



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

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In the difficulties of life: accompanying and supporting

Walking with families in complex situations

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In our local Church in the Diocese of Kalookan, we have learned that what first appears to us as an irresponsible or dysfunctional family can look very different when we enter the home and listen to its story.

One of our mission station chaplains once noticed children staying in the streets the whole day, sometimes even until eleven at night. His first reaction was irritation. *Where are the parents? Why don't they even call their children home to eat?*

But as he came to know the families, he began to understand. One father was a jeepney driver who worked from morning until night because what he earned each day was barely enough for that day. If he did not drive, the family did not eat. Exhaustion, discouragement, sometimes addiction entered the picture.

The priest realized that before judging the parents, he first had to understand what they were carrying. That has become an important pastoral lesson for us.

Our Diocese covers three densely populated cities of Metro Manila. Many poor families are migrants from the provinces. Parents leave early for work. Children are left with grandparents or older siblings. Houses may stand only a few inches apart, yet neighbours can remain strangers. Poverty can isolate people even while forcing them to live very close together.

Then came the violent campaign against illegal drugs.

Many of the killings took place precisely in the poorest communities of our Diocese. We accompanied families who suddenly lost fathers, sons, husbands and brothers. We met widows, orphans and grandparents who unexpectedly became parents again. Some families were afraid even to mourn publicly because association with a suspected drug user could itself place them under suspicion.

I remember one family whose situation could easily have been described simply as “irregular.” The parents were separated. The father was caring for their four children, the eldest twelve and the youngest three. Then he was killed. Suddenly the relatives had to take responsibility for the children.

What category should we place such a family in?

We began to realize that the fragility of many families is not produced only by personal choices. Family life can also be wounded by poverty, migration, violence, addiction, imprisonment, injustice

and precarious work. These realities can severely limit people's freedom and their capacity even to approximate the Christian ideal of family life.

This is why *Amoris laetitia* has been so important for us. It does not ask us to abandon the ideal. It asks us to accompany real people in the often painful distance between the ideal and their actual situation. It gave us a language for what we were already learning pastorally: to discern concrete situations rather than begin with classifications, to accompany gradual growth, and to trust that grace can already be at work even in lives and relationships marked by weakness and incompleteness.

Our first response during the drug-war years was not really a program.

It was presence.

Our missionaries visited grieving families. They listened without judging. They prayed with them. They assured them that they had not been forgotten.

Then something beautiful began to happen. One widow met another widow. Parents who had buried their children met other parents who understood their grief. Shared suffering created relationships. Relationships created mutual support. And mutual support gradually became community.

This experience helped shape our Mission Stations. These are small ecclesial communities we established precisely in neighbourhoods that our ordinary parish structures were hardly reaching. Priests, religious and lay missionaries began by walking the streets and listening. Eventually the poor themselves – widows, young people, recovering addicts and ordinary families – became pastoral leaders and companions of others.

When we began establishing these Mission Stations in urban-poor communities, I gave our missionaries a simple instruction: Listen. Dialogue. Be present.

Before organizing programs, they walked through the alleys. They visited homes. They learned people's names and listened to their stories. Presence became the starting point of mission.

We discovered that many poor Catholics did not really feel that they belonged to the Church. They might have a Santo Niño, an image of Our Lady or a rosary in their homes. They identified themselves as Catholics. But some thought that the parish was for people with money, proper clothes, education or social standing. They were physically near the Church but spiritually and socially distant from it.

So instead of asking, "Why do they not come to Church?" we began to ask, "Will the Church go to them?"

That question changed us.

I would say today that the Mission Stations changed our Diocese more than our Diocese changed the Mission Stations. They taught us to listen before speaking and to recognize Christ already present among the poor. They taught us that evangelization is not simply bringing God to people, as though God were absent from their lives. Often, we discover that God has arrived there ahead of us.

And perhaps this is one of the most important things we have learned about accompanying families in complex situations:

A fragile family needs more than pastoral advice. It needs a community that can help carry what it can no longer carry alone.

For us, therefore, one important question has become: Are families discovering that they no longer face life's struggles alone? Are the lonely finding companions? Are the fearful finding courage because there is a community standing with them?

Accompaniment, then, is not merely what a priest or pastoral worker does for a family. It is what the Christian community gradually learns to become around that family.

Perhaps the Holy Family in Matthew's Gospel helps us understand this. Political violence forces Joseph to take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt (*Mt* 2:13-15). Their family survives intact through migration; other families are not so fortunate. Herod's soldiers slaughter the children of Bethlehem, and Matthew hears Rachel weeping for her children, "because they are no more" (*Mt* 2:16-18). The Gospel of the family is therefore not an abstract ideal untouched by human fragility. It is Emmanuel – God-with-us – entering precisely into it.

And something even more beautiful happens. Those who have been accompanied begin accompanying others. Widows accompany widows. Recovering addicts support other recovering addicts. Families who once received help begin helping others. People who once thought they did not belong discover gifts for leadership and service.

They cease to be merely recipients of pastoral care. They become subjects of mission.

Perhaps this is one way of understanding the invitation of *Amoris laetitia*: not simply to ask how close families are to the ideal, but also how close the Church is willing to come to families in their actual struggles.

The Church cannot always wait for people to come to her.

Sometimes she has to go where people live, where they struggle, where they grieve, where they hope – and discover that Christ is already there, waiting for us.