

Families: The joy of love

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Catholic and secular media were abuzz last month with discussion and analysis of Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation "On Love in the Family". Entitled *Amoris laetitia*, or "The Joy of Love", in this document Pope Francis has gathered the contributions of the 2014 and 2015 Synods on the family, as well as his own considerations as

an "aid to reflection, dialogue and pastoral practice and as a help and encouragement to families in their daily commitments and challenges" (AL 4).

Coming in at 256 pages and arriving during the school holidays, I was especially grateful that Pope Francis himself has advised against a rushed

reading of the text. My own first reading of the document was marked by multiple opportunities (a.k.a interruptions by small children) to pause, reflect and revisit the text. It's in this context that I offer some thoughts about the help and encouragement *Amoris laetitia* has for families.

1. Marriages need God's grace

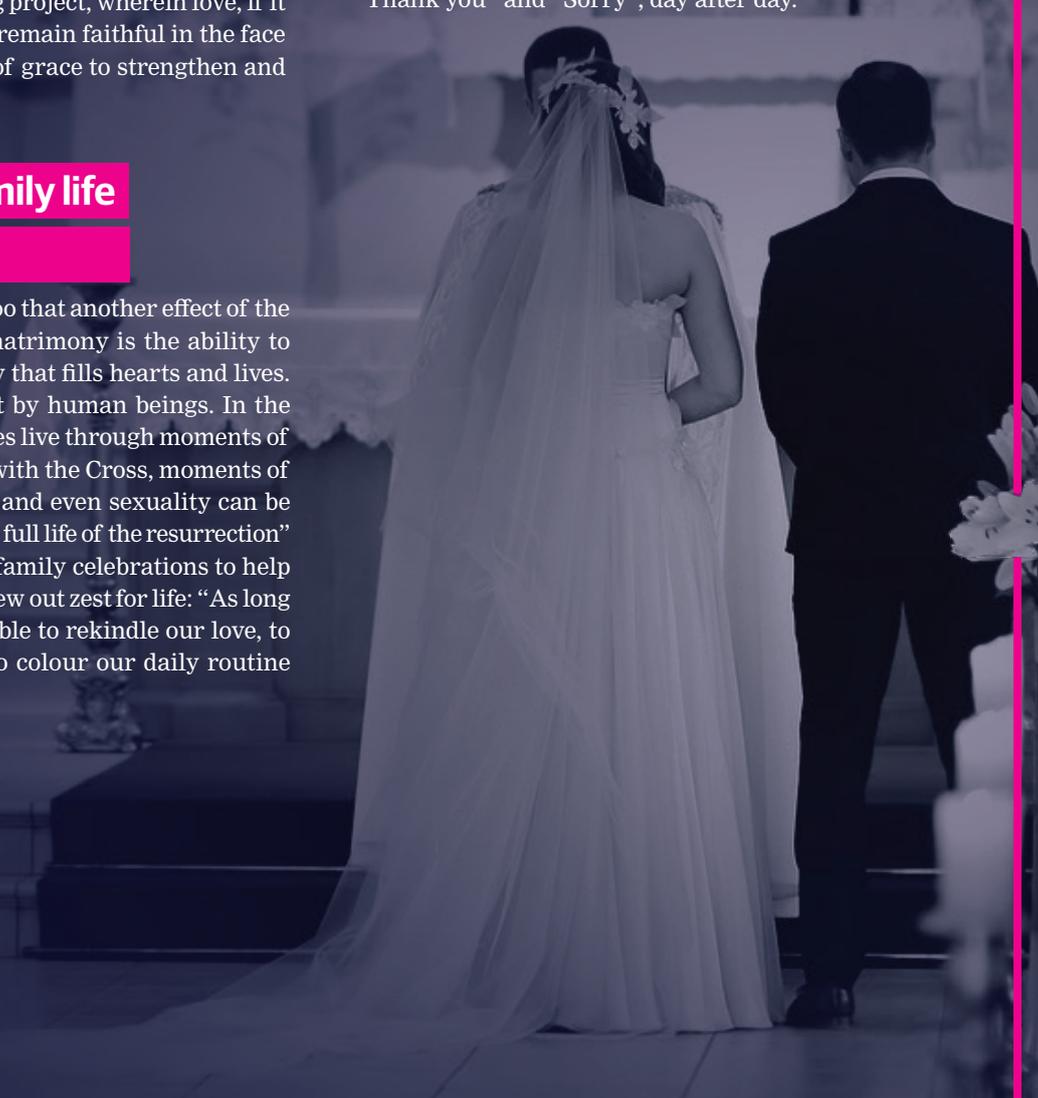
While it should come as no surprise, it is nonetheless comforting to hear Pope Francis remind us that "No family drops down from heaven perfectly formed; families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love" (AL 325). Indeed, while in no way negative about the possibility for deep and enduring marital love, Pope Francis warns against an abstract and excessive idealisation of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families (AL 36). Instead, he encourages us to see marriage as a lifelong project, wherein love, if it "is to overcome all trials and remain faithful in the face of everything, needs the gift of grace to strengthen and elevate it" (AL 124).

2. Marriage and family life should be joyful

Pope Francis reminds us too that another effect of the grace of the sacrament of matrimony is the ability to experience family life as a joy that fills hearts and lives. God loves the enjoyment felt by human beings. In the same way as Christian families live through moments of pain and difficulty in union with the Cross, moments of "joy, relaxation, celebration, and even sexuality can be experienced as a sharing in the full life of the resurrection" (AL 317). We especially need family celebrations to help us cherish God's gifts and renew our zest for life: "As long as we can celebrate, we are able to rekindle our love, to free it from monotony and to colour our daily routine with hope" (AL 226).

3. Do little things with great love

Amoris laetitia beautifully recounts the Christian understanding of marriage as the icon of God's love for us, but grounds this truth in the earthly reality of daily life. Pope Francis explains that it is by starting with the simple ordinary things of life that couples "make visible the love with which Christ loves his Church and continues to give his life for her" (AL 121). These include displaying tenderness, looking at each other with appreciation, listening patiently and attentively, and repeating "Please", "Thank you" and "Sorry", day after day.



4. Married love always gives life

The most immediate way in which married love expresses its generosity is in the reality of children, who are a living reflection of the love between husband and wife. The love that a husband and wife show their children in turn reveals ‘the maternal and paternal face of the Lord’ (AL 169, 172).

Yet *Amoris laetitia* also reminds us that “Led by the Spirit, the family circle is not only open to life by generating it within itself, but also by going forth and spreading life by caring for others and seeking their happiness” (AL 324).

Indeed, “no family can be fruitful if it sees itself as overly different or set apart.” Francis warns Christians against becoming families who “...whether because of the language they use, the way they act or treat others, or their constant harping on the same two or three issues, end up being seen as remote and not really a part of the community” (AL 182).

Faith does not remove us from the world, but ought to draw us more deeply into the world. The love of a married couple is called to foster a ‘culture of encounter’, reaching out and interacting with a wider family of parents, aunts and uncles, cousins and even neighbours and other families, and helping to overcome alienation and break through isolation (AL 183). In view of the document’s pastoral focus upon situations involving the breakdown of marriages, this is a valuable context for families to understand their own role in renewed efforts by the Church to accompany all people who have experienced abandonment, separation or divorce, particularly when there are children involved.

5. Ordinary family life is an education

Chapter Seven of *Amoris laetitia* is dedicated to topics concerning the education of children, discussing their ethical formation, discipline, the need for realism, education in sexuality and the passing on of the faith. Yet framing all of these considerations, is the constant reminder that ordinary family life is the most important educational setting for children since it is here we first learn to relate to others, to listen and share, to be patient and show respect, to help one another and live as one, to pray and appreciate the meaning and beauty of faith.

6. The joy of love is possible

Finally, over and above the ‘humble realism’ about contemporary marriage and family life in *Amoris laetitia*, we must never forget that the Christian proclamation on the family is ‘good news’. As Pope Francis himself concludes:

“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 325).

