period between a man and a woman before marriage. This is a phase of vocational discernment because it is a period of discovery for both parties, and a period to develop (deepen) the relationship. In a restricted sense, ‘sexual relationship’ refers to interpersonal bond that is characterised by sexual desire and/or activity between human persons.² There are sexual relationships that have sexual desire and even activity but do not pass for intimate romantic love. Instances of this will include erotic flirting, sexual flings, and ‘hooking up.’ Given that courtship is a sexual relationship, the Church provides a guide. In *Gaudium et Spes*, we read: “It is imperative to give suitable and timely instruction to young people, above all in the heart of their own families, about the dignity of married love, its role and its exercise; in this way they will be able to engage in honourable courtship and enter upon marriage of their own” (no. 49).

Years later, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* refers to *Gaudium et Spes*’ exhortation on the importance of preparing today’s youths,

¹Pope Francis, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Amoris Laetitia*, Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2016.

²Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, New York, NY; London: Continuum, 2007, 215.

especially those involved in courtship for marriage (no. 1632). In order to understand what 'honourable courtship' means, CCC, 1632 refers to CCC, 2350, which states:

Those who are *engaged to marry* are called to live in chastity in continence. They should see in this time of testing a discovery of mutual respect, an apprenticeship in fidelity and the hope of receiving one another from God. They should reserve for marriage the expressions of affection that belong to married love. They will help each other to grow in chastity.

Indeed, the above strictly is referring to the engaged phase. As stated in the beginning, this is distinct from courtship phase. Nevertheless, we can deduce what GS, 49 means by 'honourable courtship': *a sexual relationship that is noted for its chastity in continence*. How do we know one when we see it?

3. Features of Honourable Courtship in the Catholic Tradition

There are some fundamental features of an honourable sexual relationship, from the point of view of the Church's theology of sexual morality, notably John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*.³ In particular, this section is largely inspired by the part I of his catechesis on 'theology of the body,' especially "Creation as a Fundamental Gift,"⁴ "Human Person becomes a Gift,"⁵ "Man and Woman: A Gift for Each Other,"⁶ "Analysis of Knowledge and of Procreation,"⁷ and "The Mystery of Woman is Revealed in Motherhood."⁸ Three broad themes (features) are gleaned from these: i. freedom, accountability, and *amor*; ii. passionate friendship; and iii. self-surrender, fecundity, and just love.

3.1. Freedom, Accountability and Three 'Loves'

First, there is self-possession. This means those in healthy relationship (e.g. honourable courtship) remain in control of themselves. They retain their uniqueness, in freedom and responsibility. They are not under any compulsion to do and act out anything with the partners. Second, there is accountability in romantic relationship. The parties in a healthy relationship are accountable for the love they give or receive from the other. That means the parties are not swayed about by all or any kind of

³I am using John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*, Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997.

⁴John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, 57-60.

⁵John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, 63-66.

⁶John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, 69-72.

⁷John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, 77-80.

⁸John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, 80-83.

emotions. Whatever happens in a healthy relationship, the persons do not find excuses. They own up to their actions and consequences. Where one or all parties constantly evade(s) accountability and even liability, there is an unhealthy or toxic relationship.⁹ Third, there is love. Love is an abiding and firm commitment of emotion, mind, will, and action towards the good of the beloved and their relationship. Love ensures that the parties in a healthy relationship relate with themselves as unique and valuable individuals. They don't see the other as a means to a selfish end. This is why, in any healthy relationship in view of marriage, love is "the basis of personhood that guides the sexual morality."¹⁰

Furthermore, the love between persons in an honourable and healthy intimate relationship is characterised by the following descriptions: '*amor complacentia*,' '*amor concupiscentia*,' '*amor benevolentia*,' as well as reciprocity, friendship, and betrothal.¹¹ '*Amor complacentia*' (love as attraction) is a mutual attitude between the man and the woman that sees the beloved as a good in herself or himself. '*Amor concupiscentia*' (love as desire) is a state of genuine longing for the beloved as a human person, and not because she/he is a means to satisfying the lover's sensual desire or needs. *Amor concupiscentia* longs for the other in a way that does good to the desired, and not harm. In a healthy relationship, there is also '*amor benevolentia*' (love as good will). This love is "fully human" because it is not ruled by instinct and sentiment. It moves the persons in this peculiar love relationship towards being one heart and soul "and together attain their human perfection."¹² In other words, in this relationship, there is a deliberate longing and commitment to live and work for the good of the other person; and when the good is realised the lover is delighted. In other words, *one longs not just for the beloved as a good. One also longs for her/his good i.e. whatever that will make them develop their potentials and goals as unique and valuable human person.* Healthy relationship has reciprocal love. The lovers relate with themselves in an atmosphere of openness to each other's gifts and needs. This dimension of love makes the relationship to be durable and reliable because there is mutual trust. This is what *protects healthy relationships*

⁹Xavier Edayodil, *Sexual Ethics for Today's Youth: Based on the Anthropology of Pope John Paul II*, 3rd ed., Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2012, 86-87.

¹⁰Edayodil, *Sexual Ethics for Today's Youth*, 87.

¹¹Edayodil, *Sexual Ethics for Today's Youth*, 89-92.

¹²Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae*: On the Regulation of Birth (July 25, 1968), no. 9, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html (accessed 09.02. 2011). Henceforth, HV.

from suspicion and jealousy.¹³ Hence, a healthy relationship is one that is based on friendship or has developed into friendship.

3.2. Courtship and Passionate Friendship

Friends generally “desire and work for the good of each other.”¹⁴ Friendship is an act of the will and not just sensual desire. We choose our friends and choose everyday to retain, nurture, protect and celebrate our friends and the friendship. This is why Pope Francis declares in *Amoris Laetitia* that “Marriage is likewise a friendship marked by passion, but a passion always directed to an ever more stable and intense union” (AL, 125). This is a sign of a healthy relationship, since the passion is characterised by friendship. This passion is directed and not misdirected. Pope Francis says that three expressions are the hinge of every healthy relationship, including passionate friendships: “I want to repeat this! Three words: ‘Please’, ‘Thank you’, ‘Sorry’. Three essential words!” (AL, 133). When we are not overbearing, we ask: ‘May I?; when we are not selfish, we can say ‘Thank you!; and when someone realizes that he or she did something wrong and is able to say ‘Sorry!, “our family experiences peace and joy” (AL, 133).

3.3. Self-Surrender and Fecundity in Just Love

Healthy relationship is also characterised by willingness and the actual letting go of oneself (surrender), and letting it into the hands and space of another person in view of marriage. This is what we call betrothal (engagement). This surrendering is necessary towards realising one’s full potential as a man or a woman. Betrothed love, therefore, shows the direction which a love between a man and a woman should move towards. This finds fulfilment in marriage, and nurturing of a home together. This is why Pope Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae* says that conjugal love is “total” because as a special kind of friendship those bound together in this relationship share everything with themselves “without undue reservations and selfish calculations (HV, 9). A healthy relationship in view of marriage is faithful, exclusive and fecund i.e. open to life, even if decidedly continent during this courtship stage. It is part of love as being responsible (HV, 9).

Above all, honourable courtship must balance love and justice as ‘just love.’ ‘Just love’ means ‘an intimate relationship between human persons that is characterised by justice.’ In order to realise this vision of the Church for honourable courtship, certain norms “must govern

¹³Edayodil, *Sexual Ethics for Today’s Youth*, 91.

¹⁴Edayodil, *Sexual Ethics for Today’s Youth*, 91.

all human relationships those which are particular to intimacy of sexual relationships.”¹⁵ For every norm there is always a rational and ethical basis. Norms of just love include: Do no unjust harm (*based on the ethical principle of respect for the autonomy and relationality that characterise persons as endowed with dignity; hence their well-being must be respected*); free consent of parties (*based on respect for autonomy*); mutuality; equality; commitment; fruitfulness (*these four norms are based on respect for relationality*), and social justice (*based on the principle of respect for persons as sexual beings in society*).¹⁶

4. Crossing the Line in Courtship

In the light of the foregoing, honourable courtship must consider in the dilemmas about physical behaviours in romantic relationships. There is a line that must never be crossed in the heart of any person in any relationship – married, engaged, or dating. This is the line of *respect*. Under no circumstance must one use another person as a means to any end – sexual, emotional, physical, or material. Consequently, one may say that the opposite of love is not hatred, but *using*. We may never use another person to satisfy our emotional pleasure, while shamelessly calling it love. This is the sin of lust. We all must constantly battle in our hearts over lust; that inordinate desire to use other persons as means towards our own gratification. For this victory, we need the grace of God.¹⁷

Second, physical manifestations of affection *in se* are not bad. In fact, they have positive values because they communicate the message of publicly displayed affection (PDA). Physical touches express the inner reality of affection, goodwill, and commitment between partners and couples. Besides, PDA also fulfils some physical and emotional satisfaction. What then are physical behaviours that cross the line? While sexual intercourse does not cross the line between legitimately married couples, unmarried partners are crossing the line because this act falls short of the features of honourable relationship discussed above. Similarly, certain physical expressions, even if non-genital can cross the line. The following actions among those in courtship cross the line. This stance is based on the Church’s teaching on honourable courtship and reinforced by John Paul II’s ‘Theology of the Body.’ These cross the line based on the traditional Church’s understanding of

¹⁵Farley, *Just Love*, 230-231.

¹⁶Farley, *Just Love*, 231.

¹⁷Cf. John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 125-127.

chastity.¹⁸ These cross the line based on the traditional Church's understanding of chastity.¹⁹ Chastity is moderate use of our sexual faculties; hence, chastity consists of controlling the urge to use our sexual faculties for something else, other than what they were ordered towards. Chastity, as a virtue, enables us to make intelligent and integrative use of our sexual desires in ways that help us love, i.e. "in ways that respect fully the goods of human existence."²⁰ Accordingly, acts that are sexual in nature but are lacking in moderation, "governed by practical reason informed by prudence and in this way ordered to the true good of the person,"²¹ are 'sins against chastity.'²² They are simply for venereal pleasure, and not to foster conjugal companionship. Therefore, they are '*contra naturam*' (contrary to nature – the end for which the sexual desires were created). So, 'sins against chastity' are grave in their totality ('*ex toto genere suo*'). Hence, they are *intrinsece malum* (intrinsically evil), irrespective of extenuating circumstances and intentions.²³

¹⁸This traditional teaching is best understood within the context of the traditional moral principles invoked by the Church: *Contra naturam; Ex toto genere suo; In re venereal; Parvitas materiae in sexto; Deus impossibilia non iubet*. Cf. James Bretzke, *A Morally Complex World: Engaging Contemporary Moral Theology*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, 223, 224-225, 231; Gerald Coleman, *Human Sexuality: An All-Embracing Gift*, Staten Island, NY: St Pauls, 1992; reprint, 2012, 23-42.

¹⁹This traditional teaching is best understood within the context of the traditional moral principles invoked by the Church: *Contra naturam; Ex toto genere suo; In re venereal; Parvitas materiae in sexto; Deus impossibilia non iubet*. Cf. James Bretzke, *A Morally Complex World: Engaging Contemporary Moral Theology*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, 223, 224-225, 231; Gerald Coleman, *Human Sexuality: An All-Embracing Gift*, Staten Island, NY: St Pauls, 1992; reprint, 2012, 23-42.

²⁰Roland Lawler, Joseph Boyle and William May, *Catholic Sexual Ethics: A Summary, Explanation, & Defense*, Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1985, 130.

²¹John Grabowski, *Sex and Virtue: An Introduction to Sexual Ethics*, ed. Romanus Cessario, Catholic Moral Thought series, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003, 79.

²²Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IaIIae, ques. 151, art. 4, *sed contra*.

²³Bretzke, *Morally Complex World*, 231; Coleman, *Human Sexuality*, 33-34. There are some contemporary moral theologians who question the reasonability of labelling certain acts as 'intrinsically evil' regardless of circumstances. See Bernard Hoose, ed. *Christian Ethics: An Introduction*, London; New York, NY: Continuum, reprint, 2003; Charles Curran, *Directions in Fundamental Moral Theology*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985; Id., ed. *Change in Official Catholic Moral Teachings, Readings in Moral Theology*, vol. 13, New York, NY; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2003; John Noonan Jr., *A Church that Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Teaching*, Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2005.

Without prejudice to the positions of these works, there are still actions that are seen as inexcusable and morally inadmissible, regardless of external factors, from the perspective of Christianity's revealed morality. I agree with Coleman and Grabowski that there are some absolute moral norms, which prohibit certain actions *semper et pro semper*. Intrinsically evil acts include "infanticide, euthanasia, genocide, suicide,

Traditionally, sins of a sexual nature were and are placed in this category for a reason. If untamed, sex “wreaks havoc on men’s (sic) mind.”²⁴ Therefore, the Church teaches that “*parvitas materiae in sexto*” – there is no light [moral] matter in the sixth commandment.”²⁵ In sexual matters, nothing is ‘casual,’ ‘playful,’ or ‘light’. Even within significant sexual relationships, sex should be characterised by light-hearted seriousness. Hence, there are mortal sins if sexual acts take place outside acceptable boundaries.

However, not all physical behaviours cross the line in relationships of unmarried persons. According to Thomas Aquinas, a kiss, a caress, or a touch is not necessarily sinful because “it is possible to do such things without lustful pleasure, either as being the custom of one’s country, or on account of some obligations or reasonable cause.”²⁶ Coming from this teleological approach of Aquinas, Grabowski deepens our understanding with his discussion on offences against chastity.²⁷ ‘Lust’ is the keyword to note regarding certain non-sinful sexual acts. Lust is a form of disordered crave for sexual desire and satisfaction to the exclusion of authentic purposes of human sexuality.²⁸ So, there are some acts, which are sexual in nature, but are not necessarily lustful. For instance, a courting couple does not cross the line by holding hands or even kissing provided it is communicating a deeper message of affection, devotion, and commitment. If this message is absent in that act, they have crossed the line in their heart.²⁹ Even an ordinary kiss or peck can be a crossing of line if it is used as expression of a desire to ‘get something’ from the other. Holding hands, kissing, or other forms of PDA must be “expressions of disinterested desire to affirm the other person for his or her own sake.”³⁰

Many are tempted to ask, “What am I supposed to do with all my sexual feelings and desires if I can’t have sex and I’m not supposed to

devastation of entire cities.” Others not listed are rape, paedophilia and adultery. Cf. Coleman, *Human Sexuality*, 37; Ramón García de Haro, *Marriage and the Family in the Documents of the Magisterium: A Course in the Theology of Marriage*, 2nd ed., trans., William May, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993, 54-62.

²⁴Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IaIIae, ques. 153, art. 4, ad. 1.

²⁵For a contemporary discussion on the background, and arguments for the positive benefits of this traditional moral principle, see Coleman, *Human Sexuality*, 33-39.

²⁶Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IaIIae, question 154, article 4, responsio.

²⁷Grabowski, *Sex and Virtue*, 112-113.

²⁸Grabowski, *Sex and Virtue*, 112.

²⁹Christopher West, *Good News about Sex & Marriage: Answers to Your Honest Questions about Catholic Teaching*, Mumbai: St Pauls, 2009, 85.

³⁰West, *Good News about Sex & Marriage*, 86.

masturbate? Sometimes I feel as if I'm going to explode.'" ³¹ Admittedly, our sexual desires and feelings are strong and powerful. Violently denying them may not be healthy answer because some day, the dam will break and hell will let loose. We all have disordered sexual desires. They may be difficult at times to tame and control, but it is not impossible because as the Church teaches us, "*Deus impossibilia non iubet*" – "God does not command the impossible." No command of God, either divine or natural law, is impossible for humans to carry out. God's grace is always present to enable people to do the morally correct thing (cf. 2 Cor. 12.9).³²

5. Pastoral Care for Honourable Courtship

The Church says that engaged couples and even young families need pastoral accompaniment so that they can effectively make their relationships lasting, healthy, and joyful (AL, 205-211). I shall look at two necessary pastoral care moments as relevant to parties in courtship.

5.1. Period of Courtship

This is the stage of transition from the '*single and unattached*' state to '*single but attached*' one. It is during this period of courtship that Africans have the customary 'Rite of Introduction.' This is the stage of direct discernment and formation, and proximate preparation for marriage. While this stage has some seriousness to it, it is not irreversible or indissoluble. Just like novices beginning their direct formation for the religious life, this is an initial period of discernment towards marriage. This period of grace helps the two parties deepen their knowledge and understanding of each other. A pastoral care programme for this stage ideally should start at the very beginning of their courtship. This stage is not yet definitive. If as a result of these frank conversations, it becomes clear that they are incompatible and having a healthy future as married couples and families might be impossible, they can bring the courtship to an end without too much pressure. The significant timeline between courtship and engagement/wedding proper is helpful because it corrects the present practice where some of these pre-nuptial conversations happen, if at all they do, during the mandatory 3-6months 'marriage counselling' sessions in most Nigerian dioceses. What goes on during this period is more like direct preparation for marriage. At this time,

³¹West, *Good News about Sex & Marriage*, 93.

³² Pope Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*: Encyclical on Christian Marriage, no. 61, https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19301231_casti-connubii.html (accessed 13.05.2018).

for fear of losing face and fear of having to start searching all over again, many simply go ahead and get married, rendering their marriage putatively invalid due to lack of sufficient matrimonial consent.

5.2. Predicting Lasting Relationships

Healthy relationships do not just happen, and they can be predicted. In other words, there are certain indicators that a relationship is healthy; that if a marriage arises from it, it will be stable, happy and satisfying. According to Elena Bruun and Anne Ziff, the following are human attitudes that can predict healthy relationships: good sense of humour, sense of commitment, communication skills, determination, education, respectful fighting, flexibility, loyalty to each other, respect for differences, and trust.³³ When those in such relationships move to the next level, i.e. marriage, we can also predict if they will have a satisfying married life. The indicators include: openness; belief in other's goodwill, age, similar backgrounds or appreciation of differences, life goals, values, and lifestyle, absence of addiction (drug; drink, sex), roles assigned to extended family and friends, conflict management, emotional connection and compatibility, balance between individual and family needs, sexual intimacy, common interests, humour and creativity, balancing power and willingness to be influenced, mutually agreed division of labour, couple-esteem, knowledge of couple life stages and changing needs, friendship, and financial security.³⁴ If these predictors are not present at the stage of the courtship, parties in courtship should not waste their time. A broken courtship (even engagement) is better than a broken marriage.

6. Challenges to Honourable Courtship

While there are several challenges to honourable courtship, we shall focus on two from a specific African context – fertility culture and cost of marrying. We should revisit how these have caused many to lose their focus and forced them to abandon what they had hung on to for years – honourable courtship.

6.1. African Fertility Culture

By 'fertility culture' one refers to a culture that places disproportionate emphasis on fertility, procreation, and the emphasis on evidence to procreate (impregnating and getting pregnant, and having children). What then is the challenge here?

³³Elena Lesser Bruun and Anne Ziff, *Marrying Well: The Clinician's Guide to Premarital Education*, New York, NY; London: Northon & Company, 2010, 150-173.

³⁴Bruun and Ziff, *Marrying Well*, 174-206.

Unmarried men and women in relationships in view of marriage find themselves under pressure about evidence of fertility. There is less emphasis on complementarity, happiness, and passionate love. We have seen several unmarried youths who were faced with a catch-22 situation: to demonstrate fertility/virility (by getting pregnant or impregnating) or call an otherwise promising and healthy relationship quits, protecting one's virtue of chastity. Sometimes, parents' consent to marriage depends on the fulfilment of the first condition. If any of the parties, especially the lady, refuses, the man is told to look for someone else. Due to the high ethical and spiritual standards such persons have, they have had to endure long spinsterhood because many families do not believe in 'blind trust' in marriage. Such families do not even accept scientific fertility test. They accept only one proof: pregnancy before marriage.

On the other hand, many have had to compromise their high ethical and spiritual standards, and give in to the 'demonstration of fertility' condition. Yet, this brings them new problems. Given the Church's position on sexual activity and cohabitation prior to marriage *in facie ecclesiae*, once the demonstration of fertility (pregnancy) becomes known, the pregnant unmarried lady is automatically stopped from receiving the sacraments because her pregnant state 'proves' she had been committing fornication, and it is public sin. Hence, admitting her to the sacraments henceforth will be a cause of public scandal.³⁵ So, this hitherto active catholic youth suddenly finds herself out of the mainstream of the Church's sacramental life and activities. Yet, she does not have the guarantee that the man responsible for her pregnancy will hasten things up so that their union can be blessed in the Church. She might be in that state of 'sacramental exclusion' and marginalisation for years. Even though the relationship is fertile (fruitful), it is no longer healthy and the parties are living in a state of constant tension, unhappiness, and public embarrassment. With time, some simply drift further away from the Church until they drop out of the Catholic faith completely. Again, African 'fertility culture' creates another set of ethical and emotional challenge for another set of unmarried youths: those who, against their standards and with a heavy heart, give in to the pressure of 'demonstration of fertility.' Many are jilted leaving them to grieve over their soiled conscience. How can young people have an

³⁵Of course this pastoral approach follows the rigorist school of morality. While pastors who adopt this approach argue that any concession would encourage promiscuity and bring the church to public ridicule, this approach lacks 'mercy'. It does not accept that God's mercy received at the confessional can lead the penitent to seek to normalize relations with the Church faster than when met with rigour and lack of mercy.

honourable courtship in such a 'fertility obsessed' environment? What about love? What about trust in divine providence? The union as man and wife is efficacious not only when there is biological fertility (human achievement). Human survival does not depend on our human achievement in procreating. It depends on divine providence.

6.2. Cost of Marrying

The second challenge is the cost of marrying and how this affects the ability and sustainability of forming honourable courtship. It is really expensive to get married these days. There are several stories and anecdotes about how several men and women have had to delay marriage or wait endlessly because of the expensive material requirements that the male partner has to fulfil. The irony here is that the demanding party does not emphasise fertility at this stage. If the lady becomes pregnant prior to the beginning of negotiation, the material requirements might even double because of the indignation that the young man had started reaping from where he did not sow before coming to ask permission from the 'owners' of the vineyard.

Sometimes, by the time the prospective wife's family is done with the material requirements, the bachelor must be looking for something around half a million naira (₦500,000.00). Two things happen. On one hand, the young man postpones the marriage process and goes in search of work to raise money – sometimes it takes years and the woman's 'biological clock' is ticking away. What are the implications for this relationship that took years of gathering money to establish? High cost of marrying unfortunately gives the man the power to own and possess the wife. This is why some men have the audacity to beat and mistreat their 'hitherto sweethearts.' Such women find themselves trapped because if they dare walk away, their families will be forced to pay compensation for the money and gifts they received at their marriage.³⁶ The high cost of marrying has equally led many women to enter into loveless marriages because the rich now exploit this. Families now give their daughters to the highest bidder. This is gradually destroying the notion of 'married for love.' Women then become the exclusive property of their husbands who do with them as they deem fit.

High cost of marrying also correlate the crazily sought after 'society wedding.' Only few can afford this. Ironically, sometimes it is just one party that desires that 'society wedding.' Sometimes while the female party simply wants a simple wedding just for her to return

³⁶Amuluche Nnamani, "Gender Equality in the Church and the Society: Our Obligation towards Change," in *Gender Equality: From a Christian Perspective*, ed. Rose Uchem, Enugu: SNAAP, 2005, 30-31.

to the sacraments, the male party is working hard just to impress that he has arrived. Sometimes, it is the other way round. While the man wants to rake together his little resources for a simple wedding, the woman on her part is insisting on having a society wedding which will make her peers green with envy. The fact is that only a few men and women in Africa today can afford these expensive weddings. The implication is that there is increase in what the church calls 'concubinage' even in the villages. Some, in order to meet up with the expensive expectations, turn to crime and prostitution.

Due to the high costs, sometimes the man painfully bids the lady 'goodbye' with whom he had built an honourable courtship for years, and starts the search all over again for a lady from a place with a 'cheaper price tag.' In this case, happiness and complementarity are sacrificed for pragmatism and common sense. Indeed, agreeing with Laurenti Magesa, "many of the heterosexual customs and much of the behaviour in Africa are no longer instruments of life but of death."³⁷

7. Building Honourable Courtship and the Future

To confront positively challenges about romance, sex, and lasting relationships that will lead to marriage and happiness ever after, one must remember a few things. First, love is based on an electricity of attraction,³⁸ most times making us experience 'intoxicated excitement.'³⁹ However, right from the period of courtship that is truly honourable, those courting should learn to cultivate "'daily life as sexual spirituality."⁴⁰ By this, Harold Ellens means a way of life that sustains and improves interpersonal relationship of those with special relational bond. This demands working to have 'congenial relationship' with one's lover every day.⁴¹ Developing a 'congenial relationship' causes the brain to produce another set of chemicals called 'endorphins.' Endorphins provide increased sense of "peace, tranquillity, and security."⁴²

Second, those who are in courtship, or engaged, even newly married, should never forget to constantly 'fall in love' with themselves: "'falling in love, being in love, passionately desiring to

³⁷Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*, New York, NY: Orbis, 2004, 256.

³⁸Raymond Aina, "Relatio Synodi, Healthy Relationships and Young Families: A Moral Theological Reflection in view of Marriage Catechumenate," *Nigerian Journal of Religion and Society* 5 (June 2015) 3.

³⁹Aina, "Relatio Synodi, Healthy Relationships and Young Families," 4.

⁴⁰Aina, "Relatio Synodi, Healthy Relationships and Young Families," 5.

⁴¹J. Harold Ellens, *The Spirituality of Sex*, Westport, CT; London: Praeger, 2009, 24. Please verify whether the modification done is correct.

⁴²Ellens, *The Spirituality of Sex*, 25.

make love, and enduring in love for a life.”⁴³ Constant ‘falling in love’ means “a constant overriding and undergirding awareness of the mutuality of meaning we share with our lover or spouse. And that is what enmeshes us with each other, spiritually and sexually.”⁴⁴ Third, honourable courtship is not the end. As they inch towards marriage, parties must avoid the mistake of more than 90% married couples. They wander off emotionally because of other existential needs. Husbands become strangers to wives in their homes. Wives transfer tenderness and nurturing hunger to kids – not husbands. One hopes that none engaged in honourable courtship today will ever have to write this poem to that man or woman of their dreams with whom they had an honourable courtship:

Can I care to keep love lively?
 Can I count on you for that?
 Are we just two cool friends: no warmth,
 No love?
 We could try
 The simple tender touching
 That we knew well so long ago.
 And startle away again
 The kind and gentle tenderness.
 True love.⁴⁵

8. Conclusion

Amoris Laetitia has been a principal inspiration for this contribution. Pope Francis asserts that the most important task in pastoral care of family today is “the pastoral effort to strengthen marriages and thus to prevent their breakdown” (AL, 307). The permanence of marriage does not just happen; it is a lifelong project which demands activity and creativity (AL, 218) within a moral framework that views marriage as “friendship marked by passion, but a passion always directed to an ever more stable and intense union” (AL, 125). This is the good news about marriage and Christian sexual ethics which youths today want and need to hear (AL, 1). The pastoral care of marriage and family as envisioned in *Amoris Laetitia*, this contribution has argued, must begin long before the sacramental celebration of matrimony. This message and moral formation must begin in the home, as part of remote preparation for marriage, and specifically during courtship as the parties have marriage in view.

⁴³Aina, “*Relatio Synodi*, Healthy Relationships and Young Families,” 5.

⁴⁴Ellens, *Spirituality of Sex*, 25.

⁴⁵Ellens, *Spirituality of Sex*, 110-111.