



Ten years after *Amoris laetitia*: *proclaiming the Gospel with families today*

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Married life. The first years of marriage: a decisive time

Listening to and accompanying couples in the early years of married life and at every stage of life

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A couple arrives at the parish to get married. They have been together for three or four years. They might have already been living together; they are quite certain about their decision to marry and have spoken many times about their future. They come to the Church and together we start preparing their marriage.

However, the first question is: **as Church, at what point in their story have we arrived?**

Amoris laetitia has helped us to view the reality of marriage in a different light and has opened up new pastoral horizons. However, the first challenge is not to design new programmes. The question comes before and is more decisive: **do we truly understand, right from the start, the reality of the couples we wish to accompany?**

1. CHALLENGES TO BE ADDRESSED FROM A PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

- The first challenge, therefore, is to set our marriage accompaniment within the complexity of this changing era.

- A second challenge stems from the conviction that caring for the couple also means caring for the family that they will create. One of the most important legacies that parents leave their children is the relationship they have built among themselves: how they speak to one another, deal with their differences, forgive one another, express affection, share their faith and remain united when faced with difficulties.

With regard to the challenges of these early years, we should consider whether, we prepared couples more for a wedding ceremony than for married life.

The issue is not merely a matter of reviewing contents. It is a question of whether our pastoral care is organised primarily around the planned wedding ceremony or around the human, faith-based and vocation journeys we are called to accompany.

- *Amoris laetitia* highlighted two focus points from the moment a couple approaches the Church: accompaniment and discernment. The question: ‘What do they need to know in order to get married?’ is different from the deeper question: ‘What do they need to discover in order to know whether they are called to commit themselves definitively to one another?’

2. THE QUESTIONS ARISING AT EACH STAGE

All this leads us to an underlying question: **what should we develop in order to move, as a community, from a pastoral approach centred on specific moments – focused particularly on preparation for the sacrament – to a pastoral approach capable of accompanying processes that span a whole lifetime?**

The question takes on different forms at each stage.

The first stage is even **before engagement**. Many young believers tell us that they find it difficult to meet other people with whom to share their faith and a life plan. What type of opportunities do we offer? How can we help them discover that the way we love is also part of our Christian vocation?

Next stage is **engagement**. Falling in love is part of love, but there comes a time when one must move from the *imagined other* to the *real other*. How do we accompany that discovery and help the couple to truly get to know one another, or do we only step in when all the decisions have already been made?

As in many dioceses, here in Madrid we are trialling, alongside pre-marriage courses, initiatives such as **El reloj de los novios** (The watch of fiancés), based on a simple insight: a couple needs to set aside quality time for each other to talk, reflect on their story, recognise their strengths and weaknesses, pray and discern. The question raised by these experiences goes beyond any specific method: it involves asking ourselves **how to make a genuine process of discernment possible**.

This too influences **the decision to get married**. If a couple comes to us, after eight or ten years of being together, with a planned wedding, is there room left for discernment? If we state that marriage is a vocation, then, how do we discern vocation to marriage within the Church? At this stage, a careful pastoral interview and forming those guiding, might pave the way, but the question is still with us.

Next stage concerns **the first years**. The sacrament has been celebrated, but now the spouses must learn to build and put roots in their married life. They must build a 'we' without erasing the 'I' and the 'you'. Perhaps we could be present at some particularly significant moments: after the wedding, in the first year, when children are born, after three and five years; without necessarily turning this accompaniment into a continuous programme of meetings.

In those early years, communication changes. Differences and conflicts also arise. **Children** are born. Life is reorganised and the practical side of things can take up almost all the time.

Married couples ask us to accompany them through these changes; who does this, and how can we integrate these elements? **How can we accompany the transition from a faith lived as a couple to a faith lived as a family?**

Throughout married life, new transitions arise: work, financial difficulties, caring for the elderly, personal changes, illness or the wearing down of the relationship. Not everything is a crisis. However, we should analyse how to guide them to reflection before difficulties cause deep damage to the bond. Family Counselling Centres and other church-based settings – including ecclesial experience – help us to understand these situations better, but one question remains: **how can help married couples to seek help to nurture their relationship without waiting until they reach breaking point?**

3. THE COMMUNITY AS A CORNERSTONE

When married couples look back on these early years, many agree on one crucial point: **the importance of feeling supported by a close-knit community**. In an increasingly individualised society, quite a few couples experience their marriage in relative isolation. However, Christian marriage is not merely a story of two people; it is also an ecclesial vocation, called to grow and flourish within a community.

This raises a fundamental pastoral question: **What type of communities do our married couples need today? What is the role of the diocese, parish, movements and, in particular, other married couples in fostering communities capable of welcoming, accompanying and sustaining married life?**

In this context, there is a key element: *married couples accompanying other married couples*, not as experts, but drawing on their personal lived experience that is also discerned and shared. **How can we make sure that the experience of some married couples becomes a source of memory, witness and support for others?** How can we help those who have been accompanied to turn into accompanying guides themselves?

Last but not least, we need change our approach. We do not simply need new courses or services. We should consider how to foster communities capable of accompanying long-term life journeys and, in particular, helping to deepen the marital bond within families.

Therefore, the final question is not: ‘What should we do to better prepare our engaged couples?’ but a broader one:

How can our Church accompany the entire journey of married couples, from the moment discernment begins until that married couples themselves become companions and witnesses for others?

These questions remain open: which elements of *Amoris laetitia* do we need to embrace more fully, how can we design community-based processes of accompaniment, how can we truly incorporate discernment, and what specific aspects should we pay particular attention to at each stage.