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Editorial

Amoris Laetitia

As we all know, *Amoris Laetitia* (AL) was published following the two Synods on the family, the Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 2014 and the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2015. Expectations of changes in the moral teaching of the Church were high. In particular some of the controversial issues were taken up for discussion and many expected radical changes in the teaching of the Church. Fortunately or unfortunately, such drastic changes did not happen either at the deliberations of the Synods, or in the Apostolic Exhortation AL. However, even months after its publication, the debate is going on whether AL has made any change at all. The debates and controversies are centred on AL's teaching on irregular situations, especially regarding the communion for the divorced and the remarried. Evidently, footnote 351 has been one of the most contentious issues. It is doubtful whether any other papal document after *Humanae Vitae* has been so much discussed and debated.

In spite of the controversies and debates that continue, AL is appreciated for its sense of realism: It is rooted in a profound awareness of the challenges and crisis that the families face today. Instead of denying this reality AL tries to understand it approaching this reality from various angles, making use of various sources. The reflections on the family and the crisis it faces, and the solutions suggested do not arise from some preconceived ideas and ideals; rather, often the reality leads to reflections on the ideals proposed, and even a critical evaluation of those ideals. Thus, AL shows how theology should become contextual if it has to be sensible and relevant. Moreover, despite the crisis the Church's attitude is not that of despair and helplessness. Instead, the crisis leads the Church to a

renewed commitment to its ministry to the families – with deeper understanding and more profound compassion.

AL is basically a pastoral document. This does not mean that it does not have any theological basis. That is, ‘pastoral’ is not in opposition to ‘theological.’ Rather, AL develops its pastoral approach rooted in the theological tradition of the Church, making use of various theological principles applied in pastoral practice. Even critics would appreciate how smartly and insightfully AL makes use of various moral principles and approaches in the Christian tradition. Only a few examples: 1. The use of the Natural Law concept (AL, 304): AL refers to St Thomas’ concept of natural law, and shows that although at the level of the fundamental precept no exception is possible, when it descends to details, that is, when it comes to norms for concrete action, exceptions are possible; 2. Mitigating factors: referring to the *Catechism of the Church* and the moral tradition, AL makes it very clear that mitigating factors can lessen or extenuate moral responsibility (AL, 301-303); 3. AL defends the primacy of the conscience. This implies that the conscience has the right and duty to discern what is to be done in a given situation, and after a diligent discernment when it decides upon something even if it is different from the directives given, its inviolability and dignity are to be respected; 4. Law of gradualness (AL, 295), which refers to the Catholic moral tradition, especially to the teaching of Pope John Paul II. 5. One of the underlying principles of AL is that any principle or moral norm has to be applied with mercy, understanding and discerning the practical, concrete situation of the person. Thus, accompanying persons and discerning their contexts, AL invites the Christian community to integrate everyone into its life. One of the accusations against AL has been that it marks a break with the tradition. However, AL’s use of the above mentioned principles from the Catholic moral tradition makes it clear that it is not proposing a break with the tradition, but it is in continuity with the tradition. However, it has to be pointed out that the teaching and interpretation from the part of the authority had been rather rigid, which is reflected also in some of the criticisms against AL. Often the attempt in the past was to apply the norms without exception to the concrete situations. Here AL marks a difference, namely, making use of norms from the Catholic tradition itself, it opens ways for different practices, inspired by mercy. Thus, although AL does not explicitly change any norm, it gives the possibility for different practices. Here it may be

remembered that history shows how change in practice gradually leads to change even of the norms.

AL does not attempt to dictate solutions which are to be applied in the same manner everywhere and at all times. Instead, it calls for a creative and faithful response rooted in the Gospel values, sensitive to the context, respecting the dignity and freedom of conscience of persons. Perhaps, something new in the methodology of Pope Francis, especially in *Amoris Laetitia*, may be the change in the style of the magisterial teaching itself: At least since Vatican I, especially with the definition of Infallibility and Primacy, magisterial or Catholic teaching meant that everything is defined, or everything is stated in clear-cut terms. Especially in this document, the Pope does not follow that style. Instead, the style is dialogical, invitational. The Pope makes it clear that, “not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. 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” (no. 3). In *Amoris Laetitia* everything is not in black and white. This can be considered to be something new in the magisterial teaching style, since it gives the possibility of different practices in the Church. Based on this, various Bishops’ conferences have given guidelines for pastoral practices, which may be different when we go to the details. Differences in practice do not show confusion or lack of unity in the Church. Unity does not mean uniformity.

Although the articles in this issue do not give an exhaustive exposition of AL and the various issues it addresses, they deal with a variety of perspectives and try to present a comprehensive view of the various issues raised by AL. Peter Hünemann analyses AL from the perspective of dogmatic theology, presenting its structure and content and emphasising its synodal character. After dealing in detail with the dogmatic elements in the introduction of AL, the sacramental character of marriage, and the dogmatic significance of the much discussed chapter 8 and its implications for the “Church order,” Hünemann gives an overview of the innovations made by AL. Alexander Izuchukwu Abasili, inspired by AL’s use of the biblical teaching on marriage, especially as seen in the creation narratives, shows how AL reflects the contemporary biblical understanding of marriage and gender relationship. James Mathew Pampara tries to understand AL using the principles of interpretation of Canon Law. His basic premise is that AL has to be understood in the

light of 'text in the context and by looking into the mind of the author.' While showing in detail AL's continuity with the previous documents, he also indicates that AL opens up ways for changes in practice, though this has not yet led to changes in law, at least from a technical perspective. Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler ask whether AL has changed anything. Their answer is 'yes' and 'no', in the sense that it has not changed any Catholic doctrine, though it has changed Catholic pastoral practice. They explain this answer, especially referring to AL's use of the traditional Catholic doctrines on the freedom of conscience and on the mitigating factors, and their application to issues like divorce and remarriage and cohabitation. They underscore that, Pope Francis, following Jesus' practice, 'has abandoned the moral method that focuses only on law,' and invites the Church to focus 'on grace and virtue, particularly the virtues of mercy, love and prudence.'

The significance of AL cannot be limited to a few controversial issues, argues Josmy Jose. She substantiates this by explaining how AL highlights the theme of education in the family. AL presents the family as the Sacred Space of learning and how it becomes the school of love. It also speaks about the transmission of faith in the families. Education of children and their faith formation help the family to "respond to its natural call to become a visible sign of the tenderness of God in space and in time." Scaria Kanniyakonil explores into the theological concept of human life in AL and argues that even though AL is specifically about the theology of marriage and family, it has highlighted the concept of human life. In light of AL and previous documents, he discusses the fundamental theological concepts of human life and the different bioethical issues.

Klaus Vellguth deals with one of the most important premises of AL, namely, the importance and need of intercultural respect of questions concerning the cultural shaping of the family and the inculturation of traditional concepts of marriage and the family. Although inculturation has been an important concern in various areas of theological thinking and practice, in moral theology it was often considered impossible since moral norms were considered absolute and universal. Vellguth explains how AL paves the way for culturally influenced moral theological approaches in different contexts. Pointing out that there are attempts to read AL from a legal perspective alone, Nihal Abeyasingha argues that the Catholic tradition stands for gradualness not in the law, but in life. His discussion is particularly prompted by the 'dubia' expressed by

the four cardinals. In light of the Catholic moral tradition, especially referring to the natural law tradition, he argues that morality cannot be equated to law. According to Jojo M. Fung, rather than a rupture with the tradition, AL takes the magisterial teaching further. Particularly referring to AL's guidelines regarding the pastoral care for those in irregular situations, Fung shows how those in irregular situations are helped to find a way out 'within the recesses of their hearts and their worshipping communities.' He underscores that "accompaniment, discernment and integration has become a new way of being Church."

Growing number of divorces and remarriages makes *Amoris Laetitia* very significant for the Catholic Church of Kerala (India), point out Paul Parecattil and Geevarghese Kaithavana. Besides discussing the need of pastoral care for the divorced and remarried, they also offer a few proposals for the implementation of AL in the Kerala Church. They invite the Church to be guided by the logic of mercy. Raymond Olusesan Aina is of the opinion that the two Synods on the family were more concerned about the issues of the Western Church, whereas some of the pressing concerns of the African Churches, and in general those of the global south, were not given due importance. He feels that these concerns do not appear in AL as well. He also refers to some of the burning concerns that the Sub-Saharan Church faces regarding marriage, family and sexuality, and points out how AL can help the Church respond to such issues. Joseph Loic Mben argues for a renewed pastoral approach for polygamy in the African church. He says that the church's strategy in changing attitudes towards polygamy in Africa has failed. He believes that AL, with its emphasis on discernment and the law of gradualness, provides the possibility of a new and holistic approach to polygamy that goes beyond the mere issue of the reception of the sacraments, rooted in the conviction that polygamous families also need the compassionate pastoral care of the Church. Rhoderick John S. Abellanosa, reading AL from the context of the Philippines, argues that to respond creatively to the call of AL, the Church has to attend to internal reforms. This, according to him, particularly means addressing the issue of clericalism. He underscores that clericalism is synonymous to narcissism, arrogance, and elitism, and that only if clericalism is overcome the Church can be an agent of compassion.

It seems that the debate over some of the issues raised by AL will continue, at least for some time. However, in appreciating the contribution of AL, we should not restrict ourselves to such

controversial issues alone. First of all, AL presents a comprehensive idea of the Christian family, beginning from the biblical vision. Moreover, there is a clear emphasis on the concrete realities and complexities in the life of the families. Throughout the document, it is clear that the Pope is not speaking as a judge, but as someone who 'has the smell of the sheep.' Instead of applying hard and fast rules to all the families and situations, the attempt is to meet the families where they are and to invite them to experience the all-embracing mercy of God and the joy that God offers to every family and every person. Above all, the Pope respects the consciences of people, and urges "to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations" (no. 37).

In spite of the challenges faced, AL is optimistic in its approach: "families are not a problem; they are first and foremost an opportunity" (AL, 7). This optimism will continue to inspire the Church's pastoral care for the families.

Shaji George Kochuthara
Editor-in-Chief