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Receiving *Amoris  
Laetitia*: Learning  
and Listening as a  
Global Church

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# Receiving *Amoris Laetitia*: Learning and Listening as a Global Church

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Suzanne Mulligan

From the 11th to the 14th of May, approximately 140 Catholic ethicists met in Rome to consider the reception of *Amoris Laetitia*. The conference was organised by the Pontifical Gregorian University and the John Paul II Pontifical Theological Institute for Marriage and Family Sciences. Its focus was on the pastoral and ethical dimensions of marriage and sexuality, as well as on the reception of the document within our world Church.

Theologians from the Global South, Europe and North America spoke; the presence of lay people, especially lay women, among the panelists was notable; and participants heard theologians speak from different ethical perspectives. The plurality of voices was met with respect and professionalism; there were no attempts to undermine or dismiss the contributions of those with whom one may not fully agree. Rather, there was a sense that we were on a common journey, and that we had many miles yet to travel as we searched for ways forward amidst the complexity of being human. As the conference organisers made clear, we gathered not to simply repeat what had been already said, but instead to examine “theological and moral issues in a constructive dialogue with human experience. This experience is considered both universal and always contextual by particular cultures and personal events”.

The four days of plenary papers and break-out sessions were indeed a reflection of our global Church. On the first day Fernando Vidal (Madrid), Eric Ginilo (Philippines), Sr. Veronica Rop (Kenya), Claudia Leal (Chile), and Emilia Palladino (Italy) considered the implications, challenges and reception of the Apostolic Exhortation in each of their regional contexts. The theme of the second day was Church, Sacrament and Pastoral Challenges. Speakers included Philippe Bordeyne (John Paul II Institute, Rome), Maria Clara Bingemer (Brazil), Hélèn Bricout (France), and Sigrid Müller (Germany). The final two days explored the family as *kairos* for moral theology, as well as moral method, discernment, conscience and natural law, with theologians from South Africa (Anthony

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Egan), Argentina (Maria Martha Cúneo), Italy (Maurizio Chiodi) and India (Shaji Kochuthara) providing expertise here.

This is only a partial outline of the programme, with many other theologians speaking on a variety of topics. But it does, one hopes, illustrate the inclusivity of the event and the broad spectrum of voices and perspectives represented. What follows is a discussion of some key points raised during the conference; time and space do not allow for the thorough analysis that the contributions deserve.

## FAMILY LIFE AND MORAL DISCERNMENT

In *Amoris Laetitia* Pope Francis deals more directly with contemporary realities of family life than his predecessors did. He realises that family life today includes single-parent families, mixed-race families, parents who are separated, and “rainbow” families. Francis tries to provide an understanding of the changing dynamic of family life that is positive and hopeful, one that brings to life the Gospel message, and one which he hopes will be attractive to younger generations. He is aware also of the prevalence of many forms of sexual injustice; he recognises the strains that migration puts on families; he condemns the trafficking of women and girls for the sex industry; and highlights the reality of female genital mutilation that harms girls and deny them the possibility of sexual pleasure. He shows concern for families who lack adequate housing and for families of persons with special needs or disability.

It is to these changing realities that Lisa Sowle-Cahill (Boston College) turned in her paper. She began by acknowledging the often messy and difficult realities of family life. Families can be tough. Relationships are hard, requiring patience, tolerance and forgiveness. And marriage is often dangerous, especially for women and girls. The ongoing subordination of women and girls around the world, as well as the pervasiveness of sinful sexual attitudes, contributes to the abuse, discrimination and exclusion of females in the home and in society. Indeed, the family is where women and girls most frequently encounter violence; marriage is where women (especially in the Global South) regularly become HIV positive. Cahill observed that the sin of gender injustice leads to a double-standard morality towards females, especially regarding matters of sexuality and reproduction. Gender discrimination is a particular manifestation of social sin, and the sins of misogyny and sexism pose a major obstacle to the reception of *Amoris Laetitia* globally.

Cahill also said that magisterial teaching ought to more clearly reflect the Gospel message of mercy, compassion, and patience amidst human failure. As we read in *Amoris Laetitia* n.38: “Many

people feel that the Church's message on marriage and the family does not clearly reflect the preaching and attitudes of Jesus, who set forth a demanding ideal yet never failed to show compassion and closeness to the frailty of individuals like the Samaritan woman or the woman caught in adultery". Pope Francis wants to show how these core tenets of the Gospel shed light on how we can accompany people in their daily lives and struggles. Rather than thinking in rigid terms, in ways that exclude and hurt, Francis is calling on the Church to be creative and caring in discerning new ways forward. "Discernment", he tells us, "must help find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of limits. By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God" (*Amoris Laetitia*, n.305).

For Cahill, moral discernment is a communal endeavor; we learn, grow, heal, and act in community. Discernment should not be confused with blind obedience; it is not to be equated with the rules drawn up by the few for the many. Rather, true discernment leaves room for moral failure – failure, after all, is part of the human condition.

In a similar vein, Stephanie Höllinger (Mainz) highlighted that love co-exists with imperfection. We must therefore focus on the *concrete realities* of human beings as well as on abstract moral principles. A theology that is defensive, suspicious, and unwilling to engage in true dialogue, will offer little joy or hope to the People of God. Echoing Cahill, discernment, Höllinger said, is a dynamic, ongoing process, rooted in the relational and in the family.

Philippe Bordeyne (Pontifical John Paul II Institute, Rome) spoke about *morality as encounter*, insisting on the importance of grace, and of hearing the moral experiences of others, especially those on the "edges". He argued that the Church must acknowledge and learn from the chaos that often accompanies people's lives. In other words, complexity, difference, and failure form part of our relationships, and Church leadership must incorporate these lived experiences into its teachings and pastoral practices. As Pope Francis reminds us, we must avoid "a cold bureaucratic morality in dealing with more sensitive issues. Instead, ... a pastoral discernment filled with merciful love, which is ever ready to understand, forgive, accompany, hope, and above all integrate. That is the mindset which should prevail in the Church and lead us to 'open our hearts to those living on the outermost fringes of society'" (*Amoris Laetitia*, n.312).

Julio Martinez (Madrid) argued that Francis' application of discernment to family life is a "new thing in moral theology". How so? Since Vatican II the importance of discernment in social ethics

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has been widely accepted. An inductive, historically conscious methodology is applied to the highly diverse socio-economic realities of our world. By contrast, a deductive, universal, and rigid methodology is used within sexual and bio-medical ethics. But for Martinez, what we are now seeing in *Amoris Laetitia* is a more prominent role for moral discernment in what he calls “matters of personal morality”. In an interview for *America* shortly after the conference, Martinez elaborated on this: “The moral life is incomplete without personal and pastoral discernment”.<sup>1</sup> Contrasting *Amoris Laetitia* with *Veritatis Splendor*, Martinez argues that “*Veritatis Splendor* very much fears what is called ‘creative conscience’”, and places its emphasis on adhering to “the rules and the norms of the magisterium, and especially the magisterium of the pope, whose role it is to recognize and formulate the norms so the faithful can know and follow them.”<sup>2</sup> But a truly moral response, as we know, cannot be imposed. The moral person acts with honesty, integrity and freedom, not out of fear or out of blind obedience to authority. Since the discerning spirit is fundamental to any genuine moral response, Pope Francis calls theologians, pastors and all people of good will to this task of discernment. And perfecting the art of discernment takes time, patience, and humility. It is an art guided by the Holy Spirit, lived out in prayerful reflection, and carefully crafted within communities of love and support.

## WOMEN AND SEXUAL INJUSTICE

“History is burdened by the excesses of patriarchal cultures that considered women inferior”, Francis tells us in *Amoris Laetitia* n.54. And in one of the most provocative papers of the conference, Emily Reimer-Barry (University of San Diego) assessed *Amoris Laetitia* against the backdrop of women’s ongoing subordination throughout the world. In no country today have women achieved economic equality with men; women are often paid less to perform the same jobs as men; women remain more likely than men to live in poverty; they work in lower paid jobs, they work longer days, have fewer legal protections, and perform twice as much unpaid care-work as men. And despite educational progress in recent decades, women constitute over two-thirds of the world’s 796 million illiterate people.

Church institutions perpetuate gender-based economic inequality. Reimer-Barry explained that in 2019, although 24%

1 <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/05/27/amoris-laetitia-pope-francis-rome-julio-martinez-sj-243066>

2 Ibid.

of employees at the Holy See were women, most worked in low-power and low-paid jobs with few promotional opportunities, limited by what she called the “stained glass ceiling”. Of course, this “stained glass ceiling” extends to many religious institutions other than the Vatican. Can we therefore credibly affirm the equal dignity of women or proclaim their “genius” (as John Paul II put it), while simultaneously denying them equal pay and equal access to career advancement within Church organisations?

There is a connection between gender roles and diminished social and economic opportunities for women. Gender roles vary from culture to culture, but all too often cultural and religious based gender stereotypes place women in inferior, and often dangerous, situations. Fewer girls remain in school than boys; child marriage persists with approximately 12 million girls each year forced into marriage before the age of 18. Furthermore, the home is often the most dangerous place for women and girls. Shockingly, the UN states that 13% of women and girls between the ages of 15 and 49 have been subjected to intimate partner violence in the past 12 months, and that 1 in 3 women globally will experience physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lifetime. Globally, 47,000 women died in 2020 at the hands of their partner or family member, which equates to one woman or girl being killed every 11 minutes in their home.

Reimer-Barry believes that Church teaching on the sanctity of marriage has failed to protect millions of women. Catholic sexual teaching, she argued, limits women’s bodily autonomy, undermines women’s agency, and proposes a theology of “woman” that places too great an emphasis on “motherhood”. I would add that magisterial teaching does not go far enough in confronting and condemning the “toxic masculinity” which perpetuates these problems.<sup>3</sup> Reimer-Barry acknowledged many of the strengths of *Amoris Laetitia*, but called on Catholic theologians to do more to address its shortcomings. She included here the endorsement of gender norms that often lend acceptance to gender-based inequalities and violence; the insistence on the “ideal family” as heterosexual, procreative, and patriarchal; and a lack of understanding of the extent to which misogyny, colonialism, heterosexism, and racism are embedded in Catholic theology.<sup>4</sup>

3 By this I mean male stereotypes that place priority on physical strength and power, as well as views of men as dominant and dominating. At best, such stereotypes contribute to an increase in misogynistic and sexist attitudes; at worst, it contributes to rising levels of violence and abuse against women and girls, often leading to serious harm and death.

4 For an excellent article on this latter point see Bryan Massingale, “Has the Silence Been Broken? Catholic Theological Ethics and Racial Justice”, *Theological Studies*, vol.75, issue 1, (2014), 133-55.

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Taking Reimer-Barry's criticisms on board, and echoing the work of other theologians such as the late Kevin Kelly, we can say that magisterial teaching must denounce more forcefully child marriages, female genital mutilation, arranged marriages, the sexual, physical and emotional abuse of women within marriage, and the growing prevalence of misogyny and sexism within society. Would it not be a more credible witness to the Gospel if Church teaching was as renowned for its denunciation of these injustices as it is for its opposition to same-sex marriages and artificial contraception? As Julie Clague explains:

How well does Pope Francis's Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family confront these stark realities? *Amoris Laetitia* is addressed to the world Church, but in its focus on Western concerns such as divorce-remarriage it neglects to adequately address the multiplicity of problems facing families ... In so doing, it misses an important opportunity to broaden Catholic discourse about marriage and family life, and to mobilise Catholic action on behalf of the world's poorest families and their most vulnerable and victimised members.<sup>5</sup>

### LEARNING TO LISTEN: THE WITNESS OF GAY LOVE AND RAINBOW FAMILIES

In writing *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis faced an unenviable task. Not dissimilar to the situation of Pope Paul VI when writing *Humanae Vitae*, both sides of the theological divide waited in anticipation to see how – if at all – the Holy Father might progress Catholic sexual teaching. Some hoped for greater advancement on matters such as same-sex unions, while others hoped he would maintain traditional teaching on marriage and the family. And it is hard to keep everyone happy! Some were left feeling deeply concerned by the Apostolic Exhortation, while others felt Francis shied away from some difficult, urgent, questions.

One such question is same-sex unions, and Aaron Bianco (University of San Diego) covered this theme in his paper. His methodology was engaging. Rather than debating magisterial teaching on homosexuality, Bianco introduced his listeners to the stories of 4 members of the LGBTQI+ Catholic community whom he knows. With their permission, he recounted their experiences of being gay or transgender Catholics. Their stories were powerful, and as I listened to them it became clear to me that

5 Julie Clague, "Amoris Laetitia and the State of the World's Families", in *Vocation and Mission of the Family: Reflections on Chavarul and Amoris Laetitia*, edited by Shaji George Kochuthara, (Bengaluru, India: Dharmaram Publications, 2020), 260.

I was encountering a moment of “glad grace”.<sup>6</sup> Theirs were stories of ordinary women and men, in committed relationship with God, but who longed for acceptance by the institutional Church. Theirs were stories of hurt, exclusion, and discrimination. And although there were threads of joy and hope weaved into these narratives also, there is no denying the fact that for many of our LGBTQI+ sisters and brothers, the Catholic Church has become synonymous with bigotry, misunderstanding, and exclusion.

Where do we go from here? Francis uses the idea of accompaniment throughout *Amoris Laetitia*, and we hear it applied to people on the “fringes” of our Church. But it is often spoken of from the perspective of how *the Church* can accompany others – the divorced and remarried, gay couples and so on. And although that is a necessary discussion, I wonder also how divorced and remarried Catholics or members of the LGBTQI+ community can accompany the Church. What can the Church learn *from them*? How might *their witness* illuminate our collective journeying towards union with God?

Italian Jesuit Antonio Autiero reminds us that accompaniment “helps to rediscover the existential, dynamic, and sometimes conflictual dimension of moral demands. Accordingly, accompanying means going back to the life story, to the unfolding of the personal biographies with their evolutions and their complications”.<sup>7</sup> Accompaniment and narrative go together, he says. Narrative is not understood here simply as an account of what has happened, but rather as “the framework on which one can weave visions of life and of history, the relevance of subjectivity and of relationships, openness to the table of values, and discernment of the concrete choices that must be taken in order to realize these values ... narrative brings into circulation a dense web of experiences that have been lived, reflected upon, and communicated. And these experiences open up creative horizons in terms of reciprocity of subjects, all of whom are under way in the stories of their lives”.<sup>8</sup>

Through sharing the life-stories of his four fellow parishioners, Bianco demonstrated that human experience is a valuable source

6 This is a phrase borrowed from the work of Vincent MacNamara. See, *The Call to be Human: Making Sense of Morality*, (Dublin: Veritas, 2010), 240. “Let us not forget that we have all known also our moments of glad grace. I would bet that we have been astonished just as much by the goodness, the sacrifice, the commitment, that we often find around us, as by the crookedness and venality”.

7 Antonio Autiero “Pastoral Accompaniment: *Amoris Laetitia* as a Paradigm?”, in *Vocation and Mission of the Family: Reflections on Chavarul and Amoris Laetitia*, edited by Shaji George Kochuthara, (Bengaluru, India: Dharmaram Publications, 2020), 286.

8 *Ibid.*, 288.



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of moral wisdom, and confirmed the need to listen more intently to the voices of those who are marginalized in the Church. In other words, the Church and its pastors need to be accompanied by the witness, wisdom, and love of marginalized Catholics, by their stories of joy and sorrow, and by their commitment to our loving God.

## CONCLUSION

*Amoris laetitia* is a crucial document in magisterial teaching on marriage and the family. Along with his predecessors, Francis continues a conversation about these urgent and vital human concerns. This is not a perfect document, of course, and no doubt debate will continue for some time about its strengths and shortcomings. The four-day conference in Rome was an example of how we can dialogue with each other in meaningful and mature ways about sensitive topics. There was collective acceptance of the importance of mercy, compassion, and accompaniment as we aim to better understand, receive, and implement the riches of *Amoris Laetitia*.

But if we are to take seriously the tasks of accompaniment and of journeying together towards a fuller understanding of God, and if we are to grow as Church in the gentleness and hospitality of Christ, then we must work to heal the deep wounds of homophobia, racism, gender discrimination, and hierarchicalism.<sup>9</sup> And part of that task is naming these wounds, acknowledging them, and asking forgiveness for the harms they have inflicted. It also demands that we remain vigilant to the ways in which our liturgies are sometimes used to condemn and exclude. Thankfully, the sacraments are not earned, but rather are the spiritual gifts that heal and nourish our sinful lives. They are where we all encounter undeserved mercy and unconditional love.

9 On this point see James F. Keenan SJ, "Hierarchicalism", *Theological Studies*, vol.83, issue 1 (2022).