

Amoris Laetitia Chapter 2:

The Experiences and Challenges of Families

We all have our favorite television family. Whether it be the Waltons or the Simpsons, the Bradys or the Griffins, the depiction of family life and family love on television does not always reveal a lived reality. Reality television has given us many families' stories yet, again and again, we do not necessarily witness a true depiction of familial love and life. Often it is the case that the intended humour or seriousness of a given scenario comes at the expense of someone's dignity or humility. In any event however, the family unit, whether nuclear or extended, and the existing challenges that families face, remain a point of focus, if not fascination, for today's society. Pope Francis shares his views of the many challenges facing the modern family in this chapter.

Pope Francis begins by emphasizing that "the welfare of the family is decisive for the future of the world and that of the Church." (31). Among the greatest challenges to the integrity of the family is the "growing danger represented by an extreme individualism which weakens family bonds as an isolated unit, leading in some cases to the idea that one's personality is shaped by his or her desires, which are considered absolute." (33). Intolerance and hostility in families are the result of such focus on the individual. The fast-paced and stressful nature of modern living requires that personal freedom be purposed towards 'noble goals' that seek to edify the individual towards directing energy and making positive, life giving choices else, if misdirected, "can foster attitudes of constant suspicion, fear of commitment, self-centeredness and arrogance." (33). The point is made that increasingly, in many countries where marriage is on the decline, more and more people are "choosing to live alone or simply spend time together without cohabitating." (33). Loneliness, feelings of isolation contrasted with "the fear of entrapment in a relationship that could hamper one's individual goals" (34) reveal the complexity of issues surrounding why people are or are not entering into marriage.

As Christians, we are reminded that we cannot "stop advocating for marriage simply to avoid countering contemporary sensibilities, or out of a desire to be fashionable" (35). To the contrary, we require "a more responsible and generous effort to present the reasons and motivations for choosing marriage and the family" as a "way to help men and women better respond to the grace that God offers them." (35). Pope Francis expresses the need to have a 'healthy dose of self-criticism' when it comes to our modern understanding of marriage. He says: "at times we have also proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theology ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families." (36). Throughout this chapter we hear the call to engage in deeper and more meaningful discourse on the need to "form consciences, not to replace them" (37) when it comes to developing a healthy understanding of marriage; especially in light of complex situations.

Pope Francis asks us to have a generous and grateful disposition towards valuing 'family relationships that are marked by mutual respect.'(38). When speaking of families, particularly those impacted by secularism, Pope Francis reminds us of the power of the sacramental life,

especially Eucharist and Reconciliation, which provide “grace that helps (us) face the challenges of marriage and the family. We are challenged to consider the need to “inspire a positive and welcoming pastoral approach capable of helping couples to grow in appreciation of the demands of the Gospel.” (38). Further to this, he expresses his concern that “we have often been on the defensive, wasting pastoral energy on denouncing a decadent world without being proactive in proposing ways to find true happiness.” (38). This speaks to the incongruent messages that many people have heard over the years and which they must contemplate in developing their understanding of marriage and family life. In many cases “people feel that the Church’s message on marriage and family does not clearly reflect the preaching and attitudes of Jesus, who set forth a demanding ideal yet never failed to show compassion and closeness to the frailty of individuals” e.g. The Samaritan woman. (38.).

This chapter progresses with the articulation of further issues and challenges that are paramount to our comprehension of how family life and marriage are impacted today. The key topics include how the demands of work leave parents tired with less time for positive or quality interaction with their children. From this we see the rise of television / gaming addictions (50). Next is discourse on drug addiction, alcohol, and gambling and how “we see the serious effects of this breakdown in families torn apart, the young uprooted and the elderly abandoned, children who are orphans of living parents, adolescents and young adults confused and unsupported.” (51). Pope Francis also provides commentary on how “many countries are witnessing a legal deconstruction of the family, tending to adopt models based almost exclusively on the autonomy of the individual will.” (53). Apathy, narcissism, divisiveness, violence and hatred are the bi-products of our times. Pope Francis assures us however, that the strength of the family “lies in its capacity to love and to teach how to love. For all a family’s problems, it can always grow, beginning with love.” (53).

It is important that we be mindful of the very real challenges that face families today. Pope Francis reminds us that “we are called to protect our humanity, and this means, in the first place, accepting it and respecting it as it was created.”(56). Once more, we live in a world where the notion of family and marriage are often diluted or distorted by how they are depicted on television and main stream media. We often pay far more attention to those fictional or virtual families than our own ‘real’ family. “The Synod’s reflections (particularly in this chapter) show us that there is no stereotype of the ideal family, but rather a challenging mosaic made up of different realities, with all their joys, hopes and problems.”(57) Pope Francis concludes this chapter with a most hopeful perspective on the value he places on family and marriage: “the Church is conscious of the need to offer a word of truth and hope...the great values of marriage and the Christian family correspond to a yearning that is part and parcel of human existence.” (57). Pope Francis concludes this chapter with thanksgiving: “I thank God that the many families, which are far from considering themselves perfect, live in love, fulfil their calling and keep moving forward, even if they fall many times along the way.” (57).

Whatever your favourite TV family show may happen to be, whether from a classic or modern reality based show, we must never lose sight that the most important family, is the one we break bread with, the family we were blessed into, with all its inherent challenges and joys.