



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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Prof. María Marcela Mazzini

Mystagogy of the sacramental bond

Learning the spiritual craft of being spouses

Holy Father, Your Eminences, Your Excellencies, dear brothers and sisters:

I would like to begin my reflection with a simple question, yet one that is crucial for theology and the pastoral care of marriage: what does really happen after the wedding ceremony? Two people agreed to marry, celebrated the sacrament and said to one another: ‘I take you’. Yet it is precisely then that the long and patient process of truly receiving the other begins—the never-ending step from ‘I’ and ‘you’ to ‘we’. My proposal is to view the first years of marriage as a true mystagogy of the sacrament that has been celebrated.

The early Church named mystagogy this progressive introduction into a mystery already received sacramentally: what had been celebrated was true and effective, but it needed to be understood from within and turned into a living reality. Something similar happens in marriage. The agreement starts up a real bond, a *communio personarum* called to progressively receive its own truth: the transition from the *sacramentum celebratum* to the *sacramentum vivendum*, without separating the gift from the task, nor grace from freedom. *Amoris laetitia* expresses this clearly: the spouses’ ‘yes’ “they embark on a journey” and marriage cannot be understood as “something that happens once for all” (AL 218).¹

According to Ephesians 5, marriage shares in the *mysterion* of love between Christ and the Church, so that the spouses’ mutual belonging is called to show a love that is faithful, bodily, fruitful and paschal.² The sacrament does not remain a thing of the past, confined to the wedding day: the grace received is meant to unfold within married life. That is why the early years are mystagogical: what was celebrated before the altar must take shape in a kitchen, in a bedroom, in a child’s tears, in a bank

¹ Cf. Dionisio Borobio, *Pastoral de los sacramentos* (Salamanca: Secretariado Trinitario, 1996), 43–54, 261–92. Cf. Francisco, exhortación apostólica postsinodal *Amoris laetitia* (19 de marzo de 2016).

² Ef 5,21–33; Concilio Vaticano II, constitución pastoral *Gaudium et spes*, n. 48; Juan Pablo II, exhortación apostólica *Familiaris consortio* (22 de noviembre de 1981), n. 13; Catecismo de la Iglesia Católica, nn. 1639–42.

account, in an argument, and in a reconciliation. The mystery becomes part of everyday life, and everyday life can become an epiphany.

1. Reality speaks

Let us listen to experience: the early years demand a reorganisation of finances, work, household chores, families of origin, sexuality and, often, the arrival of children. Marital satisfaction may decline, though such a decline is not inevitable. Four key areas of crisis illustrate the everyday Paschal dimension.

First, communication and conflict management: criticism, defensiveness, emotional withdrawal or difficulty in making amends erode the security of the bond, and the relationship is reciprocal, because poor communication undermines the marriage and a weakened bond makes communication difficult.³ Second, the organisation of shared life — chores, caregiving and mental load — where spouses argue not only on who does what, but also on what that division of labour means in terms of recognition, reciprocity and fairness.⁴ Third, finances and life plans: priorities, housing, work and future plans. Fourth, sexuality and intimacy, where differences in desire, fatigue, fertility and ways of expressing affection are intertwined with the overall quality of the bond.⁵

These crises form a system: economic pressure increases the burden; the burden generates fatigue and resentment; resentment undermines communication and intimacy. What matters is not the absence of conflict, but the ability to teamwork, recognising the other's efforts and repairing the bond—a Paschal journey of daily death and resurrection. Here, reality leads us to the fundamental theological question: what is at stake? In my view, it is the ability to move from 'I' and 'you' to 'we'.

2. The conjugal 'we': gift and task

The 'we' does not arise automatically simply because two people love one another; nor is it the sum of two individuals, nor a merger, but rather two family cultures giving rise to a third, new and unique one. Authentic communion exists where otherness remains: we are one whilst still being two; our story becomes shared without the mystery of the other ceasing to transcend me.⁶

This agreement gives rise not only to obligations: it creates a bond encompassing memory, wounds, reconciliations and fruitfulness. The family is a network of bonds that shapes identities and passes on history across generations.⁷ The expression 'one flesh' denotes a physical and historical covenant in which the spouses are granted a shared time: memory, promise and a fruitful openness to the future.⁸

³ Williamson HC. The development of communication behavior over the newlywed years. *J Fam Psychol.* 2021 Feb;35(1):11-21. doi: 10.1037/fam0000780. Epub 2020 Jul 13. PMID: 32658517; PMCID: PMC7856059. Disponible en: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7856059/>

⁴ En Argentina, la Encuesta Nacional de Uso del Tiempo 2021 muestra una fuerte desigualdad en el trabajo no remunerado entre mujeres y varones; la llegada del primer hijo suele intensificar esta tensión. Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos (INDEC), Encuesta Nacional de Uso del Tiempo 2021. Resultados definitivos (Buenos Aires: INDEC, 2022).

⁵ Harris EA, Gormezano AM, van Anders SM. Gender Inequities in Household Labor Predict Lower Sexual Desire in Women Partnered with Men. *Arch Sex Behav.* 2022 Nov;51(8):3847-3870. doi: 10.1007/s10508-022-02397-2. Epub 2022 Sep 16. PMID: 36112330; PMCID: PMC9483460. Disponible en: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36112330/>

⁶ Cf. Carlos Avellaneda, *Yo y el otro en busca del nosotros: La vida en relación* (Buenos Aires: Guadalupe, 2021), 137–54, 183–205.

⁷ Cf. Eugenia Scabini y Vittorio Cigoli, *La identidad relacional de la familia*, trad. Ricardo Lázaro Barceló y Carlos Granados García (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2014), 19–46, 69–94.

⁸ Cf. José Granados García, *Una sola carne, en un solo Espíritu: Teología del matrimonio* (Madrid: Palabra, 2014), 177–202, 247–76.

The doctrinal note *Una caro* takes up this mutual belonging born of consent, clarifying that belonging does not mean appropriating. Each spouse gives themselves and receives the other as an irreducible subject. The early years are decisive because it is then that the spouses discover that the ‘we’ started up sacramentally must be made flesh through concrete acts of love.⁹

Each person comes to marriage with one’s own background, wounds and a particular way of loving and allowing oneself to be loved. Everyday life unveils previously hidden differences, and the real other does not match the imagined other. This can be lived as a disappointment, but it can also be the true beginning of love: I am offered the spiritual experience of loving that which I cannot possess. ‘I receive you’ means receiving someone whom I have not created, nor can I remake in my own image; for this reason, behind so many conflicts lies a deeper question: is there room for me, and for you, in our ‘we’? This compels us to state clearly that Christian communion can never be confused with domination, abuse or one-sided sacrifice.

A crisis, therefore, does not necessarily mean that the bond has disappeared. Often, it is a particular way of living out the ‘us’ that is in crisis. The birth of a child, infertility, migration, illness or caring for elderly parents all require tasks to be re-set, as well as expectations and possessions — these are transitions to which *Amoris laetitia* and the *Catechumenal Itineraries for Married Life* invite us to pay special attention —,¹⁰ and in each one the question come back: who are we now, and how are we called to love one another in this new situation? Fidelity is the capacity to recreate communion through these transformations. “Each crisis has a lesson to teach us; we need to learn how to listen for it with the ear of the heart” (AL 232).

3. The bond as a theological space

We thus reach the above-mentioned sacramental nucleus. If the bond is sacramental, then ordinary life becomes a theological space: difficulty in forgiving, beginning a new conversation, regaining tenderness, the caring for the sick body, deciding to ask for help, sexuality as a language of gift, and the fair distribution of care. Francis speaks of a marital spirituality made up of “thousands of small but real gestures” (AL 315). Grace does not replace the humanity of love but dwells within it.

4. Accompanying the bond and learning from families

What, then, does it mean to accompany spouses in their early years of marriage? Above all, it means recognising that we are not merely accompanying two single individuals, but a nascent bond—a ‘we’ that is still fragile yet full of possibilities. The *Catechumenal Itineraries* call for ongoing accompaniment following the celebration and describe the early years as a time of mystagogical catechesis.¹¹ But this catechesis raises a question: Who would be best suited to offer this ministry? Those who are living out the sacrament—married couples of various ages and with varying lengths of marriage—who experience the joy of this form of Christian life. Not necessarily the holiest, but those who have for some time been acknowledging their limitations and wounds and yet find

⁹ Cf. Dicasterio para la Doctrina de la Fe, *Una caro*: Elogio de la monogamia. Nota doctrinal sobre el valor del matrimonio como unión exclusiva y pertenencia recíproca (25 de noviembre de 2025), nn. 1, 5–7, 11–12, 151–55.

¹⁰ Francisco, *Amoris laetitia*, nn. 223–30; Dicasterio para los Laicos, la Familia y la Vida, *Itinerarios catecumenales para la vida matrimonial: Orientaciones pastorales para las Iglesias particulares* (Ciudad del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022), nn. 74–86.

¹¹ Dicasterio para los Laicos, la Familia y la Vida, *Itinerarios catecumenales para la vida matrimonial*, especialmente nn. 74–86; Comisión Episcopal de Laicos y Familia, *Aportes para la pastoral familiar de la Iglesia en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Oficina del Libro, 2009), n. 15 y cap. 6.

fulfilment in the sacrament. I am convinced that, given contemporary sensitivity, one of the reasons for the decline in the number of marriages is that young people do not see many examples of happy married couples amongst us.

Leo XIV has reminded us that, when we face families' difficult questions, it is not a matter of offering hasty answers, but of drawing close and understanding, together with the people themselves, how to tackle their difficulties. If God acts within their specific life stories, pastoral listening forms part of the discernment of grace.¹² It is therefore worth asking through what concrete means family pastoral ministry can listen to and learn from this experience.

Here, I would like to reverse the question. Ten years after *Amoris laetitia*, it is not enough to ask ourselves what the Church can do for families. A truly synodal reception requires us also to ask what the Church learns when she listens to their experience as believers. A couple who build a 'we' without erasing their differences can teach a great deal to a Church called to synodality; a married couple who navigate conflict without turning the other into an enemy can teach us how to live with agreement and disagreement without abandoning communion.

How, then, can we ensure that young couples take the lead in their own learning and also contribute to the journey of other couples of their generation?

It is difficult to recommend family pastoral practices applicable to contexts as varied as those found in different parts of the world, but it will be particularly important to be close to couples in their early years, who often lack anyone with whom to share their doubts as they discover the otherness of married life. St Augustine said of himself: '*mihi quaestio factus sum*', 'I have become a question to myself';¹³ if our own being remains partly a mystery, how much more so the being of the other, especially as we also change over time! Marital love is, therefore, both art and miracle: we love that which we shall never exhaust, and newlyweds need to learn this with the help of grace and of married couples with sound experience.

The early years are decisive not because everything must be solved, but because it is there that one begins to learn — for the first time and never definitively — the spiritual craft of being spouses. This is the mystagogy of marriage. The 'we' is received as a gift and becomes a task: it needs to be nurtured, renewed, forgiven and, at times, rebuilt.

At its very core, sacramental marriage can be understood in this way: two types of freedom which, supported by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, turn their mutual acceptance into the visible sign of a greater Love. This is also a message for the Church and for the world: unity does not mean abolishing differences; belonging does not mean possessing; caring does not mean dominating; and faithfulness enables us to navigate transformations without abandoning the covenant.

¹² León XIV, "Mensaje a los participantes en el seminario «Evangelizar con las familias de hoy y de mañana: desafíos eclesiológicos y pastorales»,» 28 de mayo de 2025.

¹³ Agustín de Hipona, Confesiones X, 33, 50.

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