

Pastoral Guidelines for Implementing *Amoris Laetitia*

ARCHBISHOP CHARLES CHAPUT
Archdiocese of Philadelphia
Philadelphia, PA

THE APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *Amoris Laetitia* completes the reflection on the family conducted by the Synods of 2014 and 2015, a reflection that engaged the entire world. In issuing *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis once again calls the Church to renew and intensify the Christian missionary proclamation of God’s mercy while presenting more persuasively the Church’s teaching about the nature of the family and the sacrament of Matrimony. In all of this, the Holy Father, in union with the whole Church, hopes to strengthen existing families and to reach out to those whose marriages have failed, including those alienated from the life of the Church.

Amoris Laetitia therefore calls for a sensitive accompaniment of those with an imperfect grasp of Christian teaching on marriage and family life who may not be living in accord with Catholic belief and yet desire to be more fully integrated into Church life, including the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist.

The Holy Father’s statements build on the classic Catholic understanding, key to moral theology, of the relationship between objective truth about right and wrong—for example, the truth about marriage revealed by Jesus himself—and how the individual person grasps and applies that truth to particular situations in his or her judgment of conscience. Catholic teaching makes clear that the subjective conscience of the individual can never be set against the objective moral truth, as if conscience and truth were two competing principles for moral decision-making.

As St. John Paul II wrote, such a view would “pose a challenge to the *very identity of the moral conscience* in relation to human freedom and God’s law. . . . Conscience is not an independent and exclusive capacity to decide what is good and what is evil” (*Veritatis Splendor*, §§56 and 60). Rather, “conscience is the application of the law to a particular case” (*ibid.*, §59). Conscience stands under the objective moral law and should be formed by it, so that “the truth about moral good, as that truth is declared in the law of reason, is practically and concretely recognized by the judgment of conscience” (*ibid.*, §61).

But since well-meaning people can err in matters of conscience, especially in a culture that is already deeply confused about complex matters of marriage and sexuality, a person may not be fully culpable for acting against the truth. Church ministers, moved by mercy, should adopt a sensitive pastoral approach in all such situations—an approach both patient and faithfully confident in the saving truth of the Gospel and the transforming power of God’s grace, trusting in the words of Jesus Christ, who promises that “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32). Pastors should strive to avoid both a subjectivism that ignores the truth and a rigorism that lacks mercy.

As *Amoris Laetitia* notes, bishops must arrange for the accompaniment of estranged and hurting persons with guidelines that faithfully reflect Catholic belief (§300). What follows is a template for such guidelines. It is meant for priests, deacons, seminarians, and lay persons who work in the fields of marriage, sacramental ministry, and pastoral care regarding matters of human sexuality.

For Catholic Married Couples

Christian marriage, by its nature, is permanent, monogamous and open to life. The sexual expression of love within a truly Christian marriage is blessed by God—a powerful bond of beauty and joy between man and woman. Jesus himself raised marriage to new dignity. Every marriage of two baptized persons has access, through the sacrament of Matrimony, to grace and life in Christ, especially through the shared privilege of bringing new life into the world and raising children in the knowledge of God.

Marriage and child-rearing are sources of great joy. They have moments (like the birth of a child) when the presence of God is palpable. But an intimately shared life can also cause stress and suffering. Marital fidelity is an ongoing encounter with reality. Thus, it

involves real sacrifices and the discipline of subordinating one's own needs to the needs of others.

Pastors should stress the importance of common prayer and reading Scripture in the home, the grace of frequent Penance and Communion, and the need for building mutual support with committed Catholic friends and family. Every family is a "domestic church," but no Christian family can survive indefinitely without encouragement from other believing families. The Christian community must especially find ways to engage and help families who are burdened by illness, financial setbacks, and marital frictions.

For Catholics and Christians Who Are Separated or Divorced and Not Remarried

Pastors often encounter persons whose marriages face grave hardships, sometimes for reasons that seem undeserved, and sometimes through the fault of one or both married parties. The state of being separated or divorced, and thus finding oneself alone, can involve great pain. It can mean separation from one's children, a life without conjugal intimacy, and for some, the prospect of never having children. Pastors should offer these persons friendship, understanding, introductions to reliable lay mentors, and practical help so that they can sustain their fidelity even under pressure.

Likewise, parishes should be keenly concerned for the spiritual good of those who find themselves separated or divorced for a long time. Some persons, aware that a valid marriage bond is indissoluble, consciously refrain from a new union and devote themselves to carrying out their family and Christian duties. They face no obstacle to receiving Communion and other sacraments. Indeed, they should receive the sacraments regularly, and they deserve the warm support of the Christian community, since they show extraordinary fidelity to Jesus Christ. God is faithful to them even when their spouses are not, a truth that fellow Catholics should reinforce.

In some cases, one can reasonably ask whether an original marriage bond was valid, and thus whether grounds may exist for a decree of nullity (an "annulment"). In our age, such grounds are not uncommon, but this inquiry should always be guided by the truth of the situation: *Did a valid marriage exist?* Decrees of nullity are not an automatic remedy or an entitlement. Such matters require Church ministers to be both compassionate and alert to the truth, and they should investigate these matters in a timely way, respecting the rights of all parties and ensuring that all have access to the annulment procedures.

For Catholics and Christians Who Are Divorced and Civily Remarried

Amoris Laetitia has a special concern for divorced and civilly remarried Catholics. In some cases, a valid first marriage bond may never have existed, and a canonical investigation of the first marriage may be appropriate. In other cases, the first marriage bond of one or both of the civilly remarried persons may be valid, which would impede any attempt at a second marriage. Children may further complicate the circumstances.

The divorced and remarried should be welcomed by the Catholic community. Pastors should ensure that they do not consider themselves as “outside” the Church. On the contrary, as baptized persons, they can (and should) share in her life. They are invited to attend Mass, to pray, and to take part in the activities of the parish. Their children—whether from an original marriage or from their current relationship—are integral to the life of the Catholic community, and they should be brought up in the faith. Couples should sense from their pastors and from the whole community the love they deserve as persons made in the image of God and as fellow Christians.

At the same time, as *Amoris Laetitia* notes, priests should “accompany [the divorced and remarried] in helping them to understand their situation according to the teaching of the Church and the guidelines of the bishop. Useful in this process is an examination of conscience through moments of reflection and penance. The divorced and remarried should ask themselves: how they have acted toward their children when the conjugal union entered into crisis; if they made attempts at reconciliation; what has become of the abandoned party; what consequences does the new relationship have on the rest of the family and the community of the faithful; and what example is being set for young people who are preparing for marriage” (§300). *Amoris Laetitia* continues: “What we are speaking of is a process of accompaniment and discernment which ‘guides the faithful to an awareness of their situation before God. . . . This discernment can never prescind from the Gospel demands of truth and charity as proposed by the Church’” (ibid.).

In light of this, priests must help the divorced and civilly remarried to form their consciences according to the truth. This is a true work of mercy, and it should be undertaken with patience, compassion, and a genuine desire for the good of all concerned, sensitive to the wounds of each person and gently leading each toward the Lord. Its

purpose is not condemnation, but the opposite: a full reconciliation of the person with God and neighbor and restoration to the fullness of visible communion with Jesus Christ and the Church.

Can such individuals receive the sacraments? Baptized members of the Church are always, in principle, invited to the sacraments. The confessional's doors are always open to the contrite heart.¹ What of Communion? *Every* Catholic, not only the divorced and civilly remarried, must sacramentally confess all serious sins of which he or she is aware, with a firm purpose to change, before receiving the Eucharist. In some cases, the subjective responsibility of the person for a past action may be diminished. But the person must still repent and renounce the sin with a firm purpose of amendment.

In practice, pastors must convey Catholic teaching faithfully and in a heartfelt way to all persons—including the divorced and remarried, both in the confessional and publicly—and work with people patiently as they struggle to live the teachings of Christ.

As concerns divorced and civilly remarried couples, Church teaching requires them to refrain from sexual intimacy. This applies even if they must (for the care of their children) live under one roof. The couple should approach the sacrament of Penance regularly and seek recourse to God's mercy if they fail in chastity. Pastors should be aware that, if they give Communion to divorced and remarried persons trying to live chastely, they should seek to do so in a manner that will avoid giving scandal or implying that Church teaching can be set aside. Divorce and civil remarriage may not be given an unintended endorsement, and thus, divorced and remarried persons should not hold positions of responsibility in a parish (e.g., on a parish council), nor should they carry out liturgical functions (e.g., lector or extraordinary minister of Holy Communion).

This is a hard teaching for many, but anything less misleads people about the nature of the Eucharist and the Church. The grace of Jesus Christ is more than a pious cliché; it is a real and powerful seed of change in the believing heart. The lives of many saints bear witness that grace can take great sinners and, by its power of interior renewal, remake them in holiness of life. Pastors and all who work in the service of the Church should tirelessly promote hope in this saving mystery.

¹ Where there is a canonical censure, very rarely the case in these situations, a priest-confessor can either lift the censure or help arrange for its lifting.

For Couples Who Cohabitate and Are Unmarried

Cohabitation of unmarried couples is now common, often fueled by convenience, fear of a final commitment, or a desire to “try out” relationships. Many children are born to these irregular unions. Cohabiting and contracepting couples often enter RCIA or seek to return to the Catholic faith, only dimly aware of the problems created by their situation.

Working with such couples, pastors should consider two issues. *First*, does the couple have children together? A natural obligation in justice exists for parents to care for their children. And children have a natural right to be raised by both parents. Pastors should try, to the degree possible and when a permanent commitment of marriage is viable, to strengthen existing relationships where a couple already has children together. *Second*, does the couple have the maturity to turn their relationship into a permanently committed marriage? Often cohabiting couples refrain from making final commitments because one or both persons is seriously lacking in maturity or has other significant obstacles to entering a valid union. Here, prudence plays a vital role. Where one or another person is not capable of, or is not willing to commit to, a marriage, the pastor should urge them to separate.

Where the couple is disposed to marriage, they should be encouraged to practice chastity until they are sacramentally married. They will find this challenging, but again, with the help of grace, mastering the self is possible—and this fasting from physical intimacy is a strong element of spiritual preparation for an enduring life together. (Of course, persons should also be guided to an awareness of their situation before God, so that they can make a good confession before their wedding, and so begin their married life with joy in the Lord.)

Absent children, such couples should ready themselves for marriage by a time of domestic separation. Where a cohabiting couple already has children, the good of the young may require the couple to remain living together, but in chastity.

For Persons Who Experience Same-Sex Attraction

The pastoral care of persons with same-sex attraction should be guided by the same love and respect the Church seeks to offer all people. Ministers of the Church should emphasize to such persons that they are loved by God, that Jesus desires them to receive an inheritance as adopted sons and daughters of the Father, and that, as with every Christian, this is made possible through the gift of grace.

Those who work in pastoral ministry often encounter persons with diverse forms of same-sex attraction. Many such persons have found it possible to live out a vocation to Christian marriage with children, notwithstanding experiencing some degree of same-sex attraction. Others have found it difficult to do so. Because Christian marriage with children is a great good, those who find themselves unable to embrace this good may suffer from a sense of loss or loneliness. And, as with those who are attracted to the opposite sex, some can find chastity very difficult. Pastoral care of such persons must never lose sight of their individual calling to holiness and union with Jesus Christ and the fact that the power of God's grace can make this a real possibility for their lives.

Catholic belief, rooted in Scripture, reserves all expressions of sexual intimacy to a man and a woman covenanted to each other in a valid marriage. We hold this teaching to be true and unchangeable, tied as it is to our nature and purpose as children of a loving God who desires our happiness. Those with predominant same-sex attractions are therefore called to struggle to live chastely for the kingdom of God. In this endeavor they have need of support, friendship and understanding if they fail. They should be counseled, like everyone else, to have frequent recourse to the sacrament of Penance, where they should be treated with gentleness and compassion. In fact, more than a few such persons, with the help of grace and the sacraments, do live exemplary and even heroic Christian lives.

When two persons of the same sex present themselves openly in a parish as a same-sex couple (including those who may have entered into a same-sex union under civil law), pastors must judge prudently how best to address the situation, both for the sake of the authentic spiritual good of the persons involved and for the common good of the believing community. The Church welcomes all men and women who honestly seek to encounter the Lord, whatever their circumstances. But two persons in an active, public same-sex relationship, no matter how sincere, offer a serious counter-witness to Catholic belief that can only produce moral confusion in the community. Such a relationship cannot be accepted into the life of the parish without undermining the faith of the community, most notably the children.

Finally, those living openly same-sex lifestyles should not hold positions of responsibility in a parish, nor should they carry out any liturgical function.