



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

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with the Heads of Eastern Churches
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Young people and the discovery of the vocation to marriage

Listening to young people and accompanying them in discovering the value of marriage

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In seeking to address this theme I have tried to bring together my own experience of listening to young people both as a bishop and educator (as a Salesian of Don Bosco) and the insights of both clergy and laity from the Archdiocese of Perth in Australia whom I have consulted about this topic. There are many dimensions to this pastoral challenge: today I simply want to offer some initial reflections to get us started.

Firstly, to speak of “young people” carries the risk of treating them as a uniform sociological grouping rather than as individual people who, while they may have many things in common, are also unique individuals with their own stories, experiences, and unique personalities. And if we speak more specifically of young Catholics, there are those who are devout and committed (generally not the majority); those with various levels of engagement with the Church, from regular to occasional; those searching for something more; and those for whom questions of faith and belief have not yet claimed their attention.

Because of this diversity there will not be easy answers or simple institutional solutions: particular programmes, renewed catechetical resources, revitalised parish youth groups, and so on. These are important but there is something more fundamental to consider: it is a question of *culture*. The synodal journey while it is partly about structures is more fundamentally about a shift in the Church’s culture – what Pope Leo has identified as a *certain style* which should characterise all our interactions with each other. In dealing with young people our *style* of interaction is supremely important. We must take them seriously, we must both *have* and *demonstrate* our respect for them, and we must listen carefully to them – and as individuals, not as a homogeneous group. A synodal culture is a culture of engagement and accompaniment: we must meet them where they are, enter into relationships of respect, listening and acceptance, and walk with them as they mature.

A central question many young people are asking concerns the meaning of human sexuality and its connection with marriage. In Australia, and possibly in many other countries, the concept of a necessary link between sexual activity and procreation, and the importance of this in Christian marriage is no longer widely understood or accepted. As the Director of Religious Education in the Province of Western Australia, who is married and has teenaged children, explained to me, “*Many of our young people have inherited cultural assumptions about sexuality that differ substantially from those of the Church – they may understand the Church’s position, but they do not find it easy to embrace*”. This highlights the tension between the Church’s view and some strong currents in

contemporary society and points, many would suggest, to the power of *social media, entertainment, peer culture, and online influencers (who) frequently present a view of human relationships that prioritises personal fulfilment, autonomy and immediate happiness over permanence, sacrifice, and covenant*. In addition, many young people today struggle with painful experiences such as the failure of marriages in their own families, domestic violence, inequalities between women and men, and the moral failures of Church leaders whose credibility and witness have been compromised. We are competing with many others approaches to the meaning of marriage.

At the same time many young people are searching for relationships which can bring out the best in them, are enduring rather than fleeting, and provide them with a solid basis on which to build a worthwhile future. Young people need to be affirmed in these desires and accompanied as they seek to build such relationships. They also need to be listened to and accompanied with understanding and compassion as they grow, sometimes painfully, towards a more mature understanding of what such life-giving relationships involve. At both the parish and diocesan level, a renewed focus on developing ways of engaging with young people at this crucial time of their life is needed.

Because so many marriages end in divorce and so many other relationships also end up falling apart, many young people doubt whether life-long commitment is possible or even desirable. In this context the witness of stable married couples and families is a powerful tool. As one married couple explained to me, *“the most persuasive argument for Christian marriage is often a married couple living it well”*. If local parish communities can discover ways in which the witness of married couples and families can be both visible and celebrated, the fear of commitment and doubts about permanence which trouble many young people might be mitigated to some extent. There is a real *ministry of faithful witness* here which may well be given some formal recognition in parish and diocesan communities. Marriage preparation courses are an obvious place for such a “ministry of faithful witness”. So, too, are Religious Education programmes in Catholic Schools. And in parishes which are welcoming and “young people friendly” the possibility for the exercise of such a ministry is greatly enhanced.

One priest recently spoke to me of *“the Church’s high theology of marital intimacy”*. He suggested that one of the aims of a pre-marriage preparation course ought to be a presentation of this “high theology” but in a positive rather than a negative way: as an ideal worth striving for rather than as a list of rules and regulations to be followed. Presenting ideals to work towards rather than rules to follow is more likely to win people over and enable them to see the values which underpin those rules and regulations. It also underpins the idea of accompaniment and the recognition that each person is on a journey of life and faith. Although young couples who live together before marrying are falling short of the ideal of Christian marriage, this does not mean that there is nothing good in their relationships: we met them where they are and accompany them as they move forward to a fuller expression of the Christian ideal. But as Pope Francis asks in *Amoris Laetitia*: *“Who speaks of these things today? Who is capable of taking young people seriously? Who helps them to prepare seriously for a great and generous love?”* (AL284).

Catholicism has always sought to hold together in creative tension fidelity to our ideals and respect for those who struggle to live up to those ideals or who, at certain stages in their lives, find the ideals unrealistic or unconvincing. By basing the Church’s ministry and pastoral practice on relationships of love, compassion and patience, and by committing ourselves to the challenging journey of respectful accompaniment, we will be planting seeds which others will harvest. While this is sound pastoral common sense for everyone, it is especially well-suited to the young.