

ON 28 DECEMBER 2020, the Feast of the Holy Family, Pope Francis announced that the church will celebrate an “*Amoris Laetitia* Family Year” from 2021 to 2022 – a special year to begin on 19 March 2021, the feast of St Joseph, marking the fifth anniversary of the publication of the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (AL). It will conclude on 26 June 2022 with the forthcoming World Meeting of Families in Rome. The newly erected Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life has taken over the responsibility of organizing this project. Under the guidance of Cardinal Kevin Farrell, the office offers a variety of initiatives and resources, like the various video presentations and pastoral proposals given on its website. It has also set up an international forum to take place in June 2021 where the heads of offices for family pastoral ministry in Bishops’ Conferences, International Movements, and Family Associations can discuss how AL can be implemented in the universal church. That the contents of AL should be shared more widely in the world to let “people experience the Gospel of the family as a joy that ‘fills hearts and lives’” (AL 200) is Pope Francis’s firm conviction. According to him, the goals of the new project are twofold: to proclaim the sacramental value of marriage as a gift that contains within itself a transforming power of human love and to enable the families to become active and co-responsible agents in the church.

The appeals to promote marriage as a sacrament and to encourage families to assume responsibility in their own ecclesial communities have been essential themes in church teaching for a long time. While the sacramental character of marriage is, since the Middle Ages, a common topic in theology, new accents were indeed given more recently with regard to the ecclesial position of families. What seemed at first glance astonishing for many was Pope John Paul II’s assertion in the 1980s that families are no longer “objects” of pastoral care but rather should become “subjects” in the church. He insisted that by allowing couples and families to participate directly in the ecclesial apostolate, he did not change church teaching but simply followed the church’s “hermeneutic of continuity”. Pope Francis’s AL, however, has caused much more commotion in the Roman Catholic Church than John Paul II’s adjustments. The corrections the pope called for not only concern his style and language but extend to doctrinal issues. Referring explicitly to the precarious situation of many remarried divorced people and to the increase in cohabitation in some parts of the world, Francis identified two exemplary circumstances in which the external remedy of pastoral accompaniment no longer suffices but touch central questions of the faith. For the first time he pleaded for a positive and constructive appreciation of situations that the church has regarded for centuries as serious ills and condemned as sinful misconduct. What is at stake now, he articulated, is the core of the self-understanding of the church. It should be clear to everyone what the pope’s major desiderata are: to accept that the assessment of individual situations needs a differentiated process

of discernment, to acknowledge that there is a legitimate plurality of moral judgments about individual cases, and to appreciate that a person's striving for the moral good is subject to the principle of gradualness. These are the crucial themes the church should address in the future – themes that have finally and fortunately sent tremors through what many in the church regarded since the 19th century as solid ground, based on eternally invariable teaching.

Since its pronouncement five years ago, AL has had a considerable impact in the Roman Catholic Church, mainly with regard to matters of church teaching and theological scholarship. Theologians especially have not ceased to remind the church persistently that both its teaching and pastoral care must be corrected, adjusted, and revised in order to respond to the challenges of modern times in a circumspect, attentive, and credible way. The lingering problem is, however, that many responsible church dignitaries still fail to send clear messages about what the desires, the options, and the purposes for the future are. Their lack of vision and decisiveness has in the meantime become a training ground for ultra-conservative defenders of the eternal truth which the church has claimed to possess. However, should AL not consequently be implemented at all levels of the church life, the risk is even more imminent and threatening that believers and other “people of good will” will leave a church which they think has finally lost its credit and credibility.

There are hardly any articles in our journal *Marriage, Families & Spirituality* that have not in one way or another engaged with AL since its promulgation. A common theme is that sexual morality needs to be revised and marriage theology needs to be adjusted. The situation of remarried divorced people in the Catholic Church remains a burning theological theme which is addressed in a cluster of three articles in this issue. *Sigrid Müller* attempts to untie the “gordian knot” in which the various theological disciplines of moral theology, canon law, dogmatic theology, and pastoral theology have become inextricably entwined in a contradictory stance towards failed marriages. According to the author, AL has already offered acceptable pastoral solutions by disentangling the various conflicting strings and reconstructing them in a productive way. Müller argues that moral theology as a theological subdiscipline could be more beneficial if it would, instead of retreating to abstract approaches, give coherent answers to matters dealing with the concrete life of the faithful. Another excellent overview of the theological, pastoral, and canonical dilemmas and possible pastoral solutions for remarried divorced persons is provided by *Eberhard Schockenhoff*. Schockenhoff, a renowned German ethicist, died unfortunately and unexpectedly in July 2020. We publish his article in this issue as a legacy of a colleague with a vision, which he carried through with vigor and conviction in his theological research. The article by the canonist *Adrian Loretan* pays tribute to Schockenhoff by offering his own reflections on the possibility of allowing divorced and civilly remarried Catholics to receive communion. Retracing the post-conciliar shift from an act-centered to a person-centered approach in modern church life and morality, Loretan laments that the personalist position has not yet been implemented in canon law. This has severe consequences when central matters are raised such as the relation of the spouses in marriage, the rights of women in marriage, and the situation of persons in the case of a civil divorce. AL has already identified some of these conflicts, but many of the points still remain open.

Marriage and the relation between the spouses are the primary subjects of the reflections of two other experts in moral theology. *Stephanie Höllinger* argues for a conception of virtue ethics which maintains a balance between extremes and thus avoids common pitfalls in intimate relationships. The notion of “total self-giving”, elaborated by Pope John Paul II as a consequence of his personalist philosophy, risks advocating an abstract and idealist concept of marriage that underestimates the indisputable tensions, conflicts, and failures of the conjugal relation. What is desirable here is a complementary ethics of mutual giving and receiving which is aware of the complexity of reality. Upheavals in the understanding of marriage are also the subject of *Konrad Glombik’s* article. He uses three, at first sight dogmatic, topics – the essence of sacramental marriage, the meaning of the sacramental sign, and the connection between faith and the sacramentality of marriage – to show how AL has been received by theologians in Poland. According to him, AL challenges Polish dogmatic theologians to question their own doctrinal statements because their understanding of the sacramentality of marriage becomes only comprehensible when the pastoral care of married couples is part of their theology.

The canonist *Georg Bier* examines the causes and implications of Pope Francis’s recent decision to amend canon law by opening the liturgical ministries of lector and acolyte to women, until now restricted to men. The author appreciates that the amendment reorganizes a church practice which has already become a familiar practice in many countries, although these men and women will now be installed in their ministries by the bishop. But he does not share the view that the legislative change will provide for an increased equality between Catholic women and men; on the contrary, the pope’s reaffirmed refusal of the ordination of women proves again that there is still no true equality of human rights in the church. The Anglican theologian *Adrian Thatcher* analyses the current project on sexual relations and marriage by the Church of England, developed and produced as a publication in 2020 under the title *Living in Faith and Love*. Thatcher approves of the intent of the bishops to offer a realistic presentation of the issues in question; however, in the end his criticism far exceeds his approval: their account of marriage and the way they treat issues of gender and of history, he argues, simply follows a biblicist vision.

Fundamentalism remains a real torpor that all Christian churches, including the Roman Catholic one, can lapse into. Thatcher mentions in a marginal note that in AL “Pope Francis shows more respect and pastoral sensitivity” for difficult situations of married people than the Anglican Bishops. However, it still takes a lot of time, patience, and determination for all churches to open new doors for a Christian stance on sexuality and marriage.

THOMAS KNIEPS-PORT LE ROI,  
*Editor*