

YOUTH MINISTRY AND THE FAMILY
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Amoris Laetitia: some challenges and proposals for youth ministry in family spirit
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One of the relevant events in our recent time, at an ecclesial level, has been Pope Francis' convocation of the Synod of the Family, celebrated in two-session meetings: the Extraordinary Assembly, October 5 -19, 2014 and the Ordinary Assembly, October 4-21, 2015¹. This Bishops' convocation opened, what someone called the "Trienio de la Familia"², (Family Trienium) which was "concluded" with the publication of Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, on March 19, 2016. After having listened to the Synod Fathers, the Pope set out the most adequate magisterial principles and pastoral guidelines to respond to the challenges and needs the family is facing in the current context.

Throughout the last years, a fruitful intra-ecclesial reflection has developed not only to raising awareness of the situation of the family institution in the world and different geographical places, but especially to provide a revision of the Church's pastoral activity in this sector. The Synod's work does not have as its priority that of judging analytically and in some way externally the situation or status of the family, but rather to assess and revise on how and in what ways the Church, through all her agents can better carry out her evangelizing activity - with the families as central pastoral subjects. In searching for ways by which the Church can help people grow in love, contribute in building solid and happy marriages and families, and accompany people in their concrete family situations.

This is why the Church's work for the good of the families cannot be considered concluded with the publication of *Amoris Laetitia*. On the contrary, it is now, after this intense period of reflection throughout the universal Church, that, starting from the various ecclesial realities and always maintaining their charism, renewed pastoral care initiatives must be concretized and put in place to integrate and take into account also the family dimension. This was clearly expressed at the 27th General Chapter of the Salesian Congregation in 2014, by proposing a work, analysis and

¹ Among the documents used during this synodal process- all available on the Vatican web- the ones of interest *Instrumentum laboris* of the Extraordinary Assembly, June 26, 2014, on The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization; *Relatio post disceptationem*, October 13, 2014 (11th General Congregation); *Relatio Synodi*, October 18, 2014; *Instrumentum laboris on The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and the Contemporary World*, June 23, 2015, as a result of the integration of the Lineamenta of replies to the questionnaire added to the *Relatio Synodi*, 2014; and lastly the *Relatio Finalis* of the Bishops Synod, October 24, 2015. There is a deep connection and progression in the work of both synodal assemblies, even if the comparison among the successive documents show how some relevant themes were left aside in the second part of the works.

² F. VIDAL, *El valor de la familia en la sociedad de los cuidados*, Inaugural lesson of the 2016-2017 course at the Pontifical University Comillas.

reflection itinerary, from the concrete geographical presence, on the topic of Youth Ministry and the Family. This long journey that ends in the present Congress, begins and manifests the importance of integrating the family dimension in working with young people, specific of the Salesian charism.

Indeed, the family is a relevant dimension, a challenge in the field of youth ministry from a two-fold perspective: on the one hand, because in working with young people one cannot neglect the context and environment where they live. The family is a fundamental integrating part of this vital context. On the other, where it takes on more of the “challenge” aspect, because the families of the next decades will be made up by today's young people and children, whose human, affective and spiritual formation will significantly influence the solidity of their future. How, in what ways and to what extent can the Salesian family contribute, with its work for and with the young, in building stable and happy families, in giving life to many young people to the evangelical call to love and a life of fullness? These are some of the core questions of this Congress, with all the group work of these days, to which I would like to contribute, despite being fully aware of my limitations, with the following reflections highlighting some notable elements of *Amoris Laetitia*.

1.- Christian viewpoint on matrimonial and family reality in today's world

Important challenges in providing pastoral support have been posed by the rapid changes to the concept of the family identified in the modern world in the last decades, as well as the different traditions and noticeable differences in conjugal and family relationships in cultural and geographical environments. The tension emerged quite clearly during the Extraordinary Synod of 2014, acknowledging the multifaceted reality of the family in different regions of the world. It has also been highlighted – related to Salesian Youth ministry- in this Congress preparatory activity, as illustrated in Table I. Map of the social and ecclesial reality of the family in the regions and continents (September 2015- February 2016).

One must not forget, however, that this multifaceted reality is portraying precisely the universality of the Church, that is present and acts in contexts and cultures which are profoundly different, with different issues, emergencies, and paces. It, therefore, is a sign of her richness and plurality as well as a challenge in trying to combine the Gospel's universality respecting local cultures and languages. In this sense, Pope Francis at the beginning of the apostolic exhortation sets as a criterium the need to inculturate the Church's responses, following the Conference of Bishops and local Bishops, because the general principles must be applied in very diverse contexts and traditions (AL 3).

Within this vast variety of anthropological and cultural traits and sociological situations that differently affect the families, it is interesting to note the synodal concern that any pastoral

initiative should be based on a proper diagnosis of the situation. Based on “a very grounded” reality description, family issues and challenges will significantly vary according to different cultures and geographical areas. In this respect, one can say that the overview of reality can provide a twofold key: one the one hand, the one we could call prophetic, denouncing those social and cultural dehumanizing elements and a call to a more significant commitment to justice. But also, a hopeful and constructive viewpoint, that from the divine pedagogy and a merciful and loving vision of God values the positive aspects in those less perfect realities and accompanies people in their vital concrete situations encouraging them towards a broader human and Christian fullness.

In the first prophetic dimension, the Synod focused on the socio-economic injustice, abuses and exploitation of people (situations of poverty, war, forced migration, sexual exploitation of women and children, machismo violence, unjust labour laws, persisting polygamy or fixed marriages in some cultures, etc.), which profoundly wounded families and society. It also denounced those cultural traits –hedonistic and individualistic- dangerous for family stability (uncommitted sexual relationships, abandoning the elderly, maternity refusal, addiction to pornography, fear of compromise, etc.). In the second chapter of the exhortation also the Pope denounces these situations, of extreme individualism and culture of the provisional or as he often repeats in his speeches the “culture of the throwaway”.

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One can also see a deep concern for the promotion of woman dignity, that in some culturally adverse contexts still needs to be defended. Distancing himself both from a patriarchal and machismo attitude as well as some forms of inadequate feminism, the Pope clearly stands in favour of the promotion of women in society, who he calls the “work of the Holy Spirit”. Calling for the removal of unjust discrimination and all sorts of violence, defending the effective promotion of women in society, equal job opportunities and access to managerial positions, areas where, as Pope Francis highlights there “is still a lot to be done”. Meaningfully in line with some opinions that were discussed in the synodal hall, the pope expressedly says that blaming today’s family problems to feminine emancipation is itself a form of male chauvinism (AL 54). Directly related to the matrimonial and family field – that is (should be) a reflection of this equal dignity of men and women, expressed in conjugal equality or reciprocity – the pope repeatedly warns against any form of submission, verbal, physical and sexual violence to women by men, and criticizes certain male chauvinism interpretations of the Pauline texts (AL 156) and reminds that intra-matrimonial violence “contradicts the very nature of conjugal union” (AL 54).

This must also include a reformulation and appreciation of the role man and woman have in family life. Alongside the woman's fundamental role in the family the involvement of man in family life and education of the children and the evangelical call to conjugal reciprocity, mutual self-bestowal, in a respectful and reciprocal love (AL28). Establishing new relationships with the couple on an equal basis, stronger emotional ties and involvement of men in children's education poses a challenge but is also one of the strengths of today's family.

These critical assessments on specific family realities in the different socio-cultural contexts are not, as previously mentioned, mere external judgments, related to distant realities, but according to me, they bear a direct call to our formation and educational work with young people and our action. How can we convey in the work we carry out the importance of refusing machismo and any violence? How can we form young people to the value of commitment and long-term self-giving? How can we prevent the throwaway culture from permeating our daily choices?

However, the Church's closeness to the family's multifaceted reality in different contexts cannot be limited to a denunciation, nor a cold and analytical uncommitted glance, but will always be a hopeful and constructive approach. Based on the certainty that the Christian proposal responds to the desires and the profound good of the person, it will also be a merciful glance, the glance of the Mother Church who loves and welcomes all of her children, especially the weakest and most fragile ones. The Church tries to discover and value all the positive aspects that can occur in situations that are objectively not the ideal ones. The beauty and truth of the ecclesial doctrine on the matrimony and family are not at odds with the mercy towards fragile and wounded families. Mercy is not in contrast with justice or evangelical truth or intends to reduce it, but the core itself of the Revelation of Jesus Christ.³

In this sense, the Pope in his apostolic exhortation does not shy away from addressing situations of complex marriages or families, such as the faithful joined in civil marriages or cohabitation or broken marriages⁴. broken marriages. In chapter 8 of *Amoris Laetitia* he calls for accompaniment and welcoming people in these situations, carrying out a careful discernment of the situation of each believer, always in the logic of ecclesial community integration and mercy, "to avoid judgments which do not take into account the complexity of various situations" and "to God's unconditional, gratuitous and unmerited mercy" for all (AL 296-297).

The meaningful positive and constructive tenor with which the document addresses possible complex situations that might emerge, without justifying them or pretend to convert them

³ FRANCIS, *Misericordiae Vultus. Bull of the Jubilee of Mercy*, April 11, 2015. 25.

⁴ Chapter 6, also includes in these complex situations mixed marriages, that present great potentials for ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, but also specific difficulties, since they must be respectful of the religious freedom of each spouse and care for religious education of the offspring (AL 247-249, RS 72-74); single-parent families (AL 252) or homosexual persons (AL250-251).

into elements of the Christian ideal, but repeatedly encouraging to discover and value positive aspects and transform them into opportunities in the conversion journey towards a marriage and family of fullness. From the divine pedagogy in the history of Salvation, that allows to affirm a bond between the order of nature and the order of grace and gradual development, in following stages, of the creation of all in and for Christ, the apostolic exhortation encourages to discover the seeds of the Word latent in all the reality of human marriage, without neglecting the profound transformation produced in them by divine grace (AL 76-79).

In this sense, there is a notable synodal stress in pointing, as a way for a renewed family pastoral activity, the need to look with love, accompany and welcome with patience and tenderness people who live less perfect marital situations. They are encouraged to make a proper discernment trying to discover and value as seeds of the Word, those positive elements that can be found in civil marriages or cohabitation (stability, legally recognized unions, deep affection, responsibility for their offspring, mutual forgiveness and search for the good of the other, etc.). That carry out, in a similar and partial way, the ideal marriage, to accompany them on a path to fully reach the matrimonial sacrament, identifying those elements that favour evangelization and human and spiritual growth (AL 292-294)⁵.

In the same way, another increasing cultural element is the fragility of matrimonial unions, due to the quite relevant and practically universal increase in number of divorces or conjugal breakdowns, that not only influence the personal situation of the spouses but also the entire family life: children of divorced parents, who live alternatively with one parent or the other, or in newly created families etc. The Synod, as well as the apostolic exhortation, have firmly focused on the pastoral care of separated and divorced people, even if we have to stress that the Church's preoccupation for divorced people is by no means a resignation to the very high and increasing numbers of conjugal breakdowns, as something necessary and unavoidable. The primary concern of any pastoral care activity in favour of the family is to contribute to help prevent conjugal breakdowns, assisting in building sound and happy marriages and families: ultimately foster the growth of love. In the words of the pope, "today, more important than the pastoral care of failures is the pastoral effort to strengthen marriages and thus prevent their breakdown" (AL 307). In this regard, the apostolic exhortation insists on the importance of integral support to marriages and families, that will apply different strategies and distinct moments, many of which directly imply youth ministry.

2.- A vocational and "positive" presentation of the Christian proposal: the marriage vocation and the family as a vocation to love

⁵ In AL 295, Francis, quoting John Paul II, remembered that he proposed the so-called "law of gradualness" in the knowledge that the human being "*knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by different stages of growth*". This is not a "*gradualness of law*", but rather a gradualness in the prudential exercise of free acts on the part of the subjects who are not in a position to understand, appreciate or fully carry out the objective demands of the law".

The Pope, in chapter 2 of the apostolic exhortation, calls us to rethink our way of proposing marriage and family vocation, encouraging us to do so in a vocational context open to the grace without having a defensive attitude (AL 35-38). In pastoral care, priority must not so much be centred in defending or comparing abstract family models, but on caring for a concrete person, in his/her specific situation and in presenting the evangelical proposal in an enlightening way, convinced that it responds to the human being's desires and is for his/her good.

An essential input from the Synod, also mentioned by the Pope is the importance of showing the beauty of marriage and family vocation. In facing the individualistic temptations of today's society, a fundamental pastoral challenge is to render visible the beauty of the matrimonial and family vocation, that responds to the human being's deepest desires. More than elaborate doctrinal speeches, this calls for the testimony and missionary commitments of Christian families themselves, who with their own life, manifest simply and credibly this beauty, because as a Synod Father graphically explained, "Love cannot be explained it shows."

In this sense, the Catholic theology presents a very solid anthropological foundation on marriage, highlighting the value of the natural reality of marriage, wanted by God from the very beginning. In a vision that firmly joins the natural and super-national plan, through incarnation, it is the natural and rich human reality itself of marriage, with its specific structure, to be elevated as a sacrament among the baptized (being source of sacramental grace for the spouses and inserted in the same constitutional structure of the Church, leading to the domestic church). This elevation to the order of grace does not substantially modify its essence, thus conferring to the matrimonial sacrament a notable specific feature compared to that of the other sacraments⁶.

Notwithstanding, it will be important to use a renewed language, allowing to develop a way to announce a meaningful evangelical message of family and matrimonial love for the people, and especially for the young people of today. The synodal documents consistently expressed how this would need creativity and a grounded and brave presentation of the Gospel's message. Therefore, avoid presenting the marriage indissolubility as a "yoke imposed on humanity" or as life sentence but highlighting it as a gift granted by God irrevocably faithful to the spouses, to support and enable the profound human desire of a love that endures forever (RS 40,48); also, the

⁶ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Const. ap. *Gaudium et spes*, n.48: "The intimate partnership of married life and love has been established by the Creator and qualified by His laws, and is rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent. Hence by that human act whereby spouses mutually bestow and accept each other a relationship arises which by divine will and in the eyes of society too is a lasting one. For the good spouses and their off-springs as well as society, the existence of the sacred bond no longer depends on human decision alone. For, God Himself is the author of matrimony, endowed as it is with various benefits, endowed as it is with various benefits and purposes. All of these have a very decisive bearing on the continuation of the human race, on the personal development and eternal destiny of the individual members of a family, and on the dignity, stability, peace and prosperity of the family itself and of human society as a whole".

importance of a language capable of conveying the beauty of conjugal love and sexuality. (RS 56) etc.

On a theological ground, a significant input is provided by referring to the Trinity and Trinitarian love as a basic element for the theology of the family. From Jesus' perspective, the matrimonial and family vocation is a vocation of love and tenderness. (AL 59). The focus is on the core element of love in family and marital life, in the image of God the Trinity, the family as an icon of God's love, of God the Trinity endless source of mutual love.

If man and woman, themselves and in the reciprocal relationship are God's image, the family, communion of love, is the excellent image of the Trinity. In this theological evaluation of the family - and not only of marriage- one can claim that despite its weaknesses and difficulties, the entire family in itself -always called to a higher fullness- as an image of God is a privileged place of love and mutual care with a sacred and inviolable feature. From a theologian perspective, this Trinitarian family foundation correctly completes the concept of family as domestic church and puts into perspective love's central role in the family reality.

In the same line, *Amoris Laetitia* strongly stresses the importance of conjugal love, but also other manifestations of family love, the role of extended families, grandparents, uncles, brothers...The special beauty of numbers 27-29 of the apostolic exhortation, dedicated to "the tenderness of an embrace", where the Pope alludes to the tenderness and conscientious intimacy produced by the embrace between a mother and her weaned son (gamul), or the father for his sons, to exemplify this radical vocation to love and tenderness that goes beyond the spousal one.

In the same way, there has been a sort of shift produced by the Synod on the marriage focus, gradually going from a sometimes- exaggerated concept of almost unlimited right (*ius connubii*) to the promotion of a more vocational approach to the matrimonial and family option. Thus, encouraging the Pope to rediscover its sacramental value and insert it in a life of faith and ecclesial experience: "Marriage is a vocation, inasmuch as it is a response to a specific call to experience conjugal love as an imperfect sign of the love between Christ and the Church. Consequently, the decision to marry and to have a family ought to be the fruit of a process of vocational discernment (AL72).

In fact, already in the Synod, many proposed, in different ways, a greater involvement in the course of Christian Initiation and preparing couples for marriage, (RS,39), a sort of "catechumenate option of life" starting from confirmation, a catechetical process put into practice as guiding lines of the youth ministry⁷. It has to do with proposals that need to be deepened, and in this case, structured, but that are however heading towards a stimulating path. Proposals that Pope Francis successively repeated, in claiming the need to "design ever more effective itineraries

⁷ FRANCIS, *Misericordiae Vultus. Bull of the Jubilee of Mercy*, April 11, 2015. 25.

for preparation courses to the Sacrament of Marriage, enabling the couple to grow as human beings and in their faith.” Calling for the creation of a “new catechumenate in marriage preparation that should become an integral part of the whole process of the Sacrament of Marriage as an antidote that would stop the multiplication of marriages that are null or inconsistent”⁸. In short, a clear perceived need for a deep and creative renewed formation of the marriage sacrament and its preparation, with an active involvement of the married couples and the entire Church community.

Within this vocational perspective of the matrimonial and family option, the Christian marriage seems to be a true call from God for a careful discernment, thus the need to insert this decision in a life of faith and ecclesial experience, and in an adequate formation and vocational path- both personal and as a couple, to allow a mature human and religious decision⁹. This will demand creativity in developing formation paths for a better ecclesial preparation to the marriage option and the creation of synergies with other pastoral fields, where the youth ministry perfectly fits.

Matrimonial vocation, like all the other ones, is a wonderful and enriching vocation, but also a serious and demanding one, which includes the complexity of involving two people, with their different experiences of faith, and vital moments, different paces, emotional conditions, etc. In the apostolic exhortation (AL 205-211), the Pope stresses on the need to accompany and guide the young in their engagement process, so that they can discern well the decision to marry; even for “every person marriage preparation begins at birth”. It is here that the role of the family is unreplaceable. It is also important to shape a pedagogy of love, since “learning to love someone does not happen automatically, nor can it be taught in a workshop just prior to the celebration of marriage (AL208). Conversely any preparation or accompaniment should ensure that the young couple do not view the wedding ceremony as the end of the road, but instead embark upon marriage as a life-long calling based on a firm and realistic decision to overcome problems and difficulties” (AL 211).

In this vocational approach, it is however convenient to eliminate some confusion on the sacred bond of marriage and subject of vocational discernment in deciding to commit one’s entire life to this option. In line with renewed ecclesial understanding, expressed in Vatican Council II (*Gaudium et Spes*) and taken up in the Code of Canon Law, matrimony – that between baptized is sacramental – is the institution of love, defined by the Council as “intimate conjugal community of life and love.” Marriage, in its sacred and natural form, does not primarily depend on the liturgical celebration (even if the latter is necessary, in the normal circumstances of Catholics), but that the bride and groom present a valid matrimonial consent, and it is precisely the mutual will to be joined in marriage that establishes it.

⁸ Current *marriage preparation courses* appear to be insufficient: as a Synod Father pointed out during the Synod, it is noteworthy how all-important choices in our life are prepared carefully with the exception of marriage.

⁹ This vocational perspective, of discernment and choice is present in the preparatory document of the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, scheduled for 2018, titled “Young People, The Faith and Vocational Discernment”.

Matrimonial consent, the decision to marry, is an essential act of the will, by which a man and a woman mutually give and accept one another through an irrevocable covenant to establish marriage (c. 1057): what the couple mutually gives and receives is not a series of rights and duties distant from their new matrimonial status, but, correctly, they give and receive one another, totally, to establish together the matrimonial essence, the irrevocable consent, transforming, therefore the relationship in the essential object of consent. What the couple should want in giving their consent, is not a marriage as a juridical contract, nor a matrimony as an irrevocable covenant or sacrament: they should want the other person in conjugality. The consent is not the object- nor is directly aimed at the matrimonial institution, but to the other as the spouse, to give and receive the other as spouse to establish the life-long covenant of marriage. This is already centred on the importance of adequately knowing one another- the other as well as oneself and one's own capacities- when deciding to marry.

This consent requires the couple's specific psychological ability, an ability that does not end in understanding and wanting marriage or being aware of what is being said, but due to its importance, it calls for adequate pondering and appreciation of the step that is being taken. Sufficient freedom to marital self-giving without external pressure nor internal conditionings, just like the ability to be spouses, the ability to take on and fulfil conjugal obligations, to establish the covenant of conjugal life. In facing the broad idea that matrimony is for everybody (or for which there is no need for a more elevated vocational option) one must stress – without going to the extreme of making marriage accessible only to a few chosen ones or people especially mature or with incredible self-sacrificing abilities- that marriage demands the couple to have the necessary personal abilities and attitudes to build and allow the intimate community of conjugal life and love that makes up marriage. If matrimony is a life-long covenant for the good of the spouses, this will at least demand a certain ability to interpersonal relationships, self-giving and giving oneself to one another in a deep way.

Additionally, considering the dense content that the Church ascribes to matrimony (with its indissolubility, fidelity, openness to offspring, order to the good of the spouses...notes that, according to the context, could become really countercultural), not all people who externally declare “they want to get married” for the Church really have the intention of accepting a matrimony proposed by the Church, constituting grounds for consent annulment. In fact, due to the centrality of love in the matrimony and the origin that leads to take the decision, one must not forget the features and consequences of true love: as reminded by the Pope: “it is important that marriage be seen as a matter of love, that only those who freely choose and love one another may marry” (AL 217). This love is not merely physical attraction or a vague affection, and it is important to develop and deepen the conscious and free decision to belong and love one another forever. True love is aimed at definitive self-giving, forever, fruitful and also open towards others and not enclosed in itself. Pope Francis highlights in chapters 4 and 5 of the apostolic exhortation, core chapters dedicated to conjugal love in all its forms and dimensions and to family life in its fullest meaning. In contemplating the fruitfulness as well as the openness of this love the Pope

repeatedly calls the extended family¹⁰.

However, often, people formally contract canonical matrimony – for traditions, families matters, etc. – refusing, to have children or the indissolubility of their marriage indissoluble, or to commit to conjugal fidelity. They are consenting to a different reality from the main essence of matrimony. In other even more clear cases, what is being produced is an exploitation of the matrimonial institution, that is chosen only as a formal juridical contract, perhaps with other aims or benefits, but without accepting its intimate reality of community life and love for the good of the spouses, that invalidates the bases of the consent given.

How can we avoid this? How can we accompany and form our young people so that they can fulfil God's invitation to love, this total and definite, unconditional mutual self-bestowal, and bring to life to real matrimony and family?

To do this, it will be fundamental on one hand to offer an integral formation – human, emotional, affective and spiritual –, not only for those engaged, but to all the young people, in line with the known scheme of *Familiaris Consortio*, remote, proximate and immediate preparation. Related to the remote preparation, it is necessary to highlight the importance of an affective and emotional development in the formation of the young and the couples, avoid fostering egoistic individualism or an experience that is poorly integrated and dehumanized from affections and sexuality. The deep call of all people to love, self-giving, to love and be loved, is experienced, learned and lived preferably in one's own family, main pedagogical space. There is also a vast educational and formation work to be done on affectivity and values to help youngsters grow as people related to others; the role of those involved in youth ministry – feature of the Salesian charism- in this integral formation of children and young people will be very important for their growth as people and for a future creation of emotionally healthy family relationships.

In the same way, in accessing the canonical matrimony, it will be important to accompany the discernment process on the ability and intention of the spouses, without rigidity or exaggerated requests, but helping the couple to acknowledge the importance of the step they are going to take and seriousness of the commitments taken. This calls for a thorough revision of pastoral care in marriage preparation, because during the discernment, in acknowledging the obligations, duties and commitments taken on in getting married, a couple of chats or meetings or a weekend are not sufficient. Even less so when the date of the matrimony is set and everything is ready for the wedding celebration, because when you reach this point it will be very difficult for the fiancés – even worse for one of them, to be free to take a step back despite serious and strong doubts might have emerged. In this sense, it would be better to anticipate this preparation allowing the couple to more freely ponder their decision to marry and the implication it entails.

¹⁰ They are largely original chapters with regards to the Final Synod Report, that well reflect this Pope's personality, his concerns and even his spirituality: especially noteworthy are number 90-119 AL, a commentary to 1Cor.13. In them Francis, in line with the catechesis to the new marriages during 2015, he encourages the couple, with great realism, to care for mutual love, and grow in it, to share "quality time" suggesting ways to overcome crisis, etc. One can say that in some parts of the apostolic exhortation the Pope appear rather than a Teacher as a grandfather who gives wise, simple and realistic advice to his sons and grandsons.

In this sense, it will be important to creatively develop new formation paths, fostering a more continued and personalized accompaniment of the couple, mindful of the personal situation rather than carrying out the more standardized red taped requirements. In a nutshell, it is not a matter of abusively or arbitrarily limiting marital rights (*ius connubii*), but to be aware that exercising this right demands previous requirements of ability and will (aptitude and attitude), if we don't want its celebration to turn into something without any content¹¹.

Lastly, even if it might seem something distant from the specific youth ministry- especially in those socio-geographical contexts where the matrimonial age is being postponed- the apostolic exhortation encourages also the care for the liturgical celebration (AL 212-216), exhorting the couple's active and fruitful participation during the ceremony and appreciating the meaning of the signs, focus on the Word of God, the richness of the spouses blessing etc. it is, therefore, essential to care for the celebration and feast dimension of this vocational option for love.

Likewise, there is a stress on the importance of the accompaniment of young marriages, encouraging the spouses in discovering and developing their vocation and love. "The challenge of marriage pastoral care is to help discover that the matrimony is not something that happens once and for all. The union is real and irrevocable, confirmed and consecrated by the sacrament of matrimony. In getting married the spouses are the protagonists, the owners of the story...neither can expect the other to be perfect...but must accept the other as she or he is: "an unfinished product, needing to grow, a work in progress." One must care and allow love to mature, accepting the other and not replacing the loving glance with criticism (AL 218). In the task of assuming matrimony as a maturity journey, where each spouse will be a source of grace and growth for the other (AL221), an important role will be played by the Christian community accompaniment, "family of families", journeying with the couple. In sharing their discovery of the matrimonial vocation's beauty, helping them to overcome a possible "self-absorption" dangerous for the couple and family and supporting them in troublesome moments.

Here we have a vast educational-pastoral area where we can carry out this accompaniment to prevent conjugal breakdowns and protect the stability of the marriage and families, fostering paths of reconciliation, meditation, and conflict resolution in the couple and family before the breakdown is irreversible; fostering action of reconciliation, focused on discovering the healing value of forgiveness, forgiving and being forgiven, etc.

3.- Facing conjugal breakdown

¹¹ In this context, already Benedict XVI had mentioned in his speech at the Roman Rota in 2011, that the right to marry is not the "right to a nuptial ceremony" but the right to celebrate an authentic marriage. The *ius connubii* would not, therefore be denied where it was evident that the fundamental requirements for its exercise were lacking, namely, if the required capacity for marriage were patently lacking or the person intended to choose something which was incompatible with the natural reality of marriage".

Notwithstanding all the efforts made, there will be cases when conjugal separations become inevitable or even appear as morally necessary- acknowledges the Pope- for the good of the children and of one's dignity (AL 241). The accompaniment of the couple and children in these moments of crisis and during their future relations entails a crucial important pastoral challenge for all those involved in working with young people and families. The patient and loving accompaniment – that Pope Francis calls “the art of accompaniment” which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the others’ intimacy¹² - will call for a “wisely differentiated attitude” according to the situations and circumstances: sometimes, accompaniment calls for silence; others for respectful, active and healing listening; directions, advice, support encouragement...

From an ecclesial perspective, it is fundamental to remember the inappropriateness of identifying conjugal breakup, divorce as an irregular situation. The exhortation (AL 242) refers back to the synodal warnings – already mention in *Familiaris Consortio* by John Paul (FC 83)- on the need to avoid discriminating in any way divorced people who have not remarried, acknowledging that they are frequently “excellent witnesses of conjugal fidelity” and prevent these people from participating and receiving the sacraments, including the Eucharist, to actively participate in the catechesis and the Church’s life and take on ecclesial responsibilities...It would be a serious injustice to unfairly burden the conscience of these people merely because they are divorced.

The exhortation also stresses the need of the divorced who have entered a new union (AL 243) to be welcomed and accompanied. They are not excommunicated and remain part of the ecclesial community. Chapter 8 of the exhortation calls for a careful discernment of the different situations, accompanying the person to an awareness of his condition before God since responsibilities of some actions or decisions are not the same in all cases. The Pope stresses that the negative judgement about an objective situation does not imply a decision of imputability or culpability of the person involved, since the moral responsibility can be mitigated or diminished by psychological, social and other factors, that can condition or even determine some decisions, which should be carefully assessed (AL302).

Going back to the principles already present in Saint Thomas, the Pope mentions accountability of action, with the possible form of conditioning and mitigating factors that prevent the person from acting differently or diminish his responsibility (AL 301-302). The Pope urges to better incorporate the person’s conscience in judging certain situations that do not objectively embody our understanding of marriage. He stresses the importance of a well-formed conscience, but also that “the conscience can do more than recognize that a given situation does not correspond objectively to the overall demands of the Gospel. It can also recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God, and come to

¹² *Evangelium Gaudium* 169.

see with certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one's limits, while yet not fully the objective ideal" (AL 303)¹³.

Even if it is impossible to develop here all the richness of chapter 8 of *Amoris Laetitia*, I would like, faithful to the pope's teachings, to highlight the importance of not interpreting this doctrine of the discernment of particular situations, already present in Saint Thomas' teachings, in a relativistic key. Pope Francis himself stresses that fidelity to the Gospel prevents any lukewarm attitude or an undue reticence in proposing that ideal: "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." And neither from a subjectivist key, as if the assessment "of the internal forum" or forum of conscience, despite its undeniable importance, were the only one to be taken into consideration. The Church is a community, an assembly of the faithful, communion, and, therefore divergences between the external forum and the internal forum should be avoided as much as possible.

In this sense, it is meaningful that in the case of divorcees who remarried, both the Synodal documents and the exhortation, consider possible nullity of the first marriage: in fact, it is the way or ordinary remedy offered by the Church to her faithful, even if clearly not all broken-up marriages as null, often, unfortunately, they can be. Marriage is a beautiful but very demanding vocation, which involves "two people".

Thus, the canonical processes of marriage annulment appear as a fully ecclesial solution, a remedy that, regardless of the good faith with which the parties may have contracted it, responds to the deep truth of a marriage that lacked some of the requirements for validity and can become a deeply healing moment for the person, reconciliation with his/her past and the experience of marital failure. In this sense, it is noteworthy that already during the inter-synodal period Pope Francis modified the procedure of matrimonial nullity to simply and make it more accessible, encouraging a missionary conversion of the pastoral structures- including ecclesial tribunals- so that divorcees who remarried can present their case (to shed light on the validity or nullity of their previous marriage) and wait for the Church's decision¹⁴.

4.- Concluding remarks

Pope Francis's apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* provides a positive outlook of reality, stressing more on the possibilities and challenges of the current situations of the family and

¹³ The exhortation also highlights *the dynamic aspect* of discernment, always open and looking for ways to enable to fully realize the ideal (AL 303), and the limits of general rules (certainly necessary), that must provide information for the decision, but cannot include all particular situations, that should be the object of specific discernment (AL 304).

¹⁴ FRANCISCO, *Motu Proprio Mitis Iudex Dominus Iesus*, August 15, 2015: AAS 107 (2015) 958-970. In another *motu proprio* on the same day, *Mitis et misericors Iesus*, the Pope modifies, in similar terms, the canons that ruled the matrimonial nullity procedure in the Code of Canon law of the Oriental Churches.

marriage than on its dangers, even if aware of them. It is an optimistic call to continue working and revising our pastoral activity, also in working with and for young people, in opening broad and varied ways of working for the good of the families. Paths that include the educational field, formation of values and affectivity, directions and family mediation in its broadest meaning. Preparing young people for marriage and the family, to a careful discernment of situations, etc. Developing with creativity, evangelical audacity and Church context courses of action that help to enact and implement synodal suggestions in our real pastoral care activity is a significant challenge, in this post-synodal period, while we wait for the next Synod of the Young in 2018.