

The following is a summary of the apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love) on love in the family as provided from the Vatican on April 8, 2016. Over the coming weeks we continue to present the summary. Today we continue with Chapter Eight

Chapter eight: “Guiding, discerning and integrating weakness” (291-312) The eighth chapter is an invitation to mercy and pastoral discernment in situations that do not fully match what the Lord proposes. The Pope uses three very important verbs: guiding, discerning and integrating, which are fundamental in addressing fragile, complex or irregular situations. The chapter has sections on the need for gradualness in pastoral care; the importance of discernment; norms and mitigating circumstances in pastoral discernment; and finally what the Pope calls the “logic of pastoral mercy”.

Chapter eight is very sensitive. In reading it one must remember that “the Church’s task is often like that of a field hospital” (AL 291). Here the Holy Father grapples with the findings of the Synods on controversial issues. He reaffirms what Christian marriage is and adds that “some forms of union radically contradict this ideal, while others realize it in at least a partial and analogous way”. The Church therefore “does not disregard the constructive elements in those situations which do not yet or no longer correspond to her teaching on marriage” (AL 292).

As far as discernment with regard to “irregular” situations is concerned, the Pope states: “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 296). And he continues: “It is a matter of reaching out to everyone, of needing to help each person find his or her proper way of participating in the ecclesial community, and thus to experience being touched by an ‘unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous’ mercy” (AL 297). And further: “The divorced who have entered a new union, for example, can find themselves in a variety of situations, which should not be pigeonholed or fit into overly rigid classifications leaving no room for a suitable personal and pastoral discernment” (AL 298).

In this line, gathering the observations of many Synod Fathers, the Pope states that “the baptized who are divorced and civilly remarried need to be more fully integrated into Christian communities in the variety of ways possible, while avoiding any occasion of scandal”. “Their participation can be expressed in different ecclesial services... 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... This integration is also needed in the care and Christian upbringing of their children” (AL 299).

In a more general vein, the Pope makes an extremely important statement for understanding the orientation and meaning of the Exhortation: “If we consider the immense variety of concrete situations, ... it is understandable that neither the Synod nor this Exhortation could be expected to provide a new set of general rules, canonical in nature and applicable to all cases. What is needed is simply a renewed encouragement to undertake a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases, one which would recognize that, since ‘the degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases’, the consequences or effects of a rule need not necessarily always be the same” (AL 300). The Pope develops in depth the needs and characteristics of the journey of accompaniment and discernment necessary for profound dialogue between the faithful and their pastors.

For this purpose the Holy Father recalls the Church’s reflection on “mitigating factors and situations” regarding the attribution of responsibility and accountability for actions; and relying on St. Thomas Aquinas, he focuses on the relationship between rules and discernment by stating: “It is true that general rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded or neglected, but in their formulation they cannot provide absolutely for all particular situations. At the same time, it must be said that, precisely for that reason, what is part of a practical discernment in particular circumstances cannot be elevated to the level of a rule” (AL 304).

The last section of the chapter treats “The logic of pastoral mercy”. To avoid misunderstandings, Pope Francis strongly reiterates: “To show understanding in the face of exceptional situations never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing less than what Jesus offers to the human being. Today, more important than the pastoral care of failures is the pastoral effort to strengthen marriages and thus to prevent their breakdown” (AL 307).

The overall sense of the chapter and of the spirit that Pope Francis wishes to impart to the pastoral work of the Church is well summed up in the closing words: “I encourage the faithful who find themselves in complicated situations to speak confidently with their pastors or with other lay people whose lives are committed to the Lord. They may not always encounter in them a confirmation of their own ideas or desires, but they will surely receive some light to help them better understand their situation and discover a path to personal growth. I also encourage the Church’s pastors to listen to them with sensitivity and serenity, with a sincere desire to understand their plight and their point of view, in order to help them live better lives and to recognize their proper place in the Church.” (AL 312). On the “logic of pastoral mercy”, Pope Francis emphasizes: “At times we find it hard to make room for God’s unconditional love in our pastoral activity. We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance. That is the worst way of watering down the Gospel” (AL 311).