

POPE FRANCIS' LOVE LETTER IS AN OPPORTUNITY LOST

Amoris Laetitia, Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family, leaves much to be desired—pun intended.

If you are heterosexual, married, divorced, and remarried with an understanding parish priest, you have reason to be hopeful that your “irregular situation” can be fixed. If you use most forms of effective birth control, have an abortion, or are a sexually active LGBTIQ Catholic, you might as well read Dante and/or seek another denomination if you expect to be treated with equality, dignity, and respect.

The “Joy Love Club” is members-only.

The document reflects the papal conundrum of pastoring realistically in the contemporary world without changing any church doctrine or major teaching. The result is unequal opportunity ambiguity. Some things can be parsed—as in the communion debate—while other things are off the table, such as same-sex marriage. Rationales for such decisions are lacking other than wan references to previous church teachings. It reminds this reader of Francis' openness to gay priests (“Who am I to judge?”) and his claim that the ordination of women is a settled matter. Settled by and for whom?

Once again the patriarchal power paradigm is shored up by a pope who likes to have it both ways. Certain pastoral decision-making is kicked downstairs to priests and bishops, but that is effectively how things work now. Theology follows practice.

The fundamental problem in this document is methodological: there is only one ideal—heteronormative uncontracepted sex in monogamous marriage—in relation to which everything else is derivative, lesser, lacking, and/or forbidden.

At the same time, the Pope wants to welcome and be pastoral to everyone. Catholic market share has slipped precipitously worldwide due in large part to this ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic’ way of looking at sexuality. Thinking, postmodern Catholics simply do not take kindly to such groundless generalities in the face of so much evidence to the contrary. What about Uncles Pat and Bill who love and share so generously?

Amoris Laetitia, the Pope's summary reflections following the 2014 and 2015 Synods on the Family, gives new opportunities to use the term “jesuitical.” While attempting to avoid extremes, the writers do not succeed in squaring the circle.

Only a new method that assumes a wide range of good ways to live without preferring one lifestyle and demeaning the rest can do that. In this document there is a lot of twisting of moral pretzels. What is called for is the direct embrace of all who love in the infinite variety of ways that love can be joyful.



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Published under the name of the current Jesuit pope, the document is really several somewhat disjointed pieces probably written by various authors: a biblical study that cites texts about families with no organizing cohesion; some reflections on families that include traditional tropes; advice to the lovelorn, and a little New Age stuff thrown in for relevance; a lengthy restatement of institutional church teachings on marriage and family; several chapters on love and children; some tentative toying with pastoral changes that reflect what effective priests are already doing; and a spiritual coda cum prayer about the Holy Family.

In an institution that systematically excludes women from every role except mother, it is not surprising that this document reads as if it were written by people who have never gotten up in the night with a crying baby.

There is some soaring rhetoric, for example about adoption and young lovers dancing into the future with hope. But there is a lot of sermoniac material, much taken from the Pope's own weekly homilies, in which he foreshadowed a lot of this document. I can imagine preachers recycling his words for one more wedding mass.

The reader gets the gist early on. A helpful editor would have cut the 261-page document in half and then perhaps again. No one I know was expecting anything earthshattering and we were not disappointed. But the veneer of change and the reality of stagnation are disheartening. Words like "mercy" and "tenderness" do not in and of themselves change much on the ground if the paradigm does not shift.

Repeated references to *Humanae Vitae*, the so-called birth control encyclical, are meant to underscore that only Natural Family Planning techniques are licit. No news here. The authors were able to weave in opposition to abortion (called "an evil"), in vitro fertilization, even euthanasia. The touchstones of Roman Catholic ethical orthodoxy are firmly in place.

But they made connections between immigration, human trafficking, and unfair wages that tear at the fabric of families. This suggests that there might be more factors in an ethical analysis of love than what Daniel C. Maguire has so aptly called "the pelvic zone issues" to which too much Catholic institutional attention is paid.

The problem is that this document is based on the notion of a patriarchal ideal family: Mom, Dad and as many children as the Lord sends, with everything else referred to as 'complex' or 'irregular,' 'imperfect' or the result of 'human weakness.' At its best, an intact same-sex family is defined out; a divorced and remarried couple of any sexual orientation is an ethical also-ran.

There are some feeble efforts to make such people feel welcome in the Roman Catholic Church, but just as long as they realize they are on moral thin ice. In postmodernity, families come in all sizes and shapes. Either you acknowledge that and enter into the much touted and Jesuit-tinged process of 'discernment' about the many ways there are to live morally or you don't.

There is lip service to enculturation, the idea that general principles will be lived out variously in different cultures. But there is virtually no hint of how, for example, a same-sex couple in Silver Spring, Maryland, USA, might see itself as morally equivalent to its heterosexually coupled next door neighbors despite the fact that state and federal laws, tax codes, and neighborhood children do not notice any difference.

Apparently nothing that was spoken by lay Catholics at the Synods (who merit nary a mention in the text) seeped into the writers' consciousness—only what was uttered by the "Synod Fathers."

An Opinion and Reflection

Whole swathes of new research on sex and gender are rejected without discussion. Outmoded notions remain about children needing a mother and father for that good old masculine/feminine conditioning. Repetition of the “feminine genius” of women is a clue that some things have not changed at all. Shared parenting and household tasks are mentioned, but men are still seen as helping while women do the domestic heavy lifting. Imagine if two men raised children. Some do, and very well despite the tired stereotypes here. Alas, transgender people will not find their realities reflected in this text.

I found the text troubling at many points. For example, “We need a healthy dose of self-criticism...” especially in light of “an almost exclusive insistence on the duty of procreation.” This is a frank acknowledgement that the institution has alienated its members. But as the document unfolds, especially in the sections on marriage that will be used for marriage preparation, procreation still dominates.

In another instance, the text reads, “as for proposals to place unions between homosexual persons on the same level as marriage, there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God’s plan for marriage and family.” Just what do the writers think marriage is if same-sex marriage is not even in the ballpark? I fear the authors protest too much. That struggle has been won in 22 countries and counting.

In still another dubious section, “sex education [that] deals primarily with ‘protection’ through the practice of ‘safe sex’” is said to “convey a negative attitude towards the natural procreative finality of sexuality, as if an eventual child were an enemy to be protected against. This way of thinking promotes narcissism and aggressivity in place of acceptance.” What? Don’t teach safe sex because it might imply that every heterosexual act is not preordained to procreation? Pass the condoms and stay out of my child’s sex ed class.

What the writers give with flowery praise about the wonders of marriage, they take away with endless repetition of how over

time partners grow less attractive to one another. Please, life unfolds and we with it. Physical attraction plays a relatively minor theme over time, at least for women. What is important is how we love one another in the many constellations of friendship, some of which might include marriage. If you set forth a romantic ideal with uncontracepted heterosex as the pinnacle of relational life, many, if not most people are bound to be disappointed.



If instead, as I have long claimed, friendship is normative, then good people can be friends, lovers, partners, neighbors, community and family members—even hermits. Then the “Holy Family of Nazareth,” “Jesus, Mary and Joseph” (in that order) instead of being the principal model of love would be one among many. I was heartened to see reference to Aristotle and friendship as fundamental—a glimmer of hope for future generations. But for now, the hetero marriage model reigns supreme.

In an institution that systematically excludes women from every role except mother, it is not surprising that this document reads as if it were written by people who have never gotten up in the night with a crying baby. The dog never ate their kid’s homework. Stretching the paycheck to provide fresh, natural foods is not on their radar.

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But sex, the lack of it, how to get it licitly, the consequences of sex for the reception of communion, and other sex-focused ideas to which marriage is all but reduced, is huge. Future such statements, to be useful, will reflect the priorities of most women, including safety, choice, equality, justice, and of course good sex which embodies all of the above.

I sympathize entirely with people, especially young people, who will read this compromise document—the most this pope thought he could sell to a fundamentally conservative base—and decide to look elsewhere for religious community and moral guidance. Fortunately, most people rely on their friends and work colleagues, their neighbors and relatives to model what healthy, integrated lives look like. This document can gather dust without much danger to anyone.

Amoris Laetitia in my view is a missed opportunity for Pope Francis to demonstrate that there is anything new under the Vatican sun. Maybe there isn't. Beyond the document, I think this lost opportunity for Pope Francis may not come around again. Leadership requires both intellectual creativity and raw courage. You don't need to be the sharpest knife in the drawer, but you do need to have the gumption to "throw your life as far as it will go," as feminist philosopher Mary Daly advised.

If this document is any hint, I fear Pope Francis risks being the nice pastoral guy who left his mark on ecology with the encyclical *Laudato Si*, a clear and constructive treatment of pressing global issues. However, on family matters he will be seen as the pope who kept the chair warm between John Paul II/Benedict XVI and the next pontiff.

I prefer the role of the pope to be one who symbolizes unity rather than exercises authority. Nonetheless, I am struck by Francis' choice to act like a would-be unifier on love and a strong authority on the environment. Some will argue that the documents have different ecclesial weights, the exhortation being less definitive than the encyclical. Perhaps Francis actually has an encyclical up his sleeve that will respond to the many splendored things called love today. I rather doubt it.

Unfortunately, nothing in this exhortation changes the ground rules, levels the ethical playing fields, reshapes the decision-making structures of the church, or includes more people, especially women and out LGBTIQ people, in the conversation on the joy of love. It remains a top-down, if at times purposely ambiguous, rendering of how to act without changing the framework in which such actions are set. Not even popes can do the impossible.

