



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

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Families today: reality, beauty and challenges

*Discerning the signs of the times through the experience of families
and the Church's pastoral commitment today*

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“Faithful to Christ’s teaching we look to the reality of the family today in all its complexity, with both its lights and shadows”. (AL 32). This statement from *Amoris Laetitia* describes not only the Church’s perspective on the family, but also the way in which the social sciences study family life. As a political and social philosopher myself, I seek to study the family as a complex reality, interpreting the connections between the light and the shadows of family life.

Both the family and the Church are complex realities because they are relational realities. This means that life, within the family and the Church, is made up of relationships that define the identity of each and every one of us. Through the relationships we build with other people – be they mothers, fathers, brothers or sisters – we become the builders of our own personal lives, whilst at the same time we help to develop the institutional life of the family and the Church.

Recently, in *Magnifica Humanitas*, the Holy Father reminded us of the words of Saint Paul: “Let each builder choose with care how to build” (MH 229). The importance of this call becomes very clear when we think of the family and the Church as relational realities. Indeed, we might remind one another: *Let each of us be mindful of the relationships we build within our own families and within the Church.*

1. Speaking of family and the Church together: *Amoris Laetitia* in the light of *Gaudium et Spes*

Over the last ten years, in the spirit of *Amoris Laetitia*, we have realised that it is not enough simply to list the main changes affecting the contemporary family. We must also focus on the relationship between the Church and the family – that is, on the mutual implications between the changes within the Church and those within the family. *Amoris Laetitia* clearly sets out this perspective right from the outset: “The Joy of Love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church”. (AL 1). Stylistically speaking, these opening lines of *Amoris Laetitia* also echo the opening lines of *Gaudium et Spes*: ‘The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.’ Therefore, there is a mirror-like parallel between the opening lines of *Amoris Laetitia* and the preamble to *Gaudium et Spes*.

Each of us can observe the anxieties and hopes of families from the outside, as if they were part of a reality that lies before us. This attitude may bring to mind the image of ‘shipwreck with spectator’. We do, in fact, run the risk of thinking that anthropological and social transformations always concern others. Anthropological and social changes, however, show us how the churches themselves are transformed alongside families. The account of Paul’s shipwreck, in Chapter 27 of the Acts of the Apostles, suggests the possibility of a different perspective. Paul is not a spectator of a shipwreck. Paul does not view the problems from a distance. He himself is a shipwrecked man who feels the need to be saved together with the multitude of his companions. The anxieties and hopes of the multitudes are ‘familiar’ to the Church; they are a resource for the Church, the family of God. This is why the practices of *building a family* today are relevant to the practices of *being the Church*, the family of God, today.

We could also express this perspective through the principle of pastoral care: ‘There can be no proclamation of the Gospel of God without taking responsibility for those to whom it is addressed’. Families, as the recipients of the Gospel message, have already experienced a story of love with God; the Gospel is already at work within them. Pastoral care, therefore, is a space in which the Church understands what God is saying to her through families, so that the Church herself may better understand the Gospel and its proclamation.

In recent history, when discussing the relationship between the family and the Church, we have drawn on certain metaphors; consider, for example, the image of the ‘Domestic Church’ or that of the ‘Church as the family of God’. The theological and pastoral use of these *metaphors* could today be complemented by theological and pastoral reflection on *practices*. Family practices, in fact, help us to understand how churches and families learn from one another. Both the Church and the family, in fact, learn through the practices of their daily lives. For example, both churches and families welcome and accompany others through concrete practices – through habitual and shared actions – by means of which we invite, gather, celebrate or commemorate.

2. The Family and Anthropological-Cultural Changes: Three Methodological Perspectives

In the light of these considerations, I would like to set out three methodological perspectives, which will also be useful for our shared discernment over the coming days.

First perspective: *changes in family life are social changes*. As men and women living family lives, we are transformed socially – that is, we are transformed together, by doing things together. Anthropological and cultural changes (AL 32), from the perspective of family life, are not macro-phenomena that take place ‘over our heads’. Rather, they are practical changes that concern what we do ‘with our own hands’, through our daily actions. *Amoris Laetitia* identifies some of these changes: extreme individualism (AL 33), a culture of the ephemeral (AL 39), migration and human mobility (AL 46). To understand these changes from a pastoral perspective, it is necessary to analyse them from the point of view of *family practices*, that is, by focusing on the ‘shared actions’ through which we ‘start a family’ today. For example, for two young engaged couples who, for work reasons, live in different countries, the video calls they make every evening are a fundamental ‘practice’ for nurturing their long-distance relationship.

This observation points to a second methodological perspective: *anthropological and cultural changes are not problems, but human activities*. *Amoris Laetitia* reminds us that family relationships, even when they are difficult and painful, ‘are not a problem; they are first and foremost, an

opportunity' (AL 7). All families have to cope with changes, both small and large. Some transformations in family life stem from major processes of social change and may take the form of decisions imposed upon them. However, viewed from the families' perspective, anthropological and cultural changes should not be regarded merely as problems to be tackled, but also as concrete processes in which individuals and families act, react, learn and develop new resources.

The transformation of the pastoral perspective on the family (AL 199) therefore requires us to strive ever more to identify, even in family life, not, above all, any problems, rather human activities. A Philippine student of mine, whilst writing his thesis, analysed the sociological definition of the 'culture of disaster' as applied to his country. The Philippines is often ravaged by typhoons and floods; however, these challenges have fostered a family culture of solidarity, which is characteristic of the Philippine people. Philippine families are well aware of the actions and customs needed to help one another in the face of a social crisis such as a typhoon.

From this reflection follows the third methodological premise: *social transformations are opportunities for learning*. Pastoral conversion requires, first and foremost, a 'willingness to learn' on the part of the entire People of God, as they navigate anthropological and cultural changes. Consider, for example, how the use of new digital technologies is transforming the daily habits of families and the way children are brought up. A renewed pastoral awareness must recognise that we are learning to do new things and that we are all immersed in a vast process of 'collective learning'. We might say that families are already learning when pastoral initiatives reach out to them to accompany them. We must therefore listen to families, whilst recognising that listening is only one aspect of a broader learning process that concerns the Church as a community of missionary disciples.

Each of us might therefore ask ourselves, from our own specific perspective (as a father, mother, theologian or pastor): *Am I able to recognise and share with others at least one new thing that I have learnt to do, or to do differently, in recent years of my family or pastoral life?*

3. The Flight into Egypt: Families and Churches Learning through Change

The family and the Church, therefore, learn together through change. I believe that the Gospel account of the Flight into Egypt of Jesus, Joseph and Mary (Mt 2:13–23) can help us to better understand this dynamic. I would like to revisit this story, focusing on three words: *mobility, violence, dream*.

The Flight of the Holy Family from Nazareth is an example of family *mobility*. Jesus' first experience alongside his parents is that of a migrant. As soon as he is born, Jesus becomes a stranger in the land of Egypt, just as many families do when they leave our countries to move to other nations, or as many families do who live as immigrants and foreigners in our dioceses. How is the Church being reshaped in contexts where many migrant families arrive? What, at this moment in history, through the phenomenon of human mobility, is the Lord saying to the Churches, so that they may better understand the Gospel and its message?

The Congolese theologian Josée Ngalula observes that, for migrants crossing the African Sahara on their way to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, the presence of the Church takes the form of 'domestic churches' – in other words, family homes where the Lord's disciples are, first and foremost, those who offer water, food and refreshment to those undertaking a long journey.

Today, drawing on the experiences of refugee and migrant families, some Christian communities are re-establishing themselves as 'refuge churches'. Indeed, many churches feel called to take the form

of a ‘hostel’ or a ‘family shelter’. It would be wonderful if, during these days of shared work, the churches that are already engaged in such initiatives could share the fruits and challenges of these transformations.

The second word is *violence*. The Holy Family became migrants because they encountered violence; they were surrounded by bloodthirsty political authorities murdering innocent children. The insecurity stemming from social and political violence is a worrying reality that many churches must deal with today, in their daily lives. Armed guerrilla warfare in Latin America, civil wars in numerous countries across the African continent, and urban gangs in many European and Asian cities: all these phenomena are a bitter daily reality for families and churches living in these contexts. The escalation of violence – not only in the global, media-driven form of international wars – is one of the main factors transforming church and family life. The risk of losing one’s life due to social uncertainty and instability is also gradually transforming intimate relationships. Violence can even devour family bonds and church relationships themselves.

The third word is *dream*. In the story of the Flight into Egypt, Joseph dreams and imagines new paths to salvation. All over the world, families and churches are already dreaming and imagining a better world. These dreams are made up of concrete, everyday actions, such as those of Lorena Fornasir and Gian Andrea Franchi, a married couple in the Italian city of Trieste who tend to the feet of migrants travelling along the Balkan route. To dream means relearning to do something new, in the sense of imagining an unprecedented form of pastoral care, such as tending to the feet of migrant families. To dream, to imagine new forms for the Church, also means renewing what we already do. To imagine the Church means being willing to learn from one another, whilst we are transformed together, as churches and as families. If, therefore, “the welfare of the family is decisive for the future of the world and that of the Church”. (AL 31), we might ask ourselves this question: *What do we need, amidst the light and shadow of today, to learn and imagine new ways of being a family and new ways of being the Church?*