

THE CHURCH'S DOGMA AND DISCIPLINE: A VITAL KEY TO A PROPER INTERPRETATION OF AMORIS LAETITIA

Ohagwa Damian and Onwuachimba Sixtus

INTRODUCTION

On the 19th of March, 2016, the Holy Father, Pope Francis, issued an Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* (the joy of love), following the 2014 and 2015 Episcopal synods on the family. This document which sought to address in concrete terms issues affecting the family in present-day society has evoked diverse reactions, from both the clergy and the lay faithful in the Catholic Church. Debates over the content of the document have also led to questions concerning its orthodoxy. More so, certain theological censures have been leveled against this document. The document has been accused of causing grief and confusion on account of its apparent disagreement with a number of previous teachings of the Catholic Church on faith and morals (Burke 2016). Thus, in interpreting this Apostolic Exhortation, it is pertinent that one is grounded in the Church's teaching on family life, and also knows the mindset of the author, so as to avoid making erroneous interpretations.

To this end, this work seeks to buttress the point that the Church's dogma and discipline, vis-à-vis marriage and family life, is the vital key to a proper interpretation of *Amoris Laetitia*. This will be done by examining the teaching of the Church on the sacramentality of marriage, highlighting the salient points discussed in *Amoris Laetitia*, and stating the tensions which have arisen following its promulgation. Furthermore, it will pay close attention to Chapter eight, the most controversial portion of the document, by trying to bring forth its real teaching; highlighting its guiding principle, which is the logic of pastoral mercy.

TEACHING OF THE CHURCH ON MARRIAGE

Scripture speaks of marriage and its mystery, its institution and meaning, its origin and its end, its various realizations throughout the history of salvation, the difficulties arising from sin and its renewal in the Lord in the New Covenant of Christ and the Church (Catechism 1994, art. 1602). Also, from the creation account and Christ's teaching in Matt 19:3ff, it is observable that the sacrament of marriage is not a human construct, rather it is divinely instituted.

According to the 1983 Code of Canon Law, the sacrament of marriage is a covenant by which "a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of their whole life, and which of its very own nature is ordered to the wellbeing of the spouses and to the procreation and upbringing of children" (Canon Law Society 1983, art. 1055). This definition is reiterated in chapter three of *Amoris Laetitia* (art. 71–75) where it also states that "the sacrament is a gift for the sanctification and salvation of the spouses, since their mutual belonging is a real representation of the relationship between Christ and his church" (Francis 2016, p. 31). This is why the Christian family constitutes a specific realization of the ecclesial communion, and for this reason it can and should be called a *domestic church*" (John Paul II 1981, art. 21) It is a communion of persons, a sign and image of the communion of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. It is called to partake in the prayer and sacrifice of Christ; thus, daily prayers and the reading of the Word of God strengthen it in charity. The relationships within the family bring an affinity of feelings, affections and interests, arising from the members' respect for one another (CCC 1994, art. 2204-2206).

Being a sacrament, marriage is more than a social celebration or a mere liturgical rite; it is an irrevocable and permanent relationship between the couple involved. The conciliar document *Gaudium et Spes* states that "marriage is established by God and qualified by his laws; and is rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent... It is aimed at the continuation of the human race, the personal development and eternal destiny of the individual members of the family, the dignity, stability, peace and prosperity of the family, and of the human society" (Vatican II 1965, G.S. art. 48). The mutual self-giving in the sacrament of matrimony is grounded in the grace of baptism which establishes the fundamental covenant of every person with Christ in the Church (Francis 2016, art. 73). Through this sacrament, the union is sanctified and strengthened by the graces it receives. From the definition it is observable that the essential elements that constitute the sacrament of Christian marriage are: total self-giving, unity, fidelity, indissolubility, and openness to new life.

Total self-giving emerges out of love of the other, and leads to free and mutual gift of selves. It is a gift which proves itself by gentle affection and selfless actions; and leads to intimate unity. Through this the spouses gladly and

gratefully enrich each other. (Vatican II 1965, art. 49). Total self-giving presupposes faithfulness, unity, indissolubility and openness to new life in marriage. Marriage is based on the consent of the contracting parties, that is, on their will to give themselves, each to the other, mutually and definitively, in order to live a covenant of faithful and fruitful love (CCC 1994, art.1662).

The unity of marriage demands that the couple avoid any third party. Marriage is a union of one man and one woman, with the exclusion of all other persons; thus, this union is opposed to the plurality of wives with one man, or one woman with several husbands. This unity of marriage exalts fidelity; it maintains that the spouses remain faithful to each other, respect their matrimonial bed and live chaste lives.

Indissolubility of marriage implies the permanence and perpetuity of the bond between a married couple. Once the sacrament of matrimony is validly contracted and consummated, the spouses become one flesh (cf. Matt 19:6). And they are called to grow continually in this communion through day-to-day fidelity to their marriage promise of total mutual self-giving. "As a mutual gift of two persons, this intimate union, as well as the good of children, imposes total fidelity on the spouses and argues for an unbreakable oneness between them... Thus the sacrament is a vocation and commandment for the Christian spouses, that they remain faithful to each other forever, beyond every trial and difficulty...." (John Paul II 1981, art. 20).

The marital union must be open to procreation, following the command of our Creator in Gen 1:28. Thus the fundamental task of the family is to serve life, to actualize in history the original blessing of the Creator. The transmission of new life presupposes responsible parenthood; "the fruitfulness of conjugal love is not restricted solely to the procreation of children, as understood in its human dimension; it is enlarged and enriched by all those fruits of moral, spiritual and supernatural life which the father and mother are called to hand on to their children..." (John Paul II 1981, art. 28).

AN OVERVIEW OF AMORIS LAETITIA

This post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation has as its aim, the exposition of the current challenges facing the Christian family. It proposes ways through which

families, as domestic churches, can continue to be in communion with the church, notwithstanding their short-comings. The exhortation, pastoral in nature, has 325 paragraphs, distributed over nine chapters. In its introduction the pope makes it clear that, "not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Indeed, for some questions, each country or region can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs. For every general principle needs to be inculturated, if it is to be respected and applied" (Holy See Press Office, 2016).

In its first chapter the document focuses on the family in the light of the word of God, stating that the family is like a practical trade, carried out with tenderness; and that it has been confronted with sin from the beginning. Amidst its challenges, the word of God is a source of comfort and companionship for families in crises (Holy See Press Office 2016).

Chapter two dwells on the current situation of families. Here the pope highlights various forms of challenges attending families in today's society, which range "from immigration to the ideological denial of differences between the sexes; from the culture of the provisional to the anti-birth mentality and the impact of biotechnology in the field of procreation; from the lack of housing and work to pornography and abuse of minors; from inattention to persons with disabilities, to lack of respect for the elderly; and from the legal dismantling of the family, to violence against women" (Holy See Press Office 2016).

He invites us to be real and to meet the families where they are; feeling with them their everyday struggle, so as to develop a better theory of interpretation of reality. If we fail to listen to reality, then we cannot understand the needs of the present or the movements of the Spirit, and will keep holding to an abstract and artificial theological ideal of marriage. He holds that, it is unrealistic to think that families can sustain themselves by stressing doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace (Francis 2016, art. 37). Thus, he calls for a re-evaluation of pastoral approaches to marriage, stating that Jesus proposed an ideal, but never failed to show compassion to the frailty of individuals (Holy See Press Office 2016).

Chapter three is dedicated to an exposition of some elements of the Church's teaching on marriage and the family. It stresses the key teachings of the Church on marriage: unity, indissolubility, the sacramental nature of marriage, the transmission of life, and the education of children. This was done with arguments based on the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*, Pope Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae*, and St. John Paul II's *Familiaris Consortio*. It also highlights the issue of families living in "imperfect situations," like *de facto* marriages, trial marriages, polygamy, etc; stating that these unions, though not perfect *in facie ecclesiae*, they contain some 'seeds of the word', for they uphold some tenets of sacramental marriage.

The Pope goes on to reflect on the issue of "wounded families;" homes which due to tensions which they could not contend, let loose the bond of marriage. This includes single parent families and the divorced and civilly remarried. Here, he brings to the fore their struggle to return to communion with the church, even in their 'broken' state. And he pleads that "Pastors must know that, for the sake of truth, they are obliged to exercise careful discernment of situations. Thus, while clearly stating the Church's teaching, they are to avoid judgments that do not take into account the complexity of various situations, and they are to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience and endure distress because of their condition"(Holy See Press Office 2016).

The fourth chapter treats love in marriage. Dwelling exegetically on the hymn to charity in 1 Cor. 13:4-7, it describes human love in absolutely concrete terms; entering into the emotional world of the spouses, emphasizing the goods therein and the ills that attend it. The pope states that in making judgments on everyday marriage issues, "There is no need to lay upon two limited persons the tremendous burden of having to reproduce perfectly the union existing between Christ and his Church; for marriage as a sign entails 'a dynamic process; one which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God'" (Francis 2016, art. 122).

Chapter five focuses on procreation in marriage. This entails, begetting offspring through natural conception or the expanded fruitfulness of adoption. In this document the Pope refers to family in the broad sense, including uncles, aunts, cousins and relatives. He holds that the family is a network of many

relationships. Against the tide of modern-day individualism, he emphasizes the role of relationship between the youth and the elderly and the relationship between brothers and sisters, as a means of relating well with people in the society (Holy See Press Office 2016).

Chapter six is on pastoral initiatives aimed at forming solid and fruitful families according to God's plan. This has to do with the preparation of the engaged and the accompaniment of couples in the early years of married life. The Pope regrets that some priests lack the required competence to handle the complex challenges facing families today and calls for an improvement of the psycho-affective formation of seminarians (Holy See Press Office 2016). This chapter also treats the accompanying of abandoned, separated or divorced persons. The Pope highlights the suffering of children in situations of conflict and concludes thus: "Divorce is evil and the increasing number of divorces is very troubling. Hence, our most important pastoral task with regard to families is to strengthen their love, help to heal wounds and work to prevent the spread of this drama of our times" (Holy See Press Office 2016). He goes on to address the issue of dealing with persons with homosexual tendencies, stating the necessity to respect and accompany them.

Chapter seven deals with the education of children; in other words, making the family an educational context. This includes their ethical formation, discipline, patience and tolerance, sex education, and helping them grow in faith. On this issue the Pope states that "obsession is not education. If parents are obsessed with always knowing where their children are and controlling all their movements, they will seek only to dominate space. What is most important is the ability to lovingly help them grow in freedom, maturity, overall discipline and real autonomy" (Holy See Press Office 2016). In one of the sections, he treats the "need for sex education." Here he states that "sex education should provide information while keeping in mind that young people have not yet attained full maturity. This education needs to be carried out within the broader framework of an education for love and mutual self-giving" (Francis 2016, art. 281).

The eighth chapter is devoted to the issue of guiding, discerning and integrating those in weak marital situations. Here the Pope admonishes pastors to groom within them the logic of pastoral mercy and proper discernment in addressing

fragile, complex or irregular situations. After extensively outlining the official teaching of the church on marriage, the Pope goes on to say that, the Church "does not disregard the constructive elements in those situations which do not or no longer correspond to her teaching on marriage" (Synod of Bishops 2014, art. 43).

With regard to discerning "irregular" situations, he says that it "is a matter of reaching out to everyone; helping each person find his or her proper way of participating in the ecclesial community" (Holy See Press Office 2016). He also states that, "the baptized who are divorced and civilly remarried need to be more fully integrated into Christian communities in the variety of ways possible, while avoiding any occasion of scandal" (Francis 2016, art.299). On the "logic of pastoral mercy," the Pope states: "At times we find it hard to make room for God's unconditional love in our pastoral activity. We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance" (Francis 2016, art. 311).

The ninth chapter addresses the issue of marital and family spirituality. Here the Pope stresses that, "moments of joy, relaxation, and celebration in the family, even sexuality, can be experienced as a sharing in the full life of the resurrection" (Holy See Press Office 2016). He states that, "all family life is a 'shepherding' in mercy. Each of us, by our love and care, leaves a mark on the life of others" (Holy See Press Office 2016). In the final paragraph of this chapter the Pope states that, "no family drops down from heaven perfectly formed. Families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love" (Francis 2016, art. 325).

As said earlier, this document does not seek to portray the ideal family, but the rich and complex reality observable in family life today. It pays a pastoral attention to the challenges confronting families today. In its tone and language, it appears to be the first of its kind. Observable in it is also the mindset of mercy, care, concern, tenderness and tolerance. While affirming the eternal rules, it does not cling to retributive justice but one that is restorative. It is like the tone of the merciful God who says, "Come now and let us reason together. Though your sins are like scarlet, they will become like wool" (Isaiah 1:18). The Exhortation indeed speaks the language of hope for those in pain.

THEOLOGICAL CENSURES AGAINST AMORIS LAETITIA

Although the document aims at offering light and hope, there were some doubts from various quarters as to the implications of some teaching of the document; thus it has raised tensions, as hinted earlier, and incurred some theological censures. For the purpose of precision, this article will cite one instance where this occurred and the various censures leveled against the document.

On the 29th of June, 2016, a group of forty-five theologians and philosophers, headed by Dr Joseph Shaw, an academic at the Oxford University, sent a letter to the Dean of the College of Cardinals, Angelo Sodano, requesting that "the College of Cardinals and the Patriarchs of the Catholic Church should take collective actions to respond to the dangers to the Catholic faith and morals posed by the Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, issued by Pope Francis" (Shaw 2016, Letter to Cardinal). The letter stated that the Apostolic Exhortation contains a number of statements that can be understood in a sense that is contrary to the Catholic faith and morals. Thus it seeks that "the Cardinals and Patriarchs should petition the Holy Father to condemn the errors... in a definitive and final manner, and to authoritatively state that *Amoris Laetitia* does not require any of them to be believed or considered as possibly true." (Shaw 2016, Letter to Cardinal).

A document containing the alleged errors accompanied the letter. According to the document containing these censures, it is not the case that the Apostolic Exhortation contains legally binding rules that are intrinsically heretical, or that it authoritatively taught some false teachings, rather it contains assertions which can mislead Catholics into believing what is false and doing what is forbidden by divine law. The document states that,

If the Supreme Pontiff expresses a personal opinion in a magisterial document, this expression of opinion implicitly presents the opinion in question as one that it is legitimate for Catholics to hold. As a result, many Catholics will come to believe that the opinion is indeed compatible with Catholic faith and morals. Some Catholics out of respect for a judgment expressed by the Supreme Pontiff will come to believe that the opinion is not only permissible but true. If the opinion in

question is not in fact compatible with Catholic faith or morals, these Catholics will thus reject the faith and moral teaching of the Catholic Church as it applies to this opinion...This is an important factor in an evaluation of *Amoris Laetitia*, because it addresses concrete moral questions (Shaw 2016, A Theological Critique, p. 2).

The document went on to state nineteen propositions contained in *Amoris Laetitia* which were thought to be erroneous. Most of the propositions fall under the censures of equivocal, ambiguous, obscure, presumptuous, doubtful, or offensive; to mention a few (Shaw 2016, p.3). Some of the propositions include:¹

- 1) **AL 156: "Every form of sexual submission must be clearly rejected."**

This may be understood not simply as denying that a wife owes servile obedience to her husband or that the husband has authority over his wife that is the same as parental authority, but as also denying that the husband has any form of authority over his wife, or as denying that the wife has any duty to obey the legitimate commands of her husband in virtue of his authority as husband.

- 2) **AL 159: "Saint Paul recommended virginity because he expected Jesus' imminent return and he wanted everyone to concentrate only on spreading the Gospel: 'the appointed time has grown very short' (1 Cor 7:29). . . . Rather than speak absolutely of the superiority of virginity, it should be enough to point out that the different states of life complement one another, and consequently that some can be more perfect in one way and others in another."**

¹ The propositions and their accompanying comment are presented here as they appeared in the document sent to the Cardinals and Patriarchs. For a fuller articulation of the censured propositions and the censures they received, confer the document "The Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*: A Theological Critique" by Joseph Shaw et al. (2016, June 29).

This may be understood as denying that a virginal state of life consecrated to Christ is superior considered in itself to the state of Christian marriage.

3) **AL 295: "Saint John Paul II proposed the so-called "law of gradualness" in the knowledge that the human being knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by different stages of growth. This is not a gradualness of law but rather a gradualness in the prudential exercise of free acts on the part of subjects who are not in a position to understand, appreciate, or fully carryout the objective demands of the law."**

AL 301: "It can no longer simply be said that all those in any 'irregular' situation are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace. More is involved here than mere ignorance of the rule. A subject may know full well the rule, yet have great difficulty in understanding its inherent values, or be in a concrete situation which does not allow him or her to act differently and decide otherwise without further sin."

This may be understood as meaning that a justified person has not the strength with God's grace to carry out the objective demands of the divine law, as though any of the commandments of God are impossible for the justified; or as meaning that God's grace, when it produces justification in an individual, does not invariably and of its nature produce conversion from all serious sin, or is not sufficient for conversion from all serious sin.

4) **AL 297: 'No one can be condemned for ever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel!**

This may be understood as meaning that no human being can or will be condemned to eternal punishment in hell (Shaw 2016, p. 4-6).

Other propositions which were censured include paragraphs 83, 299, 301, 303, 304, 308, 295, 296, 298, 300 and 311 of *Amoris Laetitia*.

From the foregoing, it is very obvious that the censures levelled against *Amoris Laetitia* are actually due to its propositions which are not concrete. The document tried to create a forum where the opinion of the pastor may hold sway, hinged on

the logic of pastoral mercy; but it brought forth some vague, equivocal and obscure propositions, which may be understood in an erroneous manner.

Looking at the censured proposition above; the proposition on the issue of sexual submission, tried to place husbands and wives as equals. This does not mean that husbands have no authority over their wives. It sought to give wives a voice, with regard to matters in the house, and to deter any form of oppression of women. This is in line with the teaching of the church as regards the equal dignity and responsibility of husbands and wives as stated in the Catechism art. 2334, *Familiaris Consortio* art. 22, and *Gaudium et Spes* art. 49 no. 2.

The proposition on the superiority of virginity, sought to set the celibate life and the marital life as complements; with each fitting a particular chosen vocation. Thus, none is superior to the other in every ramification. This is aimed at portraying the marital vocation as good, divinely-inspired and noble in itself, as is the consecrated life.

The proposition on the law of gradualness and irregular situation tends to be dicey. Here the subjects in question are not in a position to understand, appreciate, or fully carry out the objective demands of the law. This raises questions, as to their mental and psychological balance (cf. Canon Law Society 1983, art. 1095). Also, to say that those in any irregular situation are not to be said to be living in mortal sin sounds misleading. Christian adults, who are cohabiting and procreating, cannot claim ignorance of the law forbidding fornication. More so, if they know the rule well, how can they claim not to understand its inherent values? Really these propositions need clarification.

As for the proposition on perpetual condemnation; it does not refer to condemnation in hell, although it may be wrongly understood as such; but it means that no one should be seen as unfit for salvation, while he or she is still living.

The pope, in this document sought to empathize with those in problematic marital situations; but, while appealing to mercy and compassion, he cited certain situations but left them obscurely. There are general rules governing the sanctity and sacramentality of marriage; and their practical application should be left to the discretion of the diocesan bishops or conferences of bishops, with the help of theologians; instead of openly appealing to mercy and giving reasons why

'defaulters' should be 'acquitted.' This can lead many other persons to fault these general rules; since God is merciful, and the Church is called to show mercy. Apart from the possibility of misinterpretation, one can say that generally, the teachings of *Amoris Laetitia* are in line with the doctrines of the Church. There is the need for catechesis on the spirit and teachings of *Amoris Laetitia*. Cardinal Raymond Burke, a former prefect of the Apostolic Signatura, states that "the apostolic exhortation does not aim to change the pastoral work of the Church... but to faithfully apply her steady ministry, as the faithful expression of the ministry of Christ himself, in the context of today's culture" (Niles 2016).

AMORIS LAETITIA: ITS MOST CONTROVERSIAL CHAPTER

On the tensions which the document has raised, the most controversial portion is chapter eight, titled: 'Guiding, discerning and integrating weaknesses.' This involves pastoral approaches on handling various challenging situations in marriages. With only twenty-two articles (291-312), this chapter has experienced numerous censures; anchored on issues like the law of gradualness, discernment of irregular situations, the divorced and civilly remarried, conscience as the final arbiter, and mitigating factors in pastoral discernment. This chapter is an address to pastors and shepherds of souls, on assisting those who are not living the sacramental marital life as it should. It begins by saying that,

Although the Church realizes that any breach of the marriage bond is against the will of God, she is also conscious of the frailty of many of her children. Although she constantly holds up the call to perfection and asks for a fuller response to God, she must accompany with attention and care the weakest of her children, who show signs of a wounded and troubled love, by restoring in them hope and confidence (Francis 2016, art. 291).

This whole process is aimed at helping each person find a proper way of participating in the life of the church, while avoiding any occasion of scandal. He states that, "it will not be proper for a pastor to feel that it is enough to simply apply moral laws to those living in irregular situations, as if they were stones to throw at people's lives. This would portray the closed heart of one who hides be-

hind the Church's teachings, sitting on the chair of Moses and judging, at times with superiority and superficiality, difficult cases and wounded families" (Francis 2016, art. 305).

The remarriage of persons divorced from a living, lawful spouse contravenes the plan and law of God as taught by Christ. They are not separated from the Church, but they cannot receive the Eucharist. The Church's pastors, out of love for the truth, are obliged to discern different situations carefully, in order to be able to offer appropriate spiritual guidance to the faithful involved (cf. John Paul II 1981, art. 84).²

In a nutshell, this chapter argues that the teachings of the Church on marriage and family life remain unaltered. Nonetheless, pastors should not cast away or stigmatize the children of God who struggled with this ideal and could not live it; but bring to bear, the loving mercy of their Father upon them, and reintegrate them into the ecclesial family, in a manner which will not scandalize others. In this sense, though the circumstances and mitigating factors affecting a couple be overwhelming, they are yet not justified in their irregular state, but are reintegrated out of the unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous mercy of God.

AMORIS LAETITIA AND THE CHURCH'S TEACHING

The document *Amoris Laetitia*, like previous documents which discussed the issue of marriage, restated the dogmatic teaching of the Church on marriage (Francis 2016, art. 60-63)³, before discussing the issue of discernment of irregular situation. This too was captured in *Familiaris Consortio*, which states that,

Pastors must know that, for the sake of truth, they are obliged to exercise careful discernment of situations. There is in fact a

² This is also stated in the apostolic exhortation of Benedict XVI *Sacramentum Caritatis* art. 29.

³ This has been reechoed in various church documents, like the Code of Canon law (1055 – 1065), Catechism of the Catholic Church (1601 – 1666, 2201 – 2213), *Gaudium et Spes* (47 – 52), *Familiaris Consortio* (on the role of the Christian family in the modern world),³ *Sacramentum Caritatis* (27 – 29), *Verbum Domini* (85), *Lumen Fidei* (52 – 55), *Evangelii Gaudium* (66 – 67), etc.

difference between those who have sincerely tried to save their first marriage and have been unjustly abandoned, and those who through their own grave fault have destroyed a canonically valid marriage. Finally, there are those who have entered into a second union for the sake of the children's upbringing, and who are sometimes subjectively certain in conscience that their previous and irreparably destroyed marriage had never been valid. Together with the Synod, I earnestly call upon pastors and the whole community of the faithful to help the divorced, and with solicitous care to make sure that they do not consider themselves as separated from the Church, for as baptized persons they can, and indeed must, share in her life (John Paul II 1981, art. 84).

In its various teachings, *Amoris Laetitia* did not say something entirely new; only that some of its assertions need clarification. It is also necessary to note that there are provisions within the discipline of the church, which permits the priest or bishop to make decisions after proper discernment of the situation. On this the pope states, "to show understanding in the face of exceptional situations never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing less than what Jesus offers to us" (Francis 2016, art. 307). *Amoris Laetitia* opened to us challenging situations in family life and calls that they be addressed in the spirit of the merciful love of God, for "the Church is commissioned to proclaim the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel, which in its own way must penetrate the mind and heart of every person" (Francis 2015, art. 12).

CONCLUSION

It is visible, from the forgoing that the document *Amoris Laetitia* is a reflection on already existing laws, with the intention to show mercy where possible, so as to relieve people of the burden they experience, especially within marriage. Nonetheless, the insistence on pastoral mercy appears at some point to argue against certain teachings; and in some cases, appears vague. Though censures have been leveled against some teachings of this document, the teachings are not heretical in themselves, but have the tendency to be misinterpreted. Thus,

the onus is on the pastors of the Church and other teachers of the faith is to seek clarification where necessary and to teach and apply the precepts of *Amoris Laetitia* within the context of the Church's teaching, as much as possible, so that it serves to build up the body of Christ.

REFERENCES

- Benedict XVI. (2007, February 22). *Sacramentum Caritatis*: Apostolic Exhortation on the Eucharist as the Source and Summit of the Church's Life and Mission. Retrieved from http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis.html
- Burke, R. (2016, April 12). *Amoris Laetitia* and the constant teaching and Practice of the Church. *National Catholic Register*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/amoris-laetitia-and-the-constant-teaching-and-practice-of-the-church>.
- Canon Law Society. (1983). *Code of Canon Law: New Revised English Translation*. Bangalore; Theological Publications.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church. (1994). Nairobi; Paulines Publication.
- Francis. (2013, June 29). *Lumen Fidei*: Encyclical Letter on Faith. Retrieved from http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html
- Francis. (2015). *Misericordiae Vultus*: Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. Nigeria; Black Belt Konzult Ltd.
- Francis. (2016). *Amoris Laetitia*: Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of Love. Nairobi; Paulines Publications.
- Holy See Press Office. (2016, April 08). Summary of the post-Synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love) on love in the family, 08.04.2016. Retrieved from <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/04/08/160408b.html>
- John Paul II. (1981, November 22). *Familiaris Consortio*: Apostolic Exhortation on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World. Retrieved from <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul->