



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

Meeting of the Holy Father Leo XIV
with the Heads of Eastern Churches
and the Presidents of Episcopal Conferences

7-14 October 2026

In the difficulties of life: accompanying and supporting

Walking with families in complex situations

Monday, 12th October 2026

Prof. Julie Hanlon Rubio

Amoris Laetitia's Vision and Praxis: Ten Years Later

Pope Leo invites us to consider the fragility of families today as we remember and continue to receive *Amoris Laetitia*. Today I'd like to offer an analysis of family fragility, explore the deeper theological questions it raises, and briefly suggest how this reading might shape the Church's praxis of accompaniment.

In *Amoris Laetitia* Pope Francis approached marriage and family life with his signature themes of mercy, welcome, and accompaniment *and* a moral vision marked by complexity and respect for conscience. I believe that he wanted to invite every Catholic to a deeper embrace of Christian discipleship, but knew that many felt as if they did not fully belong to the Church because of their family situations. Before they could do more, they needed to feel like they belonged. This is perhaps why the Synods on the Family and *Amoris Laetitia* preceded his work on ecology, fraternity, and synodality. Though the document is best remembered for the controversial chapter eight, it also offered a positive vision of marriage designed to correct the abstraction and negativity that many still associate with Church teaching and a praxis of accompaniment that has yet to be fully realized. Today new forms of fragility require both re-engagement with this vision of marriage *and* a broader praxis of accompaniment.

I. Encountering Fragility

Fragility is both a crisis and a feature of our humanity. In 2026, marriage and family are becoming fragile in new ways. As we have discussed, the global trend away from marriage is accelerating. Marriage rates are declining nearly everywhere, from the Philippines to Poland, from Argentina to South Africa, from the United States to Japan. While more people are marrying later in life, there is also a decline in the percentage of people who ever marry.¹ In the U.S., in 1980, only six percent of 40-year-olds had never been married. Today the figure is 25 percent and current trends suggest that the proportion of never-married adults will continue to grow, perhaps to one third.² Marriage declines

¹ Kim Parker and Rachel Minkin, "The Future of the Family," *Pew Research Center*, Sept. 14, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/09/14/the-future-of-the-family/>.

² Richard Fry, "A Record-High Share of 40-year-olds in the U.S. Have Never Been Married," *Pew Research Center*, June 28, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/06/28/a-record-high-share-of-40-year-olds-in-the-us-have-never-been-married/>; Francesca A. Marino, "Geographic Variation in Percentage of Mid-Life Never Married Adults,"

in the U.S. are mirrored around the world, though rates of decline are uneven.³ Among U.S. Catholics, far fewer marry today than fifty years ago and only one quarter of those marry inside of the Church.⁴ Catholic weddings are declining globally.⁵

Fertility rates and baptisms are also declining. As with marriage, upper income countries are often leading the way while many African countries continue to have higher rates, but declines are evident even in countries such as Kenya, Ukraine, and India, and in urban areas in countries where fertility remains relatively high.⁶ Baptisms, like weddings, are decreasing, down by about one third from the 1990s.

The trends of declining marriage and fertility, of weddings and baptisms, have arrived in some places, are just emerging in others, and are being resisted in a few, but historians who study the development of marriage and family suggest that decline will continue to spread. They note a global shift away from “institutional marriage” arranged by families and structured around economic needs and child rearing to “companionate marriage” centered on love.⁷ Today’s marriages are more mutual and fulfilling but also more ambitious, less fruitful, and more fragile.⁸ And we seem to be entering a new stage in which marriage is increasingly optional.

II. Deeper Questions

Why are so many more people choosing not to marry or to have children? There are many theories: When love is essential to marriage it is harder to find a suitable partner. Some seek and struggle to find “the one,” their soulmate. Some women reject what they see around them—marriage marked by infidelity and domestic violence which, as Pope Francis said, “contradicts the very nature of the conjugal union.”⁹ Strikingly, many worry about their own marriage readiness and that of available partners. Most say they would still like to marry someday but are unsure if they actually will.¹⁰ Some have given up or would rather keep their options open. Many have similar worries about their readiness for parenthood so they delay it.

Of course, there are other ways marriage is fragile. As many married theologians have written, marriage requires a certain measure of self-emptying or conversion even among equals, and this is daunting.¹¹ Catholic couples especially tend to be isolated in their struggles, and are unlikely to go to

2021.” *Family Profile* 13 (2023), National Center for Family & Marriage Research. <https://doi.org/10.25035/ncfmr/fp-23-13>.

³ Bastian Herre, Veronika Samborska, Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, and Max Roser, “Marriage and Divorces,” *Our World in Data*, July 2020, rev. Feb. 25, retrieved from: <https://ourworldindata.org/marriages-and-divorces>, Aug. 19, 2026.

⁴ Mark M. Gray, ed., “Will You Marry? Will It Be in Church? Will Your Spouse Be Catholic? Will It End in Divorce?,” *1964*, August 12, 2024, <https://nineteensixty-four.blogspot.com/2024/08/will-you-marry-will-it-be-in-church.html>.

⁵ The number of Catholic weddings fell from 3.8 million in 1991 to just under 2 million in 2020. Carol Glatz, “Vatican Stats: Number of Catholics and Deacons Up, but Priests, Nuns and Baptisms Down,” *America*, Oct. 17, 2024, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2024/10/17/vatican-statistic-decline-baptism-clergy-religious-worldwide-249052/>.

⁶ Glatz, “Vatican Stats.”

⁷ Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage: A History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (Penguin Books, 2006).

⁸ Mark B. Padilla et al. eds., *Love and Globalization: Transformations of Intimacy in the Contemporary World* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2007).

⁹ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 154. See also nos. 19, 20, 45, 51, 53, 153, and 156.

¹⁰ Stephanie Coontz, *For Better and for Worse: The Complicated Past and Challenging Future of Marriage* (Viking Press, 2026).

¹¹ Richard Gaillardetz, *A Daring Promise: A Spirituality of Christian Marriage* (Liguori Publications, 2007); Emily Reimer-Barry, *Catholic Theology of Marriage in the Era of HIV and AIDS: Marriage for Life* (Lexington Books, 2015);

their parish for support. Though divorce rates have leveled off following their height in the 1980s, they are still high overall and “gray divorce,” later in marriage, is on the rise.¹²

Why does this fragility concern us? Why does the Church *care* about marriage? After all, Jesus did not marry, nor did most of the saints. Most of the New Testament has very little to do with family life. When Jesus did speak about family, he raised questions about its priority vis a vis discipleship.¹³

And yet, the Creation narratives of the opening chapters of Genesis, read through the lens of Jesus’ words on marriage (Mt 19:4-6), along with sacramental theology, Catholic social doctrine, and the experience of the laity, suggest that marriage can be a privileged relational site that “speaks” *in, through, and to* us of God’s love. To be clear, other relationships of care can also speak to us of love. But the “intimate partnership of married life and love” is unique.¹⁴ Birthed by a promise that my love will remain with another into a future I cannot fully imagine, spouses serve each other, the Church, and the world through daily practices of intimacy, hospitality, serving, giving, and praying.¹⁵ Theirs is a sacramental love with both public and private dimensions.

Of course, the Church is not only made up of families. Religious life holds a central place. Singles also fill our churches. Like the community of disciples that gathered around Jesus and the parables he told, the Catholic community welcomes not just families but a diversity of people who take up a diversity of vocations, a bounty of ways to love God and other people, and serve the world. But it is important that marriage is one among these.

In *Amoris Laetitia* Francis gave us the evocative image of a couple walking hand in hand looking outward as together they work for justice.¹⁶ Did you know that if you search for an image of “couple looking ...,” the internet will give you countless images of a couple looking *at each other*. It is far more difficult to find an image of a couple looking outward. But this is what *Amoris Laetitia* --our most significant Catholic teaching on marriage--offers--an intimate partnership committed to something larger.

Today, it is harder than ever for people to believe in marriage (“Could another person really love and support me forever? Am I capable of loving and supporting someone else? Will we be enough for each other and for our future children? What if we mess this up?”), let alone to believe that their marriage could be important to the Church and the world. If current trends continue, more people will miss out--on the depth of intimacy with a spouse, on the sacrifices and joys of parenting, on creating an open home, on the grace of growing old with a partner in life and love. Others will miss out on the gifts that married households bring. At this moment, the world needs the Church to respond to the fragility of marriage with its compelling vision.

Yet, I do not want to suggest that the problem of marginalization that concerned Pope Francis has been solved. In preparing for this intervention, I heard heart breaking stories. One person told me of

Bridget Burke Ravizza and Julie Donovan Massey, *Project Holiness: Marriage as a Workshop for Everyday Saints* (Liturgical Press, 2015).

¹² Susan L. Brown and I-Fen Lin, “The Graying of Divorce: A Half Century of Change,” *Journals of Gerontology, Psychological Science, and Social Science* 77, no. 9 (2022): 1710–20, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbac057>.

¹³ Lisa Sowl Cahill, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* (Fortress Press, 2000), 18–47.

¹⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 48.

¹⁵ Margaret A. Farley, *Personal Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing*, rev. ed. Orbis Books, 2014); Julie Hanlon Rubio, *Family Ethics: Practices for Christians* (Georgetown University Press, 2010). Julie Hanlon Rubio, “Families Weren’t Perfect in the Bible, but We Can Still Learn from Them,” *America* (June 20–27, 2016).

¹⁶ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 181.

his elderly mother suffering from dementia who, when offered Eucharist at Mass, shouted, “No!,” and covered her mouth, because one thing she remembered was that, because her husband of fifty years had been previously married, she was not worthy to receive the Body of Christ. Another, when I spoke of Pope Francis’s emphasis on welcome and accompaniment, looked at me with disbelief, thinking of how her parents did not attend her wedding, and of one too many experiences of judgement and shame.

It is important, then, that the vision the Church communicates is not one of perfection. Francis spoke of how “the fact that ... love is imperfect doesn’t mean it’s false or unreal” and insisted that “every family, despite its weaknesses, can become a light in the darkness of the world.”¹⁷ In an era when influencers on social media show off their seemingly perfect “traditional” families complete with homemade bread and chickens, Francis’s integration of weakness is crucial. *Magnifica Humanitas* as well insists that human fragility is not a problem to be solved but a fundamental element of our humanity to be integrated.¹⁸ Marriage is a place that provides the scaffolding for vulnerability and the time for inevitable failures to be balanced out by renewed attempts to love. The vision of *Amoris Laetitia* of married love as intimate and outward facing, and imperfect but real, can respond to the fragility of our times *and* our humanity.

And so too can its vision of the Church as a place where, when people fall short of the ideal, they hear from us that “the grace of God works also in their lives” and receive from us in their fragility, a truly “pastoral dialogue” and care. Francis told us, “No one can be condemned forever! It is not the logic of the Gospel!,” and this logic should be extended to “everyone.”¹⁹ The pastoral stance he called us to “is ever ready to understand, forgive, accompany, hope, and, above all, integrate.”²⁰

Conclusion

In 2016, Pope Francis invited the Church to walk with families, especially those who felt excluded, and offered them a compelling vision and concrete support. Ten years later, a deeper crisis marks marriage and parenting, as fewer people choose them, even though both have become more centered on love, which most people still seek. Underneath these declines lies a deeper fragility, accompanied by feelings of unworthiness and unreadiness. This fragility can be embraced as core to our humanity. Marriage and family are essential ecosystems for holding it.

The Church can offer a challenging vision of marriage as intimate partnership oriented to love and justice that does not require perfection. It can be a place where couples and singles experience themselves surrounded by Christians with many vocations who are walking the path of discipleship with them.

Whether they are single or married, with or without children; whether they are divorced, widowed, or remarried, we can meet them at the door with open arms, tell them that theirs is a challenging and necessary vocation, and assure them they are not alone.

¹⁷ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 113 and no. 66.

¹⁸ Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas*, no.120.

¹⁹ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 296. Today this surely includes divorced persons, single parent families, blended families, cohabiting couples, and persons identifying as LGBTQ.

²⁰ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 312. See also, #305, fn. 351.