

Pastoral Guidelines Towards the Well-being of Family Life in the Light of *Amoris Laetitia*

Dr Metti Amirtham, SCC

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The family is essential to the well-being of the world and in particular to the Church. However, the complexity of today's society and the challenges faced by the family require a greater effort on the part of the whole community in preparing those who are about to be married. Hence having identified the challenges, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love) Pope Francis addresses the issue of family and married life with concern and care in order to bring about change in the attitude and dealings of the Church in its pastoral ministry.

Especially in the sixth chapter of *Amoris Laetitia* (AL), Pope Francis presents some of the challenges that emerge from today's marriages and family life in the Church. He also seeks to provide pastoral guidelines for these challenges. Through these, he invites the Church to renew

and intensify the Christian missionary proclamation of God's mercy, while presenting more persuasively the Church's teaching about the nature of the family and the Sacrament of Matrimony.

In the first part of the paper, the significant challenges are highlighted by *Amoris Laetitia* and in the second part, the pastoral guidelines to address these challenges are dealt with.

1.1 AMORIS LAETITIA: A GIFT AND A CHALLENGE

The apostolic exhortation *AL* is the conclusion of a two-year synod process discussing both the beauty and challenges of family life today. The pastoral nature of *AL* is broad in its scope and positive in its tone. It affirms the indissolubility of marriage as an essential teaching of the Church, revealed by Jesus and cherished in our unbroken Tradition. It gives a renewed approach to caring for marriages and families and strongly emphasizes the role of personal conscience and pastoral discernment. It gives emphasis on accompaniment and mercy, while highlighting the strengths of the family and the joy of love. Indeed, it is an invitation for the local diocese to make structural and personal changes to give concrete support to marriage and family life ministry. The only goal of *AL* is to help families to experience God's love and know that they are welcome members of the church. All this may require what the Pope calls "new pastoral methods."¹

In a special way, chapter six of *AL* provides helpful guidelines and direction for those who minister to marriages and families. It presents methods most particularly in marriage preparation (including remote and proximate), and in the pastoral care of newlywed couples, parents, single parents, families in crisis or split by divorce or separation, second marriages, blended families, and persons who experience same-sex attraction. *AL* gives attention to how Catholics in irregular marital situations can be welcomed, accompanied and integrated into the Church. The exhortation has sparked discussion about how marriage preparation and marriage ministry ought to be renewed and strengthened, for example by using mentor couples and providing ongoing support for couples in their early years and beyond. It advises on how confessors can assist persons in irregular marital relationships. It also stimulates discussion about what new forms of missionary activity can be explored and how clergy and other leaders can best respond to the needs of families today and accompany families, particularly those in serious difficulties. It emphasizes on the importance of attention that needs to be given to couples in remarriages, including pastoral care for those who are seeking a declaration of nullity for their previous union. The repeated exhortations in *AL* is to have more understanding and mercy and to open up a space for people who are homosexuals to come out publicly to claim their identity and live as God created them. In all of this

the Pope Francis, in union with the whole Church, hopes to strengthen existing families, and to reach out to those whose marriages have failed, including those alienated from the life of the Church.

1.2 THE CHALLENGES OF FAMILY AND MARRIED LIFE

Today the Church is facing certain complex situations from Christian families. In order to pay attention to those challenges and to improve the quality of family life in the Church, *AL* insists on the need for adopting the new pastoral methods. Although, the different communities and parishes will have to devise more practical and effective initiatives that respect both the Church's teaching and local problems and needs, the apostolic exhortation attempts to mention some of them in a very special way. Before we proceed to see the pastoral plan for the family, let us look at the different categories of Christian families and the issues that the church is encountering today.

1. Issues involving mixed marriages: Mixed marriages have become common today in the Church. Problem arises especially when one of the spouses is not baptized or does not want to practice the faith. This makes the other's desire to live and grow in the Christian life difficult and at times painful often leading to broken relationships affecting the faith of their children as well.

2. Lack of knowledge about each other: Today the church is faced with couples who marry without really knowing one another. They enjoy each other's company and do things together, but without facing the challenge of revealing themselves and coming to know who the other person truly is.

3. Over-emphasis on external Preparation of the Celebration: Too much Emphasis is given to external preparation of the marital ceremony than the internal preparation of the couple. For instance, focus on short-term preparations for marriage tend to be concentrated on invitations, clothes, the party and any number of other details that tend to drain not only the budget but also the energy and joy of the couple. Often "many young people concentrate on their wedding day and forget the life-long commitment they are about to enter into."²

4. Lack of patience towards each other: One of the important challenges that the present day couples facing is that they lack patience and endurance in times of failures weaknesses, crises and hardships.

5. Demanding situations in bringing up children: Today's families are also faced with demanding situations that can cause apprehension, feelings of guilt, depression and fatigue, with serious repercussions on a marriage. For instance, the arrival of a child presents new emotional challenges. Raising small children necessitates a change

of lifestyle, while the onset of adolescence causes strain, frustration and even tension between the parents.

6. Personal crises of the couples: There are those personal crises that affect the life of couples, often involving finances, problems in the workplace, emotional, social and spiritual difficulties. It is becoming more and more common to think that, when one or both partners no longer feel fulfilled, or things have not turned out the way they wanted, sufficient reason exists to end the marriage.

7. Increase of Divorce among Catholic couples: Divorce is an evil and the increasing number of divorces is very troubling. Today a good number of Catholics are divorcing their husbands/wives.

8. Divorced and civilly remarried: There are also Catholics who have divorced and civilly remarried. The Church often encounter persons whose marriages face grave hardships, sometimes for reasons that seem undeserved, and sometimes through the fault of one or both married parties. The state of being separated or divorced, and thus finding oneself alone, can involve great suffering. It can mean separation from one's children, a life without conjugal intimacy, and for some the prospect of never having children.

9. Desiring for Baptism: There are also problems arise when persons in a complex marital situation wish to be baptized.

10. Same-sex attraction: There are families where persons experience same-sex attraction leading them to uncomfortable and distancing situation in the family. This situation is not easy either for parents or for children.

11. Cohabitation of unmarried couples: There are couples who cohabit but are not married. This is becoming common now, often fuelled by convenience, fear of a final commitment, or a desire to “try out” relationships.

These are some of the significant challenges identified by Pope Francis and presented in *Amoris Laetitia*.

1.3 PASTORAL GUIDELINES FOR BISHOPS AND PRIESTS

Of its very nature, marriage exists for the communion of life and love between spouses, ordered to the procreation and care of children, in an exclusive and permanent bond between one man and one woman. Christ our Lord elevated the natural bond of marriage to the dignity of a sacrament whereby the union of man and woman signifies the union of Christ and the Church. Not only by nature but also by grace is family and marriage life sustained and strengthened. Hence *AL* provides pastoral guidelines to Bishops and priests to enable the Catholic faithful to face these above challenges and to live a happy and married family life. The following are the guidelines meant for priests and deacons, seminarians and lay persons who work

in the fields of family and marriage, sacramental ministry and pastoral care regarding matters of human sexuality.

1. Preparing engaged couples for marriage

Marriage preparation should be a kind of “initiation” to the sacrament of matrimony, providing couples with the help they need to receive the sacrament worthily and to make a solid beginning of life as a family. The young people should be helped to perceive the attraction of a complete union that elevates and perfects the social dimension of existence, give sexuality its deepest meaning, and benefit children by offering them the best context for their growth and development.³ The pastors must inculcate in the young couple the important virtue of chastity which proves invaluable for the genuine growth of love between persons. A specific programme of marriage preparation should be prepared in order to give the couples a genuine experience of participation in ecclesial life and a complete introduction to various aspects of family life.”⁴ As the Italian bishops observe that the married couples are “a valuable resource because, as they sincerely commit themselves to grow in love and self-giving, they can help renew the fabric of the whole ecclesial body. Their special form of friendship can prove contagious and foster the growth of friendship and fraternity in the Christian community of which they are a part.”⁵ Hence each local Church must discern to provide suitable formation programmes of marriage preparation without distancing young people from the sacrament. In

this process, quality is more important than quantity. And priority should be given along with a renewed proclamation of the *kerygma* - to an attractive and helpful presentation of information that can help couples live the rest of their lives together "with great courage and generosity."⁶ Marriage preparation should also provide couples with the names of places, people and services to which they can turn for help when problems arise. However, both short-term and long-term marriage preparation should ensure that the couples do not view the wedding ceremony as the end of the road, but instead embark upon marriage as a lifelong calling based on a firm and realistic decision to face all trials and difficult moments together.

2. Pastoral Care for the newly married couples

The initial years of marriage are a vital and sensitive period during which couples become more aware of the challenges and meaning of married life. Consequently, pastoral accompaniment needs to go beyond the actual celebration of the sacrament.⁷ Therefore, the pastoral care of newly married couples must involve in encouraging them to be generous in bestowing life. "In accord with the personal and fully human character of conjugal love, family planning fittingly takes place as the result a consensual dialogue between the spouses, respect for times and consideration of the dignity of the partner. In this sense, the teaching of the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (cf. 1014) and the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (cf. 14~ 2835)

ought to be taken up anew, in order to counter a mentality that is often hostile to life... Decisions involving responsible parenthood presuppose the formation of conscience, which is 'the most secret core and sanctuary of a person. There each one is alone with God, whose voice echoes in the depths of the heart' (*Gaudium et Spes*, 16). The more the couples try to listen in conscience to God and his commandments (Cf. Rom 2:15), and is accompanied spiritually, the more their decision will be profoundly free of subjective caprice and accommodation to prevailing social mores."⁸ The pastors also must insist that the couple take into account both their own welfare and that of their children, those already born and those which the future may bring. Besides, "the use of methods based on the 'laws of nature and the incidence of fertility' (*Humanae Vitae*, 11) are to be promoted, since 'these methods respect the bodies of the spouses, encourage tenderness between them and favour the education of an authentic freedom' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2370).

3. For Catholics and Christians who are separated or divorced and not remarried:

The Apostolic Exhortation insists that "special discernment is indispensable for the pastoral care of those who are separated, divorced or abandoned. Respect needs to be shown especially for the sufferings of those who have unjustly endured separation, divorce or abandonment, or those who have been forced by maltreatment from a

husband or a wife to interrupt their life together. To forgive such an injustice that has been suffered is not that easy, but grace makes this journey possible. Pastoral care must necessarily include efforts at reconciliation and mediation, through the establishment of specialized counselling centres in dioceses.”⁹ At the same time, “divorced people who have not remarried, and often bear witness to marital fidelity, ought to be encouraged to find in the Eucharist the nourishment they need to sustain them in their present state of life. The local community and pastors should accompany these people with solicitude, particularly when children are involved or when they are in serious financial difficulty.”¹⁰

Hence parishes should be keenly concerned about the spiritual good of those who find themselves separated or divorced. Pastors should offer these persons friendship, understanding introductions to reliable lay mentors and practical help, so that they can sustain their fidelity even under pressure. Those persons who consciously refrain from a new union, while being aware of the bond of a valid marriage which is indissoluble face no obstacle to receive Communion and other sacraments. Indeed, they should receive the sacraments regularly, and they deserve the warm support of the Christian community, since they show extraordinary fidelity to Jesus Christ. God is faithful to them even when their spouses are not, a truth that fellow Catholics should reinforce.

People in those circumstances should be strongly encouraged to seek the assistance of a marriage tribunal of the Church. The inquiry in these cases should always be guided by the truth of the situation. However, decrees of nullity are not an automatic remedy or an entitlement. They cannot be granted informally or privately by individual pastors or priests. Because marriage is a public reality, and because a determination about the validity of a marriage affects the lives, the rights, and the duties of all parties touched by it. Hence there must be a canonical process and a decision by the proper authority under canon law. Such matters require that those conducting the inquiry be both compassionate and alert to the truth. They should investigate these matters in a timely way, respecting the rights of all parties, and ensuring that all have access to the annulment procedures.

4. For Catholics and Christians who are divorced but civilly-remarried:

AL manifests a special concern for divorced and civilly-remarried Catholics. Pastors should make sure that such persons do not consider themselves as “outsiders” of the Church; rather they should be welcomed by the Catholic community. All the same, a canonical investigation of the first marriage by a Church tribunal may be appropriate. In other cases, the first marriage bond of one or both of the civilly-remarried persons may be valid. This would hinder any attempt at a subsequent marriage. The church insists

that if these couples have children from the original marriage, they have an important duty to raise and care for them. Besides, as baptized persons, they can be invited to share in Church's life. They can be invited to attend Mass, to pray, and to take part in all the activities of the parish. Their children (whether from an original marriage or from their current relationship) are integral to the life of the Catholic community, and they should be brought up in the faith. *AL* notes that priests should accompany the divorced and remarried in helping them to understand their situation according to the teaching of the Church and the guidelines of the bishop. "They are not excommunicated" and they should not be treated as such, since they remain part of the ecclesial community.¹¹ An examination of conscience through moments of reflection and penance could be of great help to reconcile one another.

The pastors must help them to form their consciences according to the truth. Pastors by their words, behaviours and attitude should not label, ostracise and condemn them. Instead, the Church must undertake with patience, compassion and a genuine desire for the good of all concerned, sensitive to the wounds of each person, and gently leading each toward the Lord. Its purpose is a full reconciliation of the person with God and neighbour, and restoration to the fullness of visible communion with Jesus Christ and the Church through the door of sacraments.

Pastors must always convey Catholic teaching faithfully to all persons – including the divorced and remarried – both in the confessional as well as publicly. They should do this with great confidence in the power of God's grace, knowing that, when spoken with love, the truth heals, builds up, and sets free (cf. Jn 8:32). With divorced and civilly-remarried persons, Church teaching requires them to refrain from sexual intimacy. This applies even if they must (for the care of their children) continue to live under one roof. Undertaking to live as brother and sister is necessary for the divorced and civilly-remarried to receive reconciliation in the Sacrament of Penance, which could then open the way to the Eucharist. Such individuals are encouraged to approach the Sacrament of Penance regularly, having recourse to God's great mercy in that sacrament if they fail in chastity. This is a hard teaching for many, but anything less misleads people about the nature of the Eucharist and the Church. Concretely speaking, therefore, where pastors give Communion to divorced and remarried persons trying to live chastely, they should do so in a manner that will avoid giving scandal or implying that Christ's teaching can be set aside. In other contexts, also, care must be taken to avoid the unintended appearance of an endorsement of divorce and civil remarriage; thus, divorced and civilly remarried persons should not hold positions of responsibility in a parish (e.g. on a parish council), nor should they carry out liturgical

ministries or functions (e.g., lector, extraordinary minister of Holy Communion). According to *AL*,¹² the divorced-and-remarried Catholics need to be “more fully integrated into Christian communities...while avoiding any occasion of scandal.” The grace of Jesus Christ is more than a pious cliché; it is a real and powerful seed of change in the believing heart. Pastors and all who work in the service of the Church should tirelessly promote hope in this saving mystery.

5. Issues involving mixed marriages:

Unique challenges are being faced by couples and families in which one partner is Catholic and the other is a non-believer or persons of other faith. The pastors must pay special attention to these persons (who enter into mixed marriages) not only in the period before the wedding but also after the wedding.

6. For couples who cohabit and are unmarried:

Today, there are also some couples who delay their marriage until they can afford an elaborate wedding celebration. Many children are born to these irregular unions. Working with such couples, pastors should consider two issues. First, does the couple have children together? Since a natural obligation in justice exists for parents to care for their children and children have a natural right to be raised by both parents, pastors should try to strengthen existing relationships where a couple already has children together.

Second, do the couples have the maturity to turn their relationship into a permanently committed marriage? Often cohabiting couples refrain from making final commitments because one or both persons is seriously lacking in maturity or has other significant obstacles to enter into a valid union. Where one or another person is not capable of, or is not willing to commit to, a marriage, the pastor should urge them to separate. Where the couple is disposed to marriage, they should be encouraged to practice chastity until they are sacramentally married. They will find this challenging, but again, with the help of grace, mastering the self is possible and this fasting from physical intimacy is a strong element of spiritual preparation for an enduring life together. Of course, persons should also be guided to an awareness of their situation before God, so that they can make a good confession before their wedding, and so begin their married life with joy in the Lord. Where a cohabiting couple already has children, the good of the young may require the couple to remain living together, but in chastity.

7. When persons in a complex marital situation wish to be baptized:

Particular problems arise when persons in a complex marital situation wish to be baptized. These persons contracted a stable marriage at a time when at least one of them did not know the Christian faith. In such cases, bishops are called to exercise a pastoral discernment which is commensurate with their spiritual good.¹³

8. For persons who experience same-sex attraction:

The Church today faces the challenges from persons of same sex attractions. This situation is not easy either for parents or for children to reaffirm that every person, regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be respected in his or her dignity and treated with consideration, while 'every sign of unjust discrimination' is to be carefully avoided,¹⁴ particularly any form of aggression and violence. Such families should be given respectful pastoral guidance, so that those who manifest a homosexual orientation can receive the assistance they need to understand and fully carry out God's will in their lives.¹⁵

According to *AL*, the same call to chastity and holiness of life applies equally to all persons, whether attracted to the same or opposite sex. When two persons of the same sex present themselves openly in a parish as a same-sex couples (including those who may have entered into a same-sex union under civil law), pastors must judge prudently how best to address the situation, both for the sake of the authentic spiritual good of the persons involved, and the common good of the believing community.

The pastoral care of persons with same-sex attraction should be guided by the same love and respect by the Church. Ministers of the Church should emphasize to such persons that they are loved by God, that Jesus desires them to receive an inheritance as adopted sons and daughters of the Father, and that, as with every Christian,

this is made possible through the gift of grace. Those with predominant same-sex attractions are therefore called to struggle to live chastely for the kingdom of God. In this endeavour they need the support, friendship and understanding if they fail. They should be counselled, like everyone else, to have frequent recourse to the Sacrament of Penance, where they should be treated with gentleness and compassion.

The Church must welcome all men and women who honestly seek to encounter the Lord, whatever their circumstances. But two persons in an active, public same-sex relationship, no matter how sincere, offer a serious counter-witness to Catholic belief, which can only produce moral confusion in the community. Such a relationship cannot be accepted into the life of the parish without undermining the faith of the community, most notably the children. Finally, those living openly same-sex lifestyles should not hold positions of responsibility in a parish, nor should they carry out any liturgical ministry or function.

9. Single Parents / Single-parent families:

Single-parent families often result from “the unwillingness of biological mothers or fathers to be part of a family~ Situations of violence, where one parent is forced to flee with the children~ The death of one of the parents~ the abandonment of the family by one parent, and other situations; whatever may be the cause, single parents must

receive encouragement and support from other families in the Christian community, and from the parish's pastoral outreach. Often these families endure other hardships, such as economic difficulties, uncertain employment prospects, problems with child support and lack of housing."¹⁶

10. The death of one of the parents:

To turn our backs on a grieving family would show a lack of mercy, mean the loss of a pastoral opportunity, and close the door to other efforts at evangelization. The pastors must help the grieving person to realize that, after the loss of a loved one, they still have a mission to carry out, and that it does us no good to prolong the suffering, as if it were a form of tribute.

1.4 CONCRETE ACTION PLANS TOWARDS BUILDING A HEALTHY FAMILY

Amoris Laetitia says that it is not enough to show generic concern for the family in pastoral planning. Instead, the Church must, with humility and compassion, reach out to families and "to help each family to discover the best way to overcome any obstacles it encounters."¹⁷ This involves preparing a sufficient staff, composed of clerics and lay persons who are primarily deputed to this ecclesial service. Here below we shall see how the church could concentrate in training or preparing different people for the above ministry.

1. Formation of Priests

The reality today unveils that ordained ministers often lack the training needed to deal with the complex problems currently facing families. Along with a pastoral outreach aimed specifically at families, there is a need for “a more adequate formation of priests, deacons, men and women religious, catechists and other pastoral workers.”¹⁸ Seminarians should receive a more extensive interdisciplinary, and not merely doctrinal, formation in the areas of engagement and marriage. Because their present training does not always allow them to explore their own psychological and affective background and experiences. Since some come from troubled families, with absent parents and a lack of emotional stability, there is a need to ensure that the formation process can enable them to attain the maturity and psychological balance needed for their future ministry. In this process, the experience of the broad oriental tradition of a married clergy could also be drawn upon.

Besides, it is important for families to be part of the seminary process and priestly life, since they help to reaffirm these and to keep them well grounded in reality. It is helpful for seminarians to combine time in the seminary with time spent in parishes. There they can have greater contact with the concrete realities of family life, since in their future ministry they will largely be dealing with families. “The presence of lay people, families and

especially the presence of women in priestly formation, promotes an appreciation of the diversity and complementarities of the different vocations in the Church.”¹⁹ To that end, seminarians and priests need to be better trained to understand the complexities of people’s married lives.

2. Training Lay leaders

There is a need for training lay leaders who can assist in the pastoral care of families, with the help of teachers and counsellors, family and community physicians, social workers, juvenile and family advocates, and drawing upon the contributions of psychology, sociology, marital therapy and counselling. Professionals, especially those with practical experience, could help in the pastoral initiatives grounded in the real situations and concrete concerns of families. “Courses and programmes, planned specifically for pastoral workers, can be of assistance by integrating the premarital preparation programme into the broader dynamic of ecclesial life.”²⁰ Good pastoral training is important for the lay leaders “especially in light of particular emergency situations arising from cases of domestic violence and sexual abuse.”²¹

3. Equipping Parish offices, movements, schools and other Church institutions:

The main contribution to the pastoral care of families is offered by the parish, which is the family of families, where small communities, ecclesial movements and

associations live in harmony.²² It can help in a variety of ways to support families and help them grow. These might include: meetings of couples living in the same neighbourhood, brief retreats for couples; talks by experts on concrete issues facing families, marriage counselling, home missionaries who help couples discuss their difficulties and desires, social services dealing with family problems like addiction, infidelity and domestic violence, programmes of spiritual growth, workshops for parents with troubled children and family meetings. The parish office should be prepared to deal helpfully and sensitively with family needs and be able to make referrals, when necessary, to those who can help. Information, counselling and mediation services associated with the family apostolate should also be made available to individuals who are separated or couples in crisis. These services could also include meeting with individuals in view of the preliminary inquiry of a matrimonial process (cf. *Motu Proprio Mitis Iudex Dominus Iesus* (15 August 2015), art. 2-3).²³

4. Making use of available resources:

AL insists on making use of experienced couples who could play an important role in the lives of the newly married couples especially by visiting them and offering guidance in the early years of marriage. In addition, young couples need to be encouraged to be essentially open to the great gift of children. There is also the contribution made by groups of married couples that provide assistance

as part of their commitment to service, prayer, formation and mutual support. Such groups enable couples to be generous, to assist other families and to share the faith; at the same time they strengthen marriages and help them to grow.

5. Enhancing Spiritual accompaniment:

Emphasis should also be given to enhancing accompaniment of newly married couples and couples experiencing difficulty in their relationships, and those who have separated or civilly divorced. However, the fundamental value of spiritual direction, the rich spiritual treasures of the Church, and sacramental Reconciliation will be given more importance as well.

6. Blessing homes:

Another way of growing closer is by blessing homes or by bringing a pilgrim image of Our Lady to houses in the neighbourhood; this provides an opportunity for a pastoral conversation about the family's situation.

7. Tapping out the Sacramental Power:

Pastors must remind husbands and wives to strengthen their married life by the sacramental power of God. Pope Francis says, the "common life of husband and wife, the entire network of relations that they build with their children and in the world around them, will be steeped in and strengthened by the grace of the sacrament."²⁴ Integrated into every pastoral plan to "tap into" this

wellspring of grace, so that they experience the power of the sacrament to strengthen the relationship of married couples. Especially they must profit from the grace offered them by frequent reception of the Sacraments of Penance and Communion meaningfully.

8. Word of God - the source of life and spirituality:

“The word of God is the source of life and spirituality for the family. All pastoral work on behalf of the family must allow people to be interiorly fashioned and formed as members of the domestic church through the Church’s prayerful reading of sacred Scripture. The word of God is not only good news in a person’s private life but also a criterion of judgement and a light in discerning the various challenges that married couples and families encounter.”²⁵ Hence pastors should also stress the importance of common prayer and reading Scripture in the home in order to build mutual support with committed Catholic friends and family.

9. Collective Support:

Every family is a “domestic church,” but no Christian family can survive indefinitely without encouragement from other believing families. The pastors must encourage the Christian community who especially find ways to engage and help families who are burdened by illness, financial setbacks and marital friction.

10. Importance of family spirituality:

The pastors must give importance to family spirituality, personal prayer and participation in the Sunday Eucharist. Couples must be encouraged to meet regularly to promote growth in their spiritual life and solidarity in the concrete demands of life. Liturgies, devotional practices and the Eucharist celebrated for families, especially on the wedding anniversary, were mentioned as vital factors in fostering evangelization through the family.²⁶

11. Faith Life of the couples:

The pastors have to encourage families to grow in faith. This means encouraging frequent confession, spiritual direction and occasional retreats. It also means encouraging 'family prayer' during the week, since "the family that prays together stays together". When visiting people's homes, the priests should gather all the members of the family and briefly pray for one another, placing the family in the Lord's hands. It is also helpful to encourage each of the spouses to find time for prayer alone with God, since each has his or her secret crosses to bear.

12. Timely Discernment through Discussions:

The timely preparation of engaged couples by the parish community should also assist them to recognize eventual problems and risks. For this reason, they should be strongly encouraged to discuss what each expects from

marriage, what they understand by love and commitment, what each wants from the other and what kind of life they would like to build together. Such discussions would help them to see if they in fact have little in common and to realize that mutual attraction alone will not suffice to keep them together.

13. Overcoming problems:

The pastoral care of engaged and married couples should be centred on the marriage bond, assisting couples not only to deepen their love but also to overcome problems and difficulties. This involves not only helping them to accept the Church's teaching and to have recourse to her valuable resources, but also offering practical programmes, sound advice, proven strategies and psychological guidance. All this calls for pedagogy of love, attuned to the feelings and needs of young people and capable of helping them to grow interiorly.

14. Parents – The Best teachers:

Those best prepared for marriage are probably those who learned what Christian marriage is from their own parents, who chose each other unconditionally and daily renew this decision. In this sense, pastoral initiatives aimed at helping married couples to grow in love and in the Gospel of the family also help their children, by preparing them for their future married life. Nor should we underestimate the pastoral value of traditional religious practices.

15. Availability of Sacraments:

It is also important to remind them of the availability of the sacrament of Reconciliation, which allows them to bring their sins and past mistakes, and their relationship itself, before God, and to receive in turn his merciful forgiveness and healing strength. They need to be encouraged to see the sacrament not as a single moment that then becomes a part of the past and its memories, but rather as a reality that permanently influences the whole of married life.²⁷

16. Making the liturgical celebration profound:

In their preparation for marriage, the couple should be encouraged to make the liturgical celebration a profound personal experience and to appreciate the meaning of each of its signs.

The church must make the couple understand that “freedom and fidelity are not opposed to one another; rather, they are mutually supportive, both in inter-personal and social relationships. In trying situations, some have the maturity needed to reaffirm their choice of the other as their partner on life’s journey, despite the limitations of the relationship.

1.5 CONCLUSION

It is indeed the need of the hour that each family becomes the walking gospel by their witnessing way of life.

That's why *AL* emphasizes that Christian families, by the grace of the sacrament of matrimony, are the principal agents of the family apostolate, above all through "their joy-filled witness as domestic churches."²⁸ *AL* therefore calls for a sensitive accompaniment of especially those with an imperfect grasp of Christian teaching on marriage and family life, who may not be living in accord with Catholic belief, and yet desire to be more fully integrated into Church life.

*Metti Amirtham, SCC
Holy Cross Convent
Melapudur
Trichy - 1*

Endnotes

¹ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 50.

² Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Lenten Message* (18 February 2015).

³ Cf. Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Relatio Synodi* (18 October 2014), 26.

⁴ Cf. *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 39.

⁵ Italian Bishops' Conference, Episcopal Commission on Family and Life, *Orientamenti pastorali sulla preparazione al matrimonio e alla famiglia* (22 October 2012), 1.

⁶ Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, Annotation 5.

⁷ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (22 November 1981), Part III.

⁸ Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,

Relatio Finalis (24 October 2015), 63.

⁹ *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 47.

¹⁰ *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 50.

¹¹ Catechesis (5 August 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 6 August 2015, p. 7.

¹² *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 51; Cf. *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 84.

¹³ *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 75.

¹⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2358; cf. *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 76.

¹⁵ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2358; Cf. *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 76.

¹⁶ *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 76; Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons* (3 June 2003), 80.

¹⁷ *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 56.

¹⁸ *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 61.

¹⁹ *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 61.

²⁰ *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 61.

²¹ *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 61.

²² *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 77.

²³ *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 82.

²⁴ Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (2016), P. 67-8.

²⁵ *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 34.

²⁶ *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 40.

²⁷ Cf. Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Casti Connubii* (31 December 1930): AAS 22 (1930), 583.

²⁸ *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 30.