

Amoris Laetitia - Chapter Four: "Love In Marriage"
By Father Julian Bilyj

The fourth chapter reflects on love in marriage, illuminated by St. Paul's Hymn to Love: "Love is patient, love is kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). Its opening section is a richly poetic exegesis of the Pauline text, linking brief passages which describe human love in undeniably concrete terms. A quality of psychological insight marks this poetic exegesis, seeking to enter into the emotional world of the spouses and including the erotic dimension of their love. Pope Francis on growing in conjugal love states,

This is the love between husband and wife, a love sanctified, enriched and illuminated by the grace of the sacrament of marriage. It is an 'affective union', spiritual and sacrificial, which combines the warmth of friendship and erotic passion, and endures long after emotions and passion subside (AL, 120).

This valuable, genuine reflection on Christian married life is unprecedented in previous papal documents.

Pope Francis refuses to judge the day-to-day experience of married love against ideal standards,

We should not however confuse different levels: there is no need to lay upon two limited persons the tremendous burden of having to reproduce perfectly the union existing between Christ and his Church, for marriage as a sign entails 'a dynamic process..., one which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God' (122).

On the other hand, Pope Francis holds that conjugal love by its very nature defines the partners in a richly encompassing and lasting union. The Holy Father stresses,

... after the love that unites us to God, conjugal love is the 'greatest form of friendship'. It is a union possessing all the traits of a good friendship: concern for the good of the other, reciprocity, intimacy, warmth, stability and the resemblance born of a shared life. ... Lovers do not see their relationship as merely temporary. Those who marry do not expect their excitement to fade. Those who witness the celebration of a loving union, however fragile, trust that it will pass the test of time. Children not only want their parents to love one another, but also to be faithful and remain together. These and similar signs show that it is in the very nature of conjugal love to be definitive" (123).

He adds a reflection on the need for a "transformation of love" because, "Longer life spans now mean that close and exclusive relationships must last for four, five or even six decades; consequently, the initial decision has to be frequently renewed" (163). As people age, the loving attraction does not diminish but changes as sexual desire can be transformed over time into the desire for togetherness and mutuality, "There is no guarantee that we will feel the same way all through life. Yet if a couple can come up with a shared and lasting life project, they can love one another and live as one until death do them part, enjoying an enriching intimacy" (163).

Finally, there is an earthy realism to his reflection,

The ideal of marriage cannot be seen purely as generous donation and self-sacrifice, where each spouse renounces all personal needs and seeks only the other's good without concern for personal satisfaction. We need to remember that authentic love also needs to be able to receive the other, to accept one's own vulnerability and needs, and to welcome with sincere and joyful gratitude the physical expressions of love found in a caress, an embrace, a kiss and sexual union (157).