

Amoris laetitia: A Lutheran Pastor's perspective

Five Innovative Ideas

Jens-Martin Kruse

More than ever, theology must be close to the people and attentive to the challenges facing families today. As Christians in a secularized society, there is a need for a united voice among the various Churches. This happened with Pope Francis, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, with regard to safeguarding the environment. Jens-Martin Kruse is head pastor of the main Lutheran church in Hamburg (Germany). As a Lutheran minister, husband, and father of three teenagers, he offers his insights regarding Amoris laetitia from a German and European sociological perspective.

For many years, profound changes have been occurring in marriage and family life, as well as in regard to sexuality. Today's socio-cultural context represents a plurality of life projects and forms of stable coexistence that are also now recognized and supported at the legislative level. More recent socio-cultural changes are also affecting family life, as seen in Europe's low birth rate that now hovers around 1.53 children per woman. Single households also increased, with 42 percent of German households falling into this category in 2020. Religious celebrations have also been significantly impacted. Church weddings have decreased from almost 80 percent of couples in 1953 to just 18 percent of couples marrying in Church in 2018.

Yet, at the same time, families are proving to be as versatile as they are indispensable. This is due, firstly, to a biological phenomenon. Every human being has a father and a mother. Every human being is first and foremost a child.

The family as an institution is distinguished by relationships, although it is experienced in different forms today than in those times when the roles of parents, grandparents and children - and especially of women and men themselves - were clearly delineated. Life today is more 'individualized', and traditions are dissolving. Lifestyles are more pluralistic and people shape their life stories much more autonomously. They do not feel compelled by external conventions or economic pressures to endure lives that fail to correspond to their own life plans.

But despite this plurality, the desire for family life remains. The 'couple relationship' and 'family' are the top goals chosen by youth for their life. In a survey people were asked about their life priorities, "having a partner I can trust" and "having a good family life" continue to occupy top spots. The Evangelical bishop emeritus of Berlin, Wolfgang Huber, affirms: "If the concept of family is not identified with certain forms of life and traditional role models, it must be said that the family - the stable union of persons in a multigenerational

reality with marriage at its heart – does not have an alternative. If it did not exist, it would need to be invented. But it does exist, except that too few people seize this opportunity"¹.

A crisis of credibility

Working to ensure persons opt for marriage and family is a fundamental objective of the Christian Churches. In their proclamation of the Gospel and in pastoral accompaniment, they want to support young people in making good decisions for their life journeys. Churches have an important task of providing direction in a society where people struggle to choose between diverse life options in their search for the one that is right for them.

Today, several negative developments are compounding this situation. In principle, the impact of religion on a person's lifestyle has greatly diminished. Less than a third of Germans under age 35 consider religion relevant to everyday life. What is more, many no longer understand positions held by the Church – especially on marriage, family and sexuality. There is a wide gap between the reality of people's lives, including many Christians and Church teachings. And finally, Church credibility has been massively challenged by the many cases of abuse of power and sexual abuse by priests.

In the face of these grave phenomena of crisis, repentance and renewal are urgently needed if the Churches are to once again fulfil their mission of communicating the Gospel in word and deed.

Here, two things must be kept in mind. First, Churches are not an end in themselves. They do not exist to cultivate certain life forms or doctrines, rather they exist for the gospel. Thus, it is necessary to subject ecclesial actions to critical and honest examination in order to verify whether they still correspond to the Church's essential mission. Where this does not seem assured, it is necessary to find new ways that allow people to encounter the Gospel and discover its help in understanding their own existence. Likewise, structures that prevent us from experiencing God's love – or limit it to certain groups and persons – may need to change.

The same applies to the teaching of the Church: "If it is no longer possible to proclaim an assumption of faith as good news, or at least place it in an evangelical context, then the church's teaching must change – even if these are considered as established doctrines. [...] Faith challenges the Church to constantly measure herself against the Gospel and correcting, if necessary, even in matters that present themselves as strongly binding"².

Demands of pastoral renewal

In the context of socio-cultural changes and against the backdrop of Church crises, Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia – On Love in the Family*, takes on a pioneering and relevant significance also for ecumenism. It is not so much a question of individual controversial questions like pastoral care of divorced and remarried persons, 'mixed' marriages, or considerations regarding of homosexuality that find diverse responses in different Christian Churches. Rather, what are of great ecumenical significance are the fundamental theological options by which Pope Francis describes marriage and family, opening the door for a renewal of pastoral practices.

I would like to briefly illustrate five of these from an ecumenical perspective.

1. A new tone: close to life and full of appreciation

"The joy of love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church." (AL 1). From the very first sentence, a new, helpful tone pervades this papal exhortation. Not only is it easy to read, but it is also a joy to read. It is marked by benevolence and appreciation, true concern and a sincere effort to understand and dialogue. One feels that for the Pope, people are never a "problem," but always "an opportunity" (AL 7).

This basic attitude allows Pope Francis to clearly present the Christian vision of marriage and family without having to pronounce condemnations or hide the errors of the Church: "As Christians, we can hardly stop advocating marriage simply to avoid countering contemporary sensibilities, or out of a desire to be fashionable or a sense of helplessness in the face of human and moral failings. We would be depriving the world of values that we can and must offer. It is true that there is no sense in simply decrying present-day evils as if this could change things. Nor it is helpful to try to impose rules by sheer authority. What we need is a more responsible and generous effort to present the reasons and motivations for choosing marriage and the family and, in this way, help men and women better to respond to the grace that God offers them." (AL 35).

2. Mercy instead of 'bureaucratic morals'

Pope Francis wants to ensure that both the Church's pastoral activities and doctrinal speech demonstrate mercy towards every person, even if he or she does not live in accordance with Catholic teaching or has gone astray. At the same time, he hopes that the Church's pastoral care and teaching will respect, promote and take greater account of the formation of the conscience of the faithful. The Church should treat those who use the Gospel to guide their conscience with great respect and, because of the failure of their relationship as a couple, suffer pains of conscience: "We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them." (AL 37).

This position goes hand in hand with the critical awareness of ways in which the Church presented "Christian beliefs and treats others has helped contribute to today's problematic situation." (AL 36). Pope Francis also notes: "We have long thought that simply by stressing doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace, we were providing sufficient support to families, strengthening the marriage bond and giving meaning to marital life." (AL 37). Such an approach, which judges the concrete human situation on the basis of irreproachable, abstract principles represents an error, according to Pope Francis, one which he calls "cold bureaucratic morality" (AL 312). The pope does not want to take an abstract ideal image of marriage and family as a measure (AL 36; 57). It is important to take seriously the concrete reality of people in order to accompany them on the path of their existence and support them so that they might find happiness in their lives and the joy of love. Biblical mercy is fundamental to this pastoral accompaniment and must be the "foundation" that sustains all ecclesial activity (AL 310).

3. Pastoral care at the centre: listening to Sacred Scripture

In the fourth chapter of the document, Pope Francis develops in a particularly beautiful, vivid and truthful vision of the biblical understanding of married love, listening intensely to Sacred Scripture and interpreting the Hymn to Charity that the Apostle Paul handed down in the 13th chapter of his First Letter to the Church of Corinth. Meditating on this Pauline text, Pope Francis arrives at both profound and practical interpretations, illustrating with pastoral sensitivity the different aspects of married love. The reflections lead to the affirmation that after the love that unites us to God, conjugal love is the "greatest form of friendship". It is a union possessing all the traits of a good friendship: concern for the good of the other, reciprocity, intimacy, warmth, stability and the resemblance born of a shared life. Marriage joins to all this an indissoluble exclusivity expressed in the stable commitment to share and shape together the whole of life." (AL 123).

The Pope's profound biblical reflections make this chapter – as Cardinal Kasper observed – "well suited for marriage preparation, as well as for retreat weekends and other programs for married couples"³. The same also applies to Pope Francis' considerations on dealing with marital crises (AL 232-238).

4. Education: transmitting the faith

In a special, extensive chapter entitled, "Towards a Better Education of Children", Pope Francis is well aware of how complex the educational task of families has become. According to him, academic instruction and education are fundamental pillars for building a society that is conducive to the human person. Parents have a special responsibility in the field of education.

The family is "the first school of human values, where we learn the wise use of freedom." (AL 274). First, it is a question of "instilling in their children trust and loving respect. When children no longer feel that, for all their faults, they are important to their parents, or that their parents are sincerely concerned about them, this causes deep hurt and many difficulties along their path to maturity." (AL 263).

In a very similar way, Pope Francis emphasizes that the family is also "the primary setting for socialization since it is where we first learn to relate to others, to listen and share, to be patient and show respect, to help one another and live as one. The task of education is to make us sense that the world and society are also 'our home' . . ." (AL 276).

Education of children is crucially important for the "process of handing on the faith" (AL 287). Despite difficulties, one's own home must be "the place where we learn to appreciate the meaning and beauty of the faith, to pray and to serve our neighbour." (AL 287).

Pope Francis shows himself here as a great teacher of the Christian faith, distinguished not only by decades of pastoral experience but by an intense reflection on educational themes and a nuanced perception of the *signs of the times*. At the same time, he demonstrates impressive visionary power for the educational action of the Church.

5. Synod: Vision for a Church on the way to the people

The great importance given by Pope Francis to reflection on marriage and family is evident in the very fact that *Amoris laetitia* was prepared not during one, but two universal Synods of Bishops: The Extraordinary Synod of 2014 and the Ordinary Synod of 2015. Additionally, for the first time, a worldwide consultation of the faithful occurred before the Synod. Thus, it was evident that for decision-making as a Church, it is necessary to listen not only to

Sacred Scripture and Tradition but also to the faithful as well. Against this backdrop, Pope Francis gave a particularly significant, programmatic speech in the Paul VI Hall for the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops on October 17, 2015, during the Synod on the Family. There, he expounded his understanding of synodality, reflecting theologically on the day-to-day work of the Synods and unfolding his vision for the Church's journey towards a good future.

The value placed on synodality by Pope Francis emerges in the following statement: "It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium . . . A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening "is more than simply hearing." It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the "Spirit of truth" (Jn 14:17), in order to know what he "says to the Churches" (Rev 2:7).

Closing the Synod on October 24, 2015, Pope Francis once again relaunched his vision: "The Church's first duty is not to hand down condemnations or anathemas but to proclaim God's mercy, to call to conversion and to lead all men and women to salvation in the Lord (cf. Jn 12:44-50) [. . .] In effect, for the Church to conclude the Synod means to return to our true "journeying together" in bringing to every part of the world, to every diocese, to every community and every situation, the light of the Gospel, the embrace of the Church and the support of God's mercy!"

By knowing how to hold Church doctrine and unity with the pluriformity of ecclesial expressions in different life contexts, Pope Francis succeeds in developing forms of evangelical communication that respond to the challenges of today. In the globalized postmodern era, as theologian Rainer Bucher noted - "the Catholic Church is not one, but many. This is best dealt with when the paradoxes that derive from it are elaborated, namely passing from the primacy of doctrine to the primacy of concrete practices of mercy and Christian love which take into account different situations"⁴.

Pope Francis wants to lead the Church along this path of mercy. In *Amoris laetitia*, he offers important concepts in describing the Christian understanding of marriage and family which enable conversation and dialogue with contemporaries. In this sense, the document is of great ecumenical relevance.

¹ W. Huber, *Familie haben alle*, Berlin 2006, p. 13.

² M. Seewald, *Reform. Dieselbe Kirche anders denken*, Freiburg, Basel, Wien 2019, pp. 136.141.

³ W. Kasper, *Die Botschaft von Amoris laetitia. Ein freundlicher Disput*, Freiburg, Basel, Wien 2018, p. 58.

⁴ R. Bucher, *Mehr als Stellschrauben. Amoris Laetitia als Ausdruck eines pastoralen Lehramtes*, in: Herder Korrespondenz 6/2016, p. 15.