

“Pope Francis’s recent text, *The Joy of Love*, is one of the most significant and inspirational church documents ever published on marriage and family. Yet reading such documents can often be a daunting prospect for ordinary Catholics. Julie Hanlon Rubio provides an immensely helpful ‘readers guide’ to assist ordinary Catholics in recognizing the pope’s many remarkable insights on marriage and family life. Her extensive theological background, and engaging writing style, coupled with the helpful discussion questions/suggestions for prayer, make this an excellent resource for the training of those engaged in pastoral care to families/married couples, and a wide range of parish discussion groups.”

—Richard Gaillardetz is the Joseph Professor of
Catholic Systematic Theology at Boston College

“In *Reading, Praying, Living Pope Francis’s The Joy of Love*, Dr. Julie Hanlon Rubio walks readers through *Amoris Laetitia*. Like an excellent tour guide, she points out what is important about this apostolic exhortation by providing the history behind it and the relevance of it for people’s lives today. The result of following Dr. Rubio through the text is a rich appreciation of the pope’s vision of love in the family. It is a journey I would highly recommend for everyone.”

—Jason King
Professor and Chair of Theology, Saint Vincent College
Editor, *The Journal of Moral Theology*

Reading, Praying, Living Pope Francis's *The Joy of Love*

A Faith Formation Guide

Julie Hanlon Rubio



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Introduction

Front Story and Back Story

Though it has been the subject of no small amount of controversy among church leaders and theologians since its release in spring 2016, the most important thing to know about *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love) is that it is a letter written by Pope Francis to give hope to Christian married couples. Generally, papal documents have a reputation for being a little on the dry side, but Pope Francis’s trademark down-to-earth style comes through in this letter, especially when he addresses married people directly. This guide will walk you through the “back story”—the theological controversies, so that you will understand why theologian fans celebrate the mercy and compassion permeating this letter, while theologian critics worry that it fails to assert Catholic moral norms in strong enough terms. But it will also highlight the “front story”—the core message the pope wants to pass on to Christians around the world, with the hope that they will reflect on it and let it shape their lives.

So, first, some back story. In 2014, Pope Francis stunned the world by calling a synod on the family. The instrument of the synod was created by Pope Paul VI near the close of Vatican II (the historic council of bishops that met in Rome from 1962

to 1965) to provide a formal mechanism by which future popes could continue to consult the world's bishops on pressing issues. Since 1965 there have been approximately fifteen general synods. The pope sets the agenda for the synods and selects bishops from around the world to advise him. This time, bishops gathered in Rome in the fall of 2014 and again in 2015 to discuss how the church could better speak and minister to modern families.

Before the bishops descended upon Rome, they were directed by the Vatican to survey people in their dioceses.¹ One might think that surveying Catholics is unnecessary. After all, if Catholic teaching is not going to change, what is the point of asking people what they think about it? But bishops around the world were told to ask people what they knew about Catholic teaching, what they thought about it, and what they wanted from the church. Though some of the questions provided by the Vatican were weighed down by technical theological language, many were well designed to reach out to a diverse group of Catholic laypeople, many of whom feel alienated or abandoned. Many bishops adapted these questions for use in electronic and paper surveys or focus groups in their dioceses. Catholics interviewed in the media were almost uniformly positive in their reaction to the survey, stressing that whether official teachings changed or not, they were happy that someone noticed existing dissonance, spoke frankly about it, and asked for their opinions about how to move forward.

In the summer of 2014, results were sent to Rome, and bishops who met in working groups on various topics studied the surveys. Along with the expected disconnect (with some variety by region) on Catholic teachings on issues such as contraception, premarital sex, cohabitation, divorce, and same-sex marriage, they found a lack of understanding of the rationale behind those teachings, a need for better pastoral care for families, and a desire to make parishes more welcoming—even for those who

may be at odds with official Catholic teaching on sex and marriage. Though a strong level of disagreement on moral norms was undeniable, it seemed that the most urgent requests from the pews were for a new tone, more mercy and compassion, and better pastoral support.

The working documents produced by the synods in 2014 and 2015 showed that the bishops heard Catholics speaking about their hopes and desires for the church. Though some feared the questionnaires would be ignored, the preparatory and final documents produced by the 2014 and 2015 synods all suggest that the bishops



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of the world were listening to lay Catholics and talking about how best to respond. For example, the 2014 preparatory document notes that parents are “distressed” when their children can receive sacraments but they, due to their “irregular” situation, cannot, and acknowledges that many faithful Catholics do not see a significant difference between contraception and natural family planning.² All synod reports make frequent use of the word “accompaniment” to describe how the church should walk with, listen to, and respect people, a hallmark of Pope Francis’s preaching and teaching to which people all over the world are responding with enthusiasm.

The synod documents also made advances in using more “down-to-earth” language to describe marriage. The 2014 preparatory document acknowledged the limits of natural law language that is more typically used in Catholic teaching and articulated a need to move beyond abstract sacramental terms that most Catholics find to be a less-than-perfect lens through which to see their own marriages, though it offered only brief glimpses of what might replace this. In the 2014 midterm report, more relatable language *was* used, even to describe the relationships of same-sex

partners who “practice mutual, self-sacrificial love that is worthy of admiration,” though this language was subsequently withdrawn in favor of more guarded words about “receiving” those with “homosexual tendencies . . . with respect and sensitivity.”³

Despite its limitations, the synod on the family was a watershed moment for Catholics. Many felt more welcomed, respected, and understood. They responded to the offers of mercy and inclusion. It seemed that church leaders were following Pope Francis’s lead, trying to see “the good amid the weeds” in people’s lives and desiring to “throw the doors of the church wide open.”⁴ Yet, the synod documents have no real authority in the life of the church. They are part of the ongoing Catholic conversation on marriage and family, but it is up to the pope to take the insights of the synod and bring them into the realm of official Catholic teaching.

Thus, it was important that, at the close of the synod, Pope Francis chose to issue his own document, *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love, hereafter “AL”). This document is an apostolic exhortation (like Francis’s *Evangelii Gaudium*, The Joy of the Gospel) rather than an encyclical (like *Laudato Si*, On Care for Our Common Home). Generally speaking, encyclicals have a wider intended audience (“all people of goodwill”) and higher authority than exhortations, which are primarily directed to Catholics. Still, all official papal documents contain various levels of Catholic teaching, from observations about cultural change, to moral exhortation, to expressions of long-standing Catholic doctrine. Catholics are committed to approaching this whole body of work with respect and a desire to be better formed as disciples of Christ. Since the last papal encyclical on marriage (*Casti Connubii*, On Christian Marriage) was issued in 1930, it seems safe to say that AL should be regarded as the most up-to-date synthesis of authoritative Catholic teaching on marriage and family, and the best source for today’s Catholics seeking inspiration on how to live up to the demands of Catholic, sacramental marriage.

Reading a papal document can be like reading a catechism, a theology book, a spirituality guide, or a committee document all at once. Some passages explain Catholic teaching in a very basic way. Others are more speculative, as the pope makes an argument by, for instance, applying an old concept to a new problem, drawing on secular sciences to understand new phenomena, or employing poetry in order to get at the depth of a human reality that religious people have been trying to understand forever. Some passages are genuinely beautiful, and could be inspirations for prayer or pondering. Others are quite technical, and seem to be there in order to satisfy the concerns of particular influential groups. Especially in AL, the pope often quotes from the synod documents I discussed above or speaks to the concerns of different factions of bishops who argued behind closed doors during the synods. During the synods, he encouraged frank discussion and called the bishops to keep talking through their disagreements.⁵ In AL his goal is to show that while the concerns of all were heard, the church must choose a way forward, and that way is one of welcome, accompaniment, and mercy. Still, Pope Francis chooses a way that opens doors rather than closes them.

The very beginning of the document reveals the pope's concerns. A contrast with Pope John Paul II's 1981 apostolic exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio* (On the Family [FC]), also written after a synod on the family, is helpful.⁶ Unlike John Paul II, who addresses himself to bishops, clergy, and "the faithful," Pope Francis notes that he writes especially to "Christian married couples." Instead of addressing a broad social problem ("the role of the Christian family in the modern world"), he identifies an opportunity to speak "on love in the family." Rather than beginning with the idea that the family is in crisis (FC 1), Francis opens with the common



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experience of the joy of love (AL 1). He remembers the synod as a vibrant “process” involving learning, debate, and discussion (AL 2), thereby giving his official blessing to ongoing, lively conversation within the church. Finally, he chooses not to invoke his authority to settle all the controversies that arose during the synod. On the contrary, he asserts that he will not try to answer all questions, but will share with married couples the wisdom of the tradition as it relates to contemporary realities, while accepting a certain level of diversity among Catholics (AL 3).

The “back story” to the introduction to AL includes all that the bishops learned from the pre-synod surveys: the church’s failure to communicate essential wisdom about marriage in terms ordinary people would understand and find inspiring, an excess of judgment that drives people away, a too-narrow focus on moral claims that are no longer credible, a longing for a church that respects and walks with people. With all of this in mind, Pope Francis announces a new tone and a substantive shift from controversial rules to the positive aspects of what it means to live and love in a Christian family. This becomes the “front story” of his document on marriage.

This guide is designed to help you work through AL by providing necessary context (or “back story”), highlighting key points (“front story”), suggesting directions for prayer, and providing questions about how to live out the Christian vision of marriage and family. It assumes no background knowledge and can be used by individuals, groups, or classes. As you go, it will be helpful to keep the following key themes in mind. Though not addressed chronologically, they come up repeatedly and constitute the “take-away” of the document. Look for them as you read and note how they provide the scaffolding on which the rest of the exhortation is built.

1. *Intimacy and passion are good in themselves and worth cultivating for life.* Let no one say that for Catholics sex and

marriage are only for procreation. Pope Francis spends most of his time and energy talking about love, intimacy, and passion. The Christian tradition has many thinkers who had a hard time seeing this core of marriage. Saint Augustine, for instance, famously identified the three goods of marriage as offspring, (sexual) fidelity, and the sacramental bond that tied spouses to each other for life. Love did not make the list, and sex was at best a necessary evil that kept spouses from the greater evils of promiscuity and might, if they were lucky, produce children who would grow up to become vowed celibates. Francis improves upon this tradition by focusing on a passionate love that is deserving of attention and cultivation for a lifetime.

2. *Christians accompany people who experience brokenness or failure in marriage.* Our role is not to judge but to support. We do this individually and as a church. Francis recognizes that many people are doing the best they can but are often unable to keep their marriages together or treat family members as they deserve to be treated. He urges us to approach failure with mercy and acceptance, and affirms the church's trust in adult Christians who make decisions in good conscience. In providing less judgment and more accompaniment, the church holds on to the demanding ideal but recognizes the frailty of human beings and respects their ability to make their own decisions.
3. *Social forces make marriage difficult to sustain.* The pope thinks about marriage in a global context and takes note of realities that impede the living out of the ideal: poverty, migration, incarceration, racism, exploitation, trafficking, etc. In the United States, sociologists refer to two marriage cultures, distinguishing the well educated and financially comfortable (who marry more often and divorce

less frequently) from the less educated and more financially challenged (who marry less often and divorce more frequently).⁷ Marriage is easier to initiate and sustain for those who are more privileged in life. Being “pro-marriage” means caring about social issues, too. In Catholic social thought, as Pope Francis says, “everything is connected,” which means that caring about family means caring about the forces that make it difficult for families to thrive.⁸

4. *Married life is imperfect.* Previous Catholic teaching could be alienating when it spoke of married love using words or analogies that seemed totally divorced from real-life relationships. To correct this, Pope Francis identifies common problems that frequently distort married love (i.e., domination, infidelity, abuse, and neglect). Though he repeats traditional claims about married love echoing the trinitarian love of God, he is quick to say that no one married couple ever loves this perfectly, and should not be expected to!
5. *Love is fruitful.* The primary emphasis on intimate love does not rule out a broader conception of love. The claim here isn't simply that an “end” or purpose of sex is procreation (that's the natural law language we're trying to improve upon!) but that married love in its essence points beyond itself to more. If cultural ideals of romance are communicated in stories of young adults who meet and fall for “the one” with whom they want to spend every moment of every day forever, the Christian ideal is more expansive. Love between two people naturally spills over, most often in children, but also in shared projects, a welcoming home, and a life lived together in service to others. For Christians, the point is not to “focus on the family” but to find a spouse to love and to partner with in acting for justice in the world.

These five themes comprise the “front story” of *The Joy of Love*. Keep them in mind as you read, and remember that they constitute the core of the document, and are much more important than ongoing “back story” battles over rules and norms. To be sure, the document does not ignore rules and norms and I’ll draw attention to points where the pope makes normative claims. However, there is much more to the moral life, and to married life in particular, than rules. For instance, knowing Catholic norms on contraception and abortion is important, but that still leaves a lot to be said about what it means to parent well, and most of that cannot be expressed in rules. Similarly, knowing that adultery is immoral is just the beginning of thinking about what it means to be faithful to one’s spouse on a daily basis. Most of *AL* is devoted to ordinary family life and the daily struggle of trying to love family members well. All people who live that life are familiar with its many challenges. If you read *AL* looking for wisdom for those kinds of challenges, and if you’re lucky enough to be reading it with others who bring wisdom born of life experience of their own, you won’t be disappointed.

ASSESSING

Where Are We?

How does one begin to talk about family? In most of Catholic social teaching, whether the subject is economics, the environment, or war, writers begin by summarizing, with the help of scholars in the physical and social sciences, what is going on or by describing what is sometimes called “the situation.” Theologians, bishops, and popes take on “the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (*Gaudium et Spes* 4). In the documents of Catholic social teaching, there is room for the church to learn from the world and develop in its understanding of what it means to be a good person in the world (GS 44). However, in Catholic sexual ethics, whether the subject is contraception, same-sex marriage, or extramarital sex, it is more common for popes to begin by reviewing Catholic teaching, establishing universal principles to be applied to any new situation, and there is less attention to secular movements from which the church may need to learn.

Marriage and family concerns occupy a unique place between social ethics and sexual ethics. Many official documents belonging to the body of Catholic social teaching devote some attention to family, envisioning families as having a crucial role in sustaining good societies. Family is a part of Catholic social teaching.

However, family is also a part of Catholic sexual ethics. If you go to the website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), for instance, a list of documents related to marriage and family includes *Humanae Vitae* (1968), the famous encyclical that reaffirmed official Catholic teaching on contraception, along with other documents focusing primarily on sex. As many contemporary scholars have noted, though common values run through all of Catholic moral theology, the method (or approach) can differ depending on whether the issues in question are social or sexual.

So what does Francis do here? Respecting the unique position of family in Catholic thought, he has *two* starting points: the Catholic tradition (chap. 1) and the situation (chap. 2). And, even within these chapters, he moves back and forth between ideal and reality. Instead of choosing to begin *from above* (with the tradition) or *from below* (with the situation), in AL he maintains a dialogical posture that is very much in keeping with his posture as pope. Pope Francis seems to be always out in the world, is willing to talk with anyone, has a special concern for those who have been left out, and consistently focuses on the heart of the gospel message. He is a pope devoted to dialogue. This dialogical starting point, which has allowed Pope Francis to be both approachable and prophetic, is the method and genius of AL.

1

“In the Light of the Word” A Biblical Vision

*Begetting and raising children . . . mirrors God’s
creative work.*

—AL 29

Pope Francis opens this section by giving readers a distinctive lens for approaching the Bible. Instead of looking to the Bible for rules about marriage and family (i.e., “What does the Bible say about *x*?”), they should pay attention to the stories and, above all, to the mosaic that is created when we read those stories together. The Bible, he claims, from its first page to its last, “is full of families, births, love stories and family crises” (AL 8). Francis begins with a traditional image from Psalm 128 (a man, his wife who is like “a fruitful vine,” and his children who are like “olive shoots” [AL 8]) in order to paint a vibrant picture of a family gathered at table and to establish an anchor for this section. But pay attention to how this image is complicated as the pope weaves the different biblical stories into a colorful tapestry.

Note how he begins by stressing fruitfulness (AL 8, 11, 14). Of course, not all married couples have children. Still, even today, most couples bring children with them into marriage or desire biological or adopted children. However, even in Catholic

theology, which requires openness to children for a legitimate marriage, couples who cannot have biological children due to age or infertility are understood to have just as sacramental a marriage as any other couple. *All* married couples are seen as fruitful because their love is not insular; it begins with the two of them and goes beyond them.¹ Just as fecundity or creativity is fundamental to who God is, it is an essential quality of marriage, whether children are involved or not.

Yet, recall that fruitfulness is but one of the five major themes of *AL*. Passionate, faithful love (theme number one) is given more attention and developed more fully in the document. Remember, in Catholic theology, children are important to marriage, but marriage is not all about children. The passionate love of the spouses for each other constitutes the core of marriage, the essence without which marriage cannot exist. Marriage reflects the reality of God: as God is loving, so too are husbands and wives loving.

Marriage reflects the reality of God: as God is loving, so too are husbands and wives loving.

Pope Francis links the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2 with two biblical texts that are much less commonly utilized in papal documents: the Song of Songs, which celebrates passionate sexual love, and Psalm 63, which includes the provocative phrase “My soul clings to you” (*AL* 12–13). Pope Francis uses these texts to paint a picture of sexual, emotional, and free

self-giving in marriage. Unlike many Christian thinkers in the past who were so worried about the potential selfishness of sexual love that they failed to celebrate it, Pope Francis gives *eros* its due.

Notice how the document then moves to the home, describing it as a place of formation, or, in the words of *Gaudium et Spes*, “a school for human enrichment.”² Lest this sound like something anyone claiming “traditional values” might say, the pope makes sure to cite the biblical source for this vision of the home: the ear-

liest Christian communities that met not in church buildings, but in the homes of their members (AL 15). Our knowledge of this early tradition is sketchy, but, building on the available sources, we can imagine that when adults (men and women, free and slave) and children left the religions of their families, converted to Christianity, and made the choice to attend Christian rituals, they were making a pretty serious choice, one that sometimes put them at odds with their family members (Matt 10:34-36). And we can also imagine that these rituals of remembrance were formative of the moral commitments of these early Christians, who often embraced radical positions.³ This is the tradition the pope draws upon in order to make a moral claim about families. Christian homes should be places where character is formed, where adults and children are prepared to take the ethos of the New Testament into the world (AL 16–17).

What is that biblical ethos? Pope Francis does not limit his discussion to “family values,” because the biblical ethos is much broader and deeper than this. Instead, as in all of his ethical teaching, the pope focuses on the core message. He lifts up Jesus’ selfless love and highlights male and female images of God’s tenderness as the cornerstones of a biblical family ethics. He notes that a close reading of Jesus’ parables shows a concern with the anxieties and tensions of families (often in the face of sickness, abandonment, or death [AL 21]). Finally, he briefly mentions the parts of the gospel that sit uncomfortably with a focus on family: Jesus’ many puzzling sayings that call family ties into question.⁴

How can we hold this radical strain of our tradition together with all the passages that lift up family? The pope suggests that Jesus is pointing us to “other, deeper bonds” (AL 18). Some scholars would want to go further here and claim that Jesus calls his followers to reconsider the prominence of family ties, and place greater hope in the community of Christian believers.⁵ At the very least, the biblical ethos of AL includes a recognition

that discipleship is the primary call of every Christian and a view of family as one kind of community in which it is possible to live out that call.

Pope Francis helpfully calls attention to the presence of, shall we say, problems in the families portrayed in the Bible. There is no way to talk about “the biblical family” without acknowledging biblical family sins such as adultery, rape, murder, abuse, betrayal, and domination (AL 19–20). Along with these personal sins that cause pain in families, the pope notes that what the Catholic tradition calls structural or social sin (like poverty, unemployment, and environmental destruction) also hurts families (23–26). The biblical vision of the family might begin with the happy parents and loving children, but it does not deny the reality that families are the locus of much pain in life, because of the persistence of personal and social sin.

Pope Francis presents a colorful and complicated mosaic of the biblical family in this first chapter, yet he insists on this analogy: families are “icons” or images of God. If this image still seems overly ideal, the pope asks us to focus on the holy family—not the overly idealized images you might see in art museums, but the reality. When Jesus came into the world, the holy family was a refugee family living in an occupied territory (AL 30). And of course we know that the holy family did not exactly follow the traditional script. Mary found herself pregnant while betrothed, Joseph stood by her but tradition suggests he died before Jesus reached adulthood, Mary spent most of her life as a single mother, and Jesus never married. The Bible, the

pope is saying, does not give us an impossible ideal but rather assures us that, whatever our circumstances, the love we share in families can give us the best hints we have on earth of how much God loves every human being.

Families
are “icons”
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God.

Suggestions for Prayer

1. Are there experiences in your own family that could be pondered or taken to heart as Mary pondered her own family situation in light of God's work in her life (AL 30)?
2. Can you imagine Jesus, who spoke in his parables of the anguish of parents, spouses, and siblings, comforting you and others in your family in your struggles (AL 21–22)?

Discussion Questions

1. What structural sins do you see harming families in your community?
2. Does it make sense to think that family life can tell us something about the nature of God? If so, can you think of a particular experience that made this clear to you? Can family life also raise profoundly troubling questions about God?