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GERMAN BISHOPS'
CONFERENCE



**“The joy of love experienced by families
is also the joy of the Church”**

**An invitation to renewed pastoral care of marriage and of the family
in the light of *Amoris laetitia***

Statement by the German Bishops

*adopted by the Permanent Council of the
German Bishops' Conference on 23 January 2017*

We are highly gratified about the great gift that Pope Francis has given to the Church, and to all people of good will who support a successful life in marriage and the family, in the shape of his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia*. In this Exhortation, he has summarised and continued the results of the synodal journey that the Church was able to explore with him in 2014 and 2015. At the same time, he has linked the thoughts and reflections with the message of the Bible, with the tradition of the Church and with his own pastoral experience, so that they form a convincing whole. Especially the everyday, positive language that Pope Francis uses when he speaks about marriage, partnership, sexuality, parenthood, family, and in particular love, makes *Amoris laetitia* an inspiring source for a life in marriage and in the family. We cordially invite everyone to read and study the Pope's Apostolic Exhortation. As Pope Francis himself emphasises: “The greatest benefit, for families themselves and for those engaged in the family apostolate, will come if each part is read patiently and carefully, or if attention is paid to the parts dealing with their specific needs” (AL No. 7). We especially recommend reading the 4th chapter on “Love in marriage”. In his reflections on 1 Cor 13, the Holy Father lays a solid foundation for reading the different pastoral challenges in the light of the Holy Scripture which might lead to concrete actions, since “The sacrament of marriage is not a social convention, an empty ritual or merely the outward sign of a commitment. The sacrament is a gift given for the sanctification and salvation of the spouses, since their mutual belonging is a real representation, through the sacramental sign, of the same relationship between Christ and the Church”. (AL No. 72) Christian marriage is thus a visible sign of God's love and of its effective power: a piece of the living Church. For this reason, the Church speaks of marriage and the family as a church in a small setting, of a “domestic church”.

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We would like first of all to offer our thanks, not only to the Holy Father for his encouragement, but also to everyone who has contributed in the preparations and guidance of the synodal journey in the surveys during the preparatory period, as well as in the technical preparations. We are also grateful for all the prayers that have accompanied the synod participants and their deliberations. Everyone has contributed in their own way towards ensuring that this synodal journey was a journey for the whole Church.

The many and varied sets of circumstances in which married couples and families live today were also made clear to us on this journey. We regard with considerable respect the efforts which people today have to make in society, at work and in bringing up their children. All those who practice on a day-to-day basis faithfulness in a partnership, parental love, care and parenting, solidarity between the generations and sincere relationships in their family environment make an infinitely valuable contribution to society, and above all to one another. The untiring work done by parents in accompanying their children on their path into life and encouraging them to become responsible personalities is irreplaceable. We are therefore highly grateful to spouses and families for their testimony to life and for their faith. We wish to support people on this path, wherever we are able.

What consequences does *Amoris laetitia* now have for pastoral care of marriage and of the family in Germany? Much of this will have to be developed in the concrete pastoral situations. We are therefore only stating a few important reference points. These are the first focal points on which we wish to particularly concentrate in future. This does not come close to exhausting the riches offered by *Amoris laetitia*. We would also like to continue to address the Gospel of the Family, as it was developed in *Amoris laetitia*, and to develop further focal points. We would like to start by discussing the following:

- preparation for marriage;
- marriage guidance;
- strengthening the family as a place to learn to believe;
- dealing with frailty: accompanying - discerning – integrating.

Preparation for marriage

Pastoral guidance for couples, parents and families starts with preparation for marriage. “The complexity of today’s society and the challenges faced by the family require a greater effort on the part of the whole Christian community in preparing those who are about to be married” (AL No. 206). We would like couples who wish to marry in Church to know that we rejoice in their decision, for “The joy of love ... is also the joy of the Church” (AL No. 1). We are glad to invite them to accompany us in taking a look at their specific circumstances and tackling the spiritual as well as the sacramental dimension of their partnership. Additional efforts are needed here in order to develop a catechumenate of marriage which accompanies them on their path towards marriage as a deliberate path of faith. We already have large

numbers of models, initiatives and projects in the German dioceses for preparation for marriage, starting by promoting young people in their ability to engage in relationships, such as in youth work, religious instruction and pastoral care of the family, on seminars for couples and marriage, through to direct preparation for the marriage service. Many of these offers are however provided on too isolated a basis, and reach too few couples. The precious asset which the marriage sacrament signifies on the basis of faith is frequently too weakly communicated to young couples.

Our pastoral work in preparation for marriage therefore needs to be stepped up and to take on a more binding and at the same time a more convincing character. Both on the ground and in exchanges at diocesan and supra-diocesan level, there is a need to develop on and expand these pastoral offerings.

Marriage guidance

We are also faced with a duty to double our marriage guidance efforts. To this end, there needs to be an appreciation in particular of all the successful elements with all their efforts and positive results. It should be celebrated in services marking special occasions and at wedding anniversaries. It is also important to explore the sacrament of marriage and its meaning in greater detail in proclamation, in preaching and in adult education. On the other hand, however, it is not sufficient to withdraw to the proclamation of principles. "What we need is a more responsible and generous effort to present the reasons and motivations for choosing marriage and the family, and in this way to help men and women better to respond to the grace that God offers them" (AL No. 35). We are explicitly promoting all efforts in marriage and family circles in parishes, associations and spiritual communities. In all this, we are particularly keen on developing a spirituality of marriage and the family. Especial significance also attaches to the large numbers of inter-denominational marriages in our country. Their situation poses a special challenge, but also provides an opportunity in the ecumenical dialogue. We know that the pain of the separation between the Churches is felt particularly acutely in such a marriage. This will certainly be felt particularly when it comes to the question of baptism and in parenting methods, or when celebrating first communion or confirmation.

Above all, the fact that full communion at communion is not yet possible makes clear the pain caused by the separation of Christianity in such marriages and families. We are aware that it is not easy to communicate the Catholic position in our time whilst also addressing this question in pastoral responsibility.

In addition to the appreciation of success, help is also indispensable when problems and difficulties arise in accompanying married couples and families. Families face situations on an almost daily basis which make their lives difficult. The spectrum ranges from economic challenges, through illnesses, physical impairments, problems with parenting and

relationships, housing shortages, job loss, caring for aged parents, to the death of family members. The help that is offered needs to be appropriately varied. The services offered by Caritas, the range of pastoral care of marriage and of the family and the Church's advisory agencies, as well as the possibility to directly approach staff working in parish ministry and in the Church's facilities, for instance in kindergartens, are already doing a great deal now in this respect. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who are committed to working in these areas. This is the only way in which the Church can be experienced as having a kind face and as willing to help in people's everyday lives. The appeal from *Amoris laetitia* applies to all of us: "In such difficult situations of need, the Church must be particularly concerned to offer understanding, comfort and acceptance ..." (AL No. 49).

Strengthening the family as a place to learn to believe

With *Amoris laetitia*, we point to the particular significance of the family as a place to learn to believe: "Raising children calls for an orderly process of handing on the faith" (AL No. 287). Families are the place in which the first personal relationships are formed, and they create an intimate place of experience. Children are particularly sensitive towards the major questions of life, and parents can create an awareness of these questions among their children. Daily rituals are helpful, such as praying the benediction cross together, which they draw on their foreheads. And the conscious keeping of Sunday and church festivals in the family provides an opportunity for religious instruction and for passing on the faith. Parents wish to give to their children an orientation for their future lives. This also includes speaking about their own faith: "Faith is God's gift, received in baptism, and not our own work, yet parents are the means that God uses for it to grow and develop" (AL No. 287). Thus families seek shared forms of viable expression. The shaping of religious elements and rituals in family life does not need the extraordinary, but needs to be close to everyday life. We would like to support parents and grandparents to do even more to seek and find new, suitable forms. Children need adults who accompany them in their questioning and seeking. Children however also challenge adults with their questions. This can help adults to re-think their faith and their religious practice, and to grow in their faith. The co-existence of children and adults can therefore be a real school of faith. We wish to increase our support for these processes in pastoral terms, particularly since the religious element of family life has to a large extent ceased to be something that can be taken for granted.

Dealing with frailty: accompanying - discerning – integrating

Despite all the good will on the part of spouses, and in spite of all the preparation for marriage, relationships do sometimes break down. People see themselves faced by the shattered remains of their life plans that were based on a partnership. They suffer from having failed and having been unable to do justice to their ideal of life-long love and partnership. Their self-doubt is frequently also exacerbated by economic woes. It is the children of a

failing relationship who are particularly affected. In this predicament, it is the job of the Church to accompany and support people. In many cases it is the Church's advisory centres and those providing pastoral care to lone parents which provide this service. Having said that, everyday pastoral work must be practiced with an open ear and a generous heart so that it is possible to encourage "openness to grace" (AL No. 37).

We would therefore also like to address the question of how the Church approaches those who are divorced and civilly remarried and who long to receive the sacrament of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. The indissolubility of marriage is part and parcel of the Church's indispensable set of beliefs. *Amoris laetitia* leaves as little doubt in this regard as it does concerning the need to take a differentiated view of the respective circumstances in which people find themselves "Consequently, there is a need "to avoid judgements which do not take into account the complexity of various situations" and "to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience distress because of their condition"." (AL No. 296) *Amoris laetitia* stresses the three aspects of *accompanying, discerning and integrating* as central guiding concepts, on the basis of the fundamental statement that: "No one can be condemned for ever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel!" (AL No. 297). In circumstances which are frequently felt to be unsettling and taxing, those concerned should be able to experience that their Church does not let them fall. It needs to be made clear when dealing with remarried divorcees that they belong to the Church, that God does not take His love away from them, and that they are called on to practice both God's love and brotherly love, and to be real witnesses of Jesus Christ. The Holy Father unambiguously stresses the aspect of guidance by stating: "Such persons need to feel not as excommunicated members of the Church, but instead as living members, able to live and grow in the Church and experience her as a mother who welcomes them always, who takes care of them with affection and encourages them along the path of life and the Gospel." (AL No. 299)

It becomes clear what the Pope means in this context by *discerning* when he states in *Amoris laetitia*: "The Church possesses a solid body of reflection concerning mitigating factors and situations. Hence it can no longer simply be said that all those in any "irregular" situation are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace." (AL No. 301). *Amoris laetitia* does not offer a general rule with regard to this matter, and it does not provide an automatic mechanism to admit all those who are divorced and civilly remarried to the sacraments. *Amoris laetitia* neglects neither the grave fault which many people take on in such situations of break-down and failure of marital relationships, nor the problem that civil remarriage contradicts the visible symbol of the sacrament of marriage, even if the person concerned was left without guilt. *Amoris laetitia* however does not stop at categorical and irreversible exclusion from the sacraments. Footnote 336 (to AL No. 300) makes it clear that discernment which "can recognise that in a particular situation no grave fault exists" should also lead to discerning consequences in terms of sacramental discipline. Footnote 351 (to AL No. 305) furthermore points out that, in an objective situation – which may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such – "a person can be living in God's grace, can love and can

also grow in the life of grace and charity” (AL 305), while receiving the Church’s help and in certain cases also the help of the sacraments. This too speaks in favour of the possibility of receiving the sacraments in such situations.

Not all faithful whose marriages have broken down and are divorced and civilly remarried can receive the sacraments without discernment. Rather, there is a need for discerning solutions which do justice to the individual case and then come to bear if the marriage cannot be annulled. In this context, we encourage all who have justified doubts that their marriage was concluded validly to take up the service of the Church’s marriage courts so that, where appropriate, they may enter into a new church marriage. We would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone working in the Church’s courts for their discrete pastoral commitment.

Amoris laetitia presupposes a process of decision-making guided by a pastoral worker. Subject to the proviso of this decision-making process, which is highly demanding on the consciences of everyone involved, *Amoris laetitia* opens up the possibility to receive the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. In *Amoris laetitia*, Pope Francis stresses the significance of conscience-based decisions when he says: “We also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them.” (AL No. 37). Such a spiritual process, which is always concerned about *integrating*, does not always conclude with the receipt of the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. The individual decision in the respective circumstances of not, or not yet, being able to receive the sacraments deserves respect and recognition. But a decision in favour of receiving the sacraments must also be respected. There is a need to avoid both a laxistic stance lacking intensive assessment when it comes to accompanying, discerning and integrating, and also a rigorist stance which hastily pre-judges people and continues to define their situations as “irregular”. Such extreme stances need to be replaced by discernment (Lat. “*discretio*”) exercised in a personal discussion. We consider it to be our task to deepen the path of conscience-formation among the faithful. This makes it necessary to enable our pastors and provide them with criteria. The Holy Father provides such detailed and excellent conscience-forming criteria in *Amoris laetitia* (see AL Nos. 298-300).

This guiding principle of *accompanying*, *discerning* and *integrating* signifies a considerable claim and a major challenge, for pastors and for the faithful alike. Particularly in a situation of failure, but also over and above it, people are to be able to learn that the Church is with them and invites them to go along with Her. “The Church’s pastors, in proposing to the faithful the full ideal of the Gospel and the Church’s teaching, must also help them to treat the weak with compassion, avoiding aggravation or unduly harsh or hasty judgements.” (AL No. 308) Pope Francis touched on many situations in his Exhortation: Be it lone parents, migrants and displaced families, interdenominational, interreligious or intercultural couples, those where one partner believes and the other believes much less strongly, or indeed not at all, families

living in poverty looking after family members who are old, ill or in need of particular care, and not lastly also those couples who are not yet able to decide to marry, and married couples after divorce and civil remarriage. Some of them we will only be able to accompany on a brief section of their journey, or we will only maintain a distant contact with them, whilst we will be able to accompany others more intensively, and some will be on the road with us permanently. And we must not deny the Gospel of the family here. "We would be depriving the world of values that we can and must offer." (AL No. 35). Accompanying couples undergoing crises, divorces and civil remarriage also means a major challenge and an opportunity to spark a discussion of the Church and Her understanding of marriage.

We would like to encourage anyone wishing to take the path of marriage and family with the Church to personally take the ground-breaking text *Amoris laetitia* to heart, and hence to discover the riches of the Gospel of the family for their own lives. We would like to support, further and guide all spouses and all families on this path. The Holy Father himself has given us a message to take with us on our journey: "All of us are called to keep striving towards something greater than ourselves and our families, and every family must feel this constant impulse. Let us make this journey as families, let us keep walking together. What we have been promised is greater than we can imagine. May we never lose heart because of our limitations, or ever stop seeking that fullness of love and communion which God holds out before us." (AL No. 325)