

PASTORAL LETTER ON THE  
READING OF *AMORIS LAETITIA* IN LIGHT OF CHURCH TEACHING  
“A TRUE AND LIVING ICON”  
OF THE ARCHBISHOP OF PORTLAND, OREGON  
MOST REVEREND ALEXANDER K. SAMPLE  
TO THE PRIESTS, DEACONS, RELIGIOUS AND FAITHFUL OF THE  
ARCHDIOCESE

“The couple that loves and begets life is a true, living icon ... capable of revealing God the Creator and Savior.”<sup>1</sup> With these words our Holy Father, Pope Francis, reminds us that married love is “a symbol of God’s inner life,” for the “triune God is a communion of love, and the family is its living reflection.”<sup>2</sup>

Of its very nature, marriage exists for the communion of life and love between spouses, ordered to the procreation and care of children, in an exclusive and permanent bond between one man and one woman. In this natural bond, existing even between unbaptized spouses, we are given “an image for understanding and describing the mystery of God himself....”<sup>3</sup>

Christ our Lord elevated the natural bond of marriage to the dignity of a sacrament whereby the union of man and woman signifies the “union of Christ and the Church.”<sup>4</sup> God, who is eternal and unchanging, gives marriage as a natural icon of himself; Christ elevates marriage into a sacrament signifying the permanent, indissoluble covenant with his people.

Because the family is essential to the well-being of the world, the Church, and the spread of the Gospel, the world’s bishops gathered in the Synods of 2014 and 2015 to identify the real situation of marriages and families in the world today and to seek pastoral solutions for these challenges. Having listened to the bishops, Pope Francis presented his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, in

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* [The Joy of Love], 11.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

order to invigorate the Church’s pastoral care, particularly for those in difficult and wounded situations.

Patiently reminding us that the Church must often function like a field hospital for the wounded, Pope Francis honestly faces the pain and brokenness of many lives. For those who suffer, “the Church must accompany with attention and care the weakest of her children, who show signs of a wounded and troubled love, by restoring in them hope and confidence, like the beacon of a lighthouse in a port or a torch carried among the people to enlighten those who have lost their way or who are in the midst of a storm.”<sup>5</sup> Only a patient love accompanying those who suffer can fully “bear witness, in a credible way, to the beauty of marriage as indissoluble and perpetually faithful.”<sup>6</sup> The Exhortation should move us to mercy.

While the Exhortation does not contain any change in Church doctrine regarding marriage and family life, some have used *Amoris Laetitia* in ways that do not correspond with the Church’s teaching tradition.

At the invitation of Pope Francis, we must read the document “patiently and carefully” and in keeping with the teaching of the Church.<sup>7</sup> This pastoral letter is not intended to be the only and final word on *Amoris Laetitia* in the Archdiocese of Portland. Further pastoral guidelines will be forthcoming which will help us apply the Exhortation in pastoral support of marriage and family life. The current text before us articulates the principles with which to approach *Amoris Laetitia*, and addresses and clarifies several troublesome misuses of the text which have received attention from the media and elsewhere. Only with this foundational understanding in place can we make practical application of these principles in our local Church.

## TEACHING IN CONTINUITY

Since the truth of God is necessary for salvation, in “His gracious goodness, God has seen to it that what He had revealed for the salvation of all nations would abide perpetually in its full integrity and be handed on to all generations.”<sup>8</sup> The Sacred deposit of the faith is given to the apostles and authentically interpreted by the teaching office of the Church.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 291; citing *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 28.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Dei Verbum*, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Second Vatican Council, 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 84–85.

So constant is the deposit of faith, that the Magisterium itself “is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it.”<sup>10</sup> The Gospel remains always whole and alive, “preserved by an unending succession of preachers until the end of time,” who “handing on what they themselves have received, warn the faithful to hold fast to the traditions which they have learned...”<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, doctrine does not change, but it can develop. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, St. Vincent of Lérins provided a beautiful account of the development of doctrine, one occasionally appealed to by Pope Francis himself. Doctrine will develop, St. Vincent suggests, for our understanding of it grows, not unlike the growth of a child into adulthood. Yet development must not be alteration, for “development means that each thing expands to be itself, while alteration means that a thing is changed from one thing into another.”<sup>12</sup> Authentic development admits of no essential change, no variation in the essential shape and limits.

Much later, Blessed John Henry Newman, who became a Cardinal of the Church, used St. Vincent in his own influential account of development.<sup>13</sup> As Newman explains, at times the external expression or formulation of a doctrine develops or is clarified, particularly in response to new circumstances and contexts, even though the central idea or truth expressed does not change. Further, all genuine development exists in continuity with the past, both in the sense of following logically or organically from what was prior, but also in the sense of preserving the past, maintaining and securing what has been believed.

When discerning genuine development, we read parts in light of the whole, formulae in light of the essence, and the newer in light of the older. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Tradition does develop, but Tradition develops only in continuity, never in rupture. Pastoral practice and sacramental discipline develop as well, but practice and discipline must be completely consistent with the teachings of Jesus and the Church.

So also the Church’s moral teaching. As historical and social contexts change, issues addressed and ways of addressing them change. But fundamental moral truths—grounded in the eternal nature of God, revealed through his Word, and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 86; citing *Dei Verbum*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Dei Verbum*, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitorium*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 1845, II. 5.

corresponding to unchanging human nature and the flourishing of that nature—do not change. Social contexts do not cause human nature or the human good; indeed, only an invariant human good allows us to understand the idea of moral development within human history.

The indissolubility of marriage is a precious and essential teaching of the Church, revealed by Jesus and cherished in our unbroken Tradition. Our Lord proclaims the eternal wisdom of God as expressed in creation: “from the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate ... whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) and marries another commits adultery” (Matthew 19:4-9).

What our Lord teaches, establishes, and commands is articulated by canon law and the Catechism alike: “From a valid marriage there arises between the spouses a bond which by its nature is perpetual and exclusive” (c. 1134), and the “essential properties of marriage are unity and indissolubility” (c. 1056). So firm is this indissoluble bond, that a valid and consummated marriage “can be dissolved by no human power and by no cause, except death” (c. 1141). The consent of the spouses is established and sealed by God himself, and the ensuing bond “is a reality, henceforth irrevocable.... The Church does not have the power to contravene this disposition of divine wisdom.”<sup>14</sup>

The indissolubility of the marriage bond is not merely a legal or ethical rule. It is a beautiful, sacramental, and spiritual reality. In created nature, the bond expresses something of the eternal nature of God, and in the sacrament of marriage between baptized persons it is “integrated into God’s covenant with man,” a “covenant guaranteed by God’s fidelity.”<sup>15</sup> The marriage bond is indissoluble because the Gospel covenant is indissoluble, for the sacrament signifies Christ’s permanent union with his Church.

Accepting the teaching on indissolubility corresponds with sound reason, Scripture, unbroken Tradition, and the clear teaching of our Lord. It also affirms the Gospel by acknowledging that the sign and promise of God’s covenantal fidelity is trustworthy, that God is who he is and has promised himself to be. Accepting indissolubility affirms the very essence and purpose of the Church,

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<sup>14</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1640.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 1639, 1640.

which is to proclaim and hand on the Gospel as it was given to us. The supreme law of the Church is the salvation of souls, and that which furthers this law should be embraced by the faithful. If mercy is to achieve its goal, it must include the proclamation of all that is necessary for salvation. To fail to proclaim all that is necessary for salvation is unmerciful.

### MISUSES OF AMORIS LAETITIA

Despite the clear teaching of the Church, some have misused elements of *Amoris Laetitia* to support positions that are not compatible with Church teaching. This has created some confusion and consternation amongst the faithful. Given the nature of doctrinal and moral development, certain positions are incompatible with genuine doctrine, pastoral practice, and sacramental discipline. Since such positions are illicit, *Amoris Laetitia* cannot be legitimately used to offer support for them. The text cannot and ought not be misused in support of the following three errors.

#### **Misuse One: Conscience Legitimizes Actions Contravening Divine Commandments**

“Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey.... His conscience is man’s most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.”<sup>16</sup> Conscience enjoins us to do good and refrain from evil, and listening to and following conscience is a mark of human dignity and awesome responsibility. When we act, we shape not only the world around us but also our own character, even, at times, affecting our eternal well-being. Given the seriousness of this responsibility, each person has the right and obligation to obey their conscience.

*Amoris Laetitia* affirms the magnificence of this freedom, for “human dignity itself demands that each of us ‘act out of conscious and free choice, as moved and drawn in a personal way from within.’”<sup>17</sup> Given the difficulty and complexity of various situations, as well as the level of formation, knowledge, and virtue of the person, the Exhortation notes that a person “can also recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God, and come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one’s limits, while not yet fully the objective ideal.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 1776; citing *Gaudium et Spes*, 16.

<sup>17</sup> *Amoris Laetitia*, 267; citing *Gaudium et Spes*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 303.

This does not support the claim that conscience supersedes an objective moral law. Ignorance, enslavement to passions, an incorrect understanding of moral autonomy, or the absence of virtue may reduce a person's subjective culpability when sincerely following erroneous conscience, and in some instances "the evil committed by the person cannot be imputed to him."<sup>19</sup> But in no way does this diminish or negate the objectivity of the evil, or privation, or disorder committed.

Conscience is not a law unto itself, nor may conscience rightly disregard or supplant the commands of God as taught by the Church. St. John Paul II explicitly rejected the possibility that private judgments of conscience could "legitimize so-called 'pastoral' solutions contrary to the teaching of the Magisterium" or allow individuals to violate exceptionless moral norms.<sup>20</sup>

The Church never desires to "replace" or circumvent conscience, knowing that persons are "capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations."<sup>21</sup> But conscience can err, and "freedom of conscience is never freedom 'from' the truth but always and only freedom 'in' the truth."<sup>22</sup> Thus, the Church, parents, and lawful authority are called always "to form consciences."<sup>23</sup> A person sincerely responding with as much generosity to God's commandment as they can, is nonetheless called to "remain ever open to new stages of growth and to new decisions which can enable the ideal to be more fully realized."<sup>24</sup>

Because persons are free, conscience can develop and mature. No one is trapped within a permanently erroneous conscience, and by God's grace and moral education can cooperate in attaining a well-formed conscience. Pope Francis notes, for instance, the serious responsibility of parents in "shaping the will of their children, fostering good habits and a natural inclination to goodness," and of moral education for "cultivating freedom" to "help develop those stable interior principles that lead us spontaneously to do good."<sup>25</sup> Human dignity, he reminds us, calls us to act in a personal way, from within, and it is precisely formation in the virtuous life which "builds, strengthens, and shapes freedom."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1792, 1793.

<sup>20</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 56.

<sup>21</sup> *Amoris Laetitia*, 37.

<sup>22</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 64.

<sup>23</sup> *Amoris Laetitia*, 37.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 264, 267.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

Conscience as an inner law inscribed by God “bears witness to the authority of truth in reference to the supreme Good to which the human person is drawn, and it welcomes the commandments.”<sup>27</sup> Conscience is internal, but conscience is given by God in such a way that the moral commandments, and the authoritative interpretation of those commandments by the Church, are not external impositions on a person. Moral teaching forms conscience, enlightening a person so they can recognize, love, and willingly follow the objective moral truth, however incorrect their previous judgments may have been. This is particularly true for the baptized, who are united with Christ and have Christ’s own mind and life in them through grace (1 Corinthians 2:16). Let us not forget the hope of divine filiation, that in baptism we have become new creatures, born anew from within.

There is a grave obligation to assist in the formation of conscience. As St. John Paul II reminded, in full conformity with the Catholic tradition, when people approach the Church with the questions and challenges of their conscience, “*the Church’s reply contains the voice of Jesus Christ, the voice of the truth about good and evil*. In the words spoken by the Church there resounds, in people’s inmost being, the voice of God....”<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere, he links moral formation to the charity of the Gospel itself: “the concrete pedagogy of the Church must always remain linked with her doctrine and never be separated from it. With the same conviction as my predecessor, I therefore repeat: ‘To diminish in no way the saving teaching of Christ constitutes an eminent form of charity for souls.’”<sup>29</sup>

Encouraging or silently accepting an erroneous judgment of conscience is neither mercy nor charity. Proclaiming the Good News, including the moral demands entailed by the nature of marriage, is a work of mercy, and all parents, schools, Catholic institutions, teachers, theologians, pastors, religious, and bishops have “the ‘grave obligation’ to be *personally* vigilant that the ‘sound doctrine’ (1 Tim 1:10) of faith and morals is taught” for the proper formation of conscience.<sup>30</sup>

## **Misuse Two: Under Certain Conditions Divine Prohibitions Admit of Exceptions**

Mitigating factors can mean that a “negative judgment about an objective situation does not imply a judgment about the imputability or culpability of the person involved.”<sup>31</sup> Consequently, the Exhortation notes that it would be “reductive simply

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<sup>27</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1777.

<sup>28</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 117.

<sup>29</sup> John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 33; citing *Humanae Vitae*, 29.

<sup>30</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 116.

<sup>31</sup> *Amoris Laetitia*, 302.

to consider whether or not an individual's actions correspond to a general law or rule, because that is not enough to discern and ensure full fidelity to God in the concrete life of a human being.... 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."<sup>32</sup> As the Holy Father reminds us, the moral law is not a cudgel: "a pastor cannot feel that it is enough simply to apply moral laws to those living in 'irregular' situations, as if they were stones to throw at people's lives."<sup>33</sup>

Some have improperly used these considerations to claim that absolute prohibitions admit of exceptions, particularly when weakness of will or the complexity of a situation makes living up to the rule extremely difficult. This is incorrect.

It is true that keeping the objective law is not sufficient to demonstrate full fidelity to God, neither are moral laws empty formulae which are kept even when one's intentions and character are indifferent or hostile to their purposes. As St. Paul reminds us, Christian perfection is not mere rule keeping, but the fullness of virtue: "If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal.... If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:1, 3). As St. Thomas Aquinas explains, a person's right external behavior does not necessarily entail that they have chosen the good act for its own sake or from a firm disposition of virtue, let alone that they have fulfilled the law with the perfection of charity.<sup>34</sup>

But it remains the case that certain actions are absolutely prohibited, for in no instance is it possible to choose them with a good will. As St. John Paul II explains, certain *positive* commandments, while unchanging and universal, admit of widely varying means to accomplish them. Moreover, at times external circumstances can impede a person's ability to perform such good acts. There are *negative* commandments, or prohibitions, on the other hand, which are universally binding in each and every circumstance. They admit of no exceptions whatsoever and can never be chosen, in any way or for any reason, in "conformity with the dignity of the person" or with the "goodness of the will."<sup>35</sup> Further, unlike positive commandments, external circumstances can never hinder a person "from not doing

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II 100. 9, 10; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1826, 1827.

<sup>35</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 52.

certain actions,” especially if one is prepared “to die rather than to do evil.”<sup>36</sup> Doing good, thus, admits of more flexibility and context than avoiding evil, which is why the “Church has always taught that one may never choose kinds of behavior prohibited by the moral commandments expressed in negative form in the Old and New Testaments.... Jesus himself reaffirms that these prohibitions allow no exceptions: ‘If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.... You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery....’”<sup>37</sup>

Further, consciously choosing actions in violation of exceptionless moral prohibitions remains impermissible even if one has made a general or overarching commitment to the good—the so-called fundamental option.<sup>38</sup> That is, it is not enough to have a general intention to do and be good even when choosing actions morally illicit in themselves. Some actions ought never be chosen, and the “negative moral precepts, which oblige without exception” are to be accepted by the faithful as obligations “declared and taught by the Church in the name of God, the Creator and Lord.”<sup>39</sup>

Still, as described throughout *Amoris Laetitia*, the real situation in many societies is such that general values, laws, economic conditions, and changing social mores means that many people find themselves in “irregular” situations and unions. The Church, following the example and teaching of the Lord, offers mercy. With the Samaritan woman, Jesus “addressed her desire for true love, in order to free her from the darkness in her life and to bring her to the full joy of the Gospel.”<sup>40</sup> Confronted with her need, her thirst for love, He offers himself, the living water (John 4:10).

Accompanying the weak in their weakness, Jesus offers his own life to and for them—the Church does the same. Like a caring Mother, “the Church is close” to those who find the moral teachings on marriage and sexuality difficult, those in situations which are “often very arduous and at times truly tormented by difficulties of every kind.”<sup>41</sup> Grace and mercy and accompaniment are the way of the Church as she cares for all, for Jesus is the Good Shepherd who does not will that any should be lost.

At the very same time, the Church which is Mother is also a Teacher who “never

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 65–68.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>40</sup> *Amoris Laetitia*, 294.

<sup>41</sup> John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 33.

tires of proclaiming the moral norm that must guide the responsible transmission of life. The Church is in no way the author or the arbiter of this norm. In obedience to the truth which is Christ, whose image is reflected in the nature and dignity of the human person, the Church interprets the moral norm and proposes it to all people of good will, without concealing its demands of radicalness and perfection.”<sup>42</sup>

As Teacher and Mother, “the Church never ceases to exhort and encourage all to resolve whatever conjugal difficulties may arise without ever falsifying or compromising the truth.... Accordingly, the concrete pedagogy of the Church must always remain linked with her doctrine and never be separated from it.”<sup>43</sup> In her patient instruction, the Church follows the “law of gradualness,” knowing that persons grow in stages in their ability to know, love, and enact the moral good.<sup>44</sup> However, with respect to exceptionless prohibitions, the law of gradualness is “not a ‘gradualness of law’ ... [f]or the law is itself a gift of God which points out the way, a gift for everyone without exception; it can be followed with the help of grace, even though each human being ‘advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God....’”<sup>45</sup> That which is prohibited is prohibited for all, in every circumstance.

### **Misuse Three: Human Frailty Exempts from Divine Command**

With genuine compassion, the Holy Father exhorts us to “proclaim the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel, which in its own way must penetrate the mind and heart of every person.”<sup>46</sup> We cannot forget the frailty and weakness of God’s children, or as the Synod Fathers realistically describe, “[u]nder certain circumstances people find it very difficult to act differently. Therefore, while upholding a general rule, it is necessary to recognize that responsibility with respect to certain actions or decisions is not the same in all cases.”<sup>47</sup>

While authentic pastoral care always accompanies people in their suffering and frailty, some have misused the Exhortation’s rightful insistence on the logic of mercy to claim that objectively wrong acts can be accepted, even perhaps sanctified, if a person judges he or she cannot do differently. Not only does this misapply mitigating factors for *subjective* responsibility with determinations of *objective* rightness, but it empties the cross of its power. Claiming that individuals

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> *Amoris Laetitia*, 295; citing *Familiaris Consortio*, 34.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 295; citing *Familiaris Consortio*, 9.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 309; citing *Misericordiae Vultus*, 12.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 302.

cannot change their ways is tantamount to denying the efficacy and power of grace, of denying that God can do what he promises.

The moral law is neither alien nor hostile to human well-being and capabilities. The natural moral law is an internal law, the law of our own nature, and its demands, however challenging, are in keeping with our natural capacities and tends toward the fulfillment of our deepest desires: “Since the moral order reveals and sets forth the plan of God the Creator, for this very reason it cannot be something that harms man, something impersonal. On the contrary, by responding to the deepest demands of the human being created by God, it places itself at the service of that person's full humanity with the delicate and binding love whereby God Himself inspires, sustains and guides every creature towards its happiness.”<sup>48</sup>

Further, not only by nature but also by grace is family and marriage life sustained and strengthened. For the baptized, marriage is a sacrament and brings with it sacramental grace and the grace of state to aid and assist, strengthen and convert: “By taking up the human reality of the love between husband and wife in all its implications, the sacrament [of marriage] gives to Christian couples and parents a power and a commitment to live their vocation ... and they receive both a command which they cannot ignore and a grace which sustains and stimulates them.”<sup>49</sup>

In his abundant kindness, God does not issue commands from afar, but accompanies us always, offering his gracious assistance to all those in need. Christ is the great physician, the good shepherd, and our brother who has been tempted as we have, and his merits can become our own. Because of this, the law is “a gift for everyone without exception ... [and] can be followed with the help of grace.”<sup>50</sup>

Only because God’s gracious assistance is available does the Church teach the law of gradualness and carefully identify mitigating factors in personal culpability. If a person could not grow, either by nature and grace, we could not speak of gradualness as they develop in responsibility, knowledge, and love. If grace were not able to assist them, they would be mired in sin, unable to do otherwise, without the freedom to convert. They would not be free and neither grace nor mercy nor forgiveness would be available to them, for they would not be the sort of beings to whom such are offered. Those beings operating only by instinct or natural compulsion are incapable of voluntary actions which can be forgiven or graciously assisted— such beings are not in need of redemptive mercy. If one could never

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<sup>48</sup> John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 34.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>50</sup> *Amoris Laetitia*, 295.

convert, grace would be impotent, unnecessary, and irrelevant. The human being, created in the image of God, “is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons. And he is called by grace to a covenant with his Creator, to offer him a response of faith and love that no other creature can give in his stead.”<sup>51</sup>

Consequently, while the Church follows the logic of mercy for all who struggle with frailty, consigning anyone to the inevitability of frailty and the impossibility of doing otherwise negates the logic of mercy: “In every situation, when dealing with those who have difficulties in living God’s law to the full, the invitation to pursue the *via caritatis* must be clearly heard.”<sup>52</sup> Not only is the invitation to live in the perfection of love offered to every person in every situation, but it is offered fully: “in no way must the Church desist from proposing the full ideal of marriage, God’s plan in all its grandeur.... A lukewarm attitude, any kind of relativism, or an undue reticence in proposing that ideal, would be a lack of fidelity to the Gospel and also of love on the part of the Church....”<sup>53</sup>

*Amoris Laetitia* honestly and boldly describes the serious difficulties facing families and marriages in our time, never papering over the challenges or offering a false optimism. The Good News is never unrealistic, for it depends always on the initiative and action of God, through whom we are capable of doing all things. Christian hope, unlike mere optimism, places “our trust in Christ’s promises and relying not our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>54</sup> Relying on this hope, we know that the “Lord’s presence dwells in real and concrete families, with all their daily troubles and struggles, joys and hopes.”<sup>55</sup> Grace is always available, as is the freedom of our own natures, and it is always merciful to look for God’s assistance even in the most troubled of situations, for nothing can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39).

## CONCLUSION: TRUE AND LIVING ICONS

Too often, and perhaps especially in the media furor surrounding the Synods of 2014 and 2015 and the release of *Amoris Laetitia*, the moral teaching of the Church regarding marriage, family, and sexuality has been described in the language of policies and rules. While there is something to this, it must be remembered that the Church’s teaching, in the end, is *always* about the Good News of salvation found

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<sup>51</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 357.

<sup>52</sup> *Amoris Laetitia*, 306.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>54</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1817.

<sup>55</sup> *Amoris Laetitia*, 315.

in Jesus Christ. The beauty and dignity of marriage as it comes to us from the hand of our Creator and revealed in Sacred Scripture and the Tradition of the Church is “a Gospel in itself, a Good News for the world of today, especially the dechristianized world.”<sup>56</sup>

Because the truth about marriage is rooted in human nature as created by God, and because the sacrament of marriage is elevated by Christ into a sacrament signifying his love for the Church, married and family life is most properly understood through the Gospel, through the holy life, death, and resurrection of our Lord, and his invitation to participate in that same life. “If a family is centered on Christ, he will unify and illuminate its entire life. Moments of pain and difficulty will be experienced in union with the Lord’s cross, and his closeness will make it possible to surmount them.”<sup>57</sup> The family is a true and living icon of God’s own communion and graciousness, a beautiful proclamation and witness for all to see.

Misusing *Amoris Laetitia* to support the erroneous claims identified above does more than violate reason, the natural moral law, Scripture, the teaching of our Lord, and the unbroken teaching and Tradition of the Church—it also forgoes the Gospel.

The woman caught in adultery is not condemned by Jesus (John 8:1-11). If she were condemned, we all would be condemned. But there would be no hope had Jesus done no more than refrain from condemning her, for she would then be mired in her adultery and sin, lost in unhappiness and unfulfilled desire. Jesus does more. His powerful gesture of mercy opens the door of her heart to conversion. It opens her ears to hear his admonition: “Go, and from now on, do not sin anymore.” What Jesus commands her to do is possible. It is a command to turn away from a life of sin and to live in a way that honors the mercy he has extended to her. Because of his command, there is hope, and mercy can attain its goal of salvation in her. Mercy opens the door to truth, and the truth of a new life in Christ will set her free. In emulating Jesus, the Church strives to offer the same mercy, the same truth, and the same hope to all.

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<sup>56</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Homily for the Opening of the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization, October 7, 2012.

<sup>57</sup> *Amoris Laetitia*, 317.

Given on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of October in the year of our Lord, 2016, the Memorial of Our Lady of the Rosary.

Most Reverend Alexander K. Sample  
Archbishop of Portland in Oregon

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Alexander K. Sample". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.