

Conscience and 'The Joy of Love'

'Amoris Laetitia' ('The Joy of Love') is an Apostolic Exhortation written by Pope Francis and published on 8th April 2016. Because the document is so long (245 pages), some experts have advised that lay persons begin at Chapter 4 ('Love in Marriage') which is beautifully written and well suited for couples. These same experts recommend that priests, teachers or the divorced should begin at Chapter 8 ("Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating Weakness") which deals with assisting those who find themselves in 'irregular' marriages.

Pope Francis' pastoral advice has attracted different reactions from church officials, and many people have admitted that they do not understand Church teaching about Conscience. Many say that they have not read or heard much about conscience since their school days, and it seems almost certain that many younger people are either ignorant about Church teaching on conscience or they ignore it.

Most Catholics admit that they have never read many Vatican documents. Will they read this one of Pope Francis? In addition, certain church officials have publically challenged Pope Francis about his teaching and this has led to some confusion and disquiet. Like Jesus, Francis teaches as a pastor, while some senior church officials who challenge him are more focused on applying laws.

When asked in an interview in November 2016 for the Italian newspaper 'Avvenire' about some Cardinals who have publically disagreed with aspects of 'The Joy of Love', Francis said, "*Some people continue to misunderstand. It's either black or white to them, even if in the flow of life you have to discern. You see right away that a certain 'rigorism' is born out of a lack of something, from a desire to hide inside the armour of one's own sad dissatisfaction,*"

When Francis was returning from Lesbos, Greece on April 16th 2016, a reporter on the plane asked him about a particular footnote in 'The Joy of Love' (No 351), in which the Pope says that "pastoral discernment" for divorced and remarried persons "in certain cases ... can include the help of the sacraments."

The journalist asked why the pope had put that decision in a footnote, and if it meant he wanted to indicate the issue was not overwhelmingly important. Francis responded, *"One of the last popes, speaking about the Council, said there were two Councils. The Second Vatican Council that met in St. Peter's Basilica and the other was the Council of the media!"* He continued, *"When I convoked the first Synod, the great worry of the majority of the media was will they give Communion to the divorced and remarried?"* he continued. *"Not being a saint, this annoyed me a bit but also made me a bit sad,"* said Francis. *"The media that said this, do not see that this is not the important problem of the church. They do not see that the family in all the world is in crisis. And family is the base of society."*

In *The Joy of Love*, Francis wrote, *"I understand those who prefer a more rigorous pastoral care which leaves no room for confusion. But I sincerely believe that Jesus wants a Church attentive to the goodness which the Holy Spirit sows in the midst of human weakness, a Mother who, while clearly expressing her objective teaching, always does what good she can, even if in the process her shoes get soiled by the mud of the street"* (308).

We will return to this document later, but for now, it is important to address some issues regarding how the church understands our responsibility to be informed about and respond to our personal decisions of conscience. So this might be Conscience 101!

To begin with, Conscience **must always be free**, so conscience is not 'feeling guilty' because feelings have no moral value unless they are expressed by some action. Conscience is not childhood experiences that haunt an adult (and might cause a person fear and shame).

Conscience has to do with knowledge, judgment and reason as to whether an action is good (right) or bad (wrong). Conscience can make mistakes in its formation because our human perceptions and thinking are limited and we may not see all the perspectives that are present despite our best efforts.

For this reason we should consider the views of experts and not just say to ourselves, 'I've worked it out myself'.

There are three steps in the formation of an **informed** conscience.

1. Learn the mind and heart of Jesus.

The gospels are our best source for this. We need to listen to the challenge Jesus constantly made for people to be faithful, committed to serving others and responsive to the demands of love.

Jesus also constantly preached and displayed compassion, forgiveness and mercy. A helpful question to ask is, *'If Jesus faced my problem what would he do?'*

2. Become informed about Church teaching.

The Pope and Bishops protect and teach the values of Jesus. Theologians study and teach and advise bishops. Often we can look to them for helpful advice. We need to discover what guidelines the Church offers in general and in my particular situation. Those guidelines will include the teaching in 'The Joy of Love'.

If there is a Church law, we need to discover its purpose and spirit. When we consider advice, it would be ideal if we could rely on every bishop, priest or book, but sadly that is not the case, so we have to be discerning.

The advice we seek has to be competent and up-to-date. We should presume that the whole Church and its teachers are more likely to be correct than one individual conscience, but at the same time note Pope Francis' teaching that circumstances are often different and this calls for discernment. We also need to appreciate that the teaching authority cannot take the place of individual conscience. It is a necessary guide, but neither priests nor bishops can make our decisions for us. We are responsible before God for our own decisions. This is the third step.

3. Having tried to discern the heart and mind of Jesus; having listened to what the Church teachers say and having prayed and reflected, I might ask a question like this.

“Do I believe in my heart, that if I follow these guidelines of the Church, that that is what Jesus wants me to do?”

If the answer is Yes, I must follow the Church teaching to be acting in accordance with my conscience. If the answer is No, I must follow my own discerned and informed decision.

*Document 16 from Vatican 2 (The **Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World**)states, “Deep within their consciences, men and women discover a law which they have not laid upon themselves, but which they must obey. Its voice ever calling them to love and do what is good and to avoid evil, tells them inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For they have in their hearts a law inscribed by God. Their dignity rests in observing this law, and by it they will be judged” It often happens that conscience goes astray by unavoidable ignorance, without thereby losing its dignity”*

Church teaching supports and promotes personal decisions of conscience and this teaching includes the truth that a person acting in good and true conscience, can choose an action that is different from church teaching on a particular matter yet be without sin and therefore not cut off from the Church. ‘The Joy of Love’ (Amoris Laetitia) confirms this.

Let us now look at some quotations from Chapter 8 of. ‘The Joy of Love’.

“Although she constantly holds up the call to perfection and asks for a fuller response to God, the Church must accompany with attention and care the weakest of her children”

“Let us not forget that the Church’s task is often like that of a field hospital”

“It is a source of concern that many young people today distrust marriage and live together, putting off indefinitely the commitment of marriage, while yet others break a commitment already made and immediately assume a new one. As members of the Church, they too need pastoral care that is merciful and helpful”

“No one can be condemned for ever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel!”

“There are those who have entered into a second union for the sake of the children’s upbringing, and are sometimes subjectively certain in conscience that their previous and irreparably broken marriage had never been valid”. (John Paul 2nd)

“While upholding a general rule, it is necessary to recognize that responsibility with respect to certain actions or decisions is not the same in all cases

“Priests have the duty to accompany the divorced and remarried in helping them to understand their situation according to the teaching of the Church and the guidelines of the bishop”

“It can no longer simply be said that all those in any “irregular” situation are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace. More is involved here than mere ignorance of the rule.

“A subject may know full well the rule, yet be in a concrete situation which does not allow him or her to act differently and decide otherwise without further sin”

“Let us re-member that a small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order, but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties”

Writer and commentator Austen Ivereigh suggests that while ‘The Joy of Love’ is very clear about not wanting to create new norms or laws, it is also very clear about fostering a new attitude. What Amoris seeks is a new attitude on the part of the Church towards those who are in irregular situations, one that moves from a primary focus on defending the law and the institution from contamination, towards a focus on the need for accompaniment and healing of the victims of divorce, especially those seeking integration into the Church.

Just like the woman caught in adultery, the sinner is still a sinner; but Jesus sees her also as a victim in need of help and healing. This is a very different logic from that of the doctors of the law whose primary focus leads, necessarily, to shunning (and stoning) in order to discourage others”.

Invereigh adds that this document was “the fruit of a Synod which spent a lot of time examining the world as it is now, where divorce is no longer a wolf prowling ‘out there,’ from which the flock must be defended; it is within the fold, devastating the flock. Furthermore, the Church has failed to keep the wolf out: Catholics have been woefully unprepared for the collapse in the wider culture of the understanding of marriage”.

The ‘Joy of Love’ makes clear that this is not enough to apply the law, which has been the emphasis in the past. The Church must go beyond the law, into the realm of conscience. Francis has called on pastors to “form” consciences, not “replace” them. Conscience is not a way of evading responsibility, but assuming it. In line with Vatican 2 and Catholic tradition ‘Joy of Love’ portrays conscience as the inner sanctuary and core of a person, where he or she is alone with and responsible to God.

The 2017 guidelines of the Maltese bishops in relation to ‘Joy of Love’ suggest that a minister is unable to withhold sacraments to someone who has reached peace through a decision taken in true conscience as result of an authentic discernment. God goes beyond (not against) the law, and speaks directly to the human heart - and a minister of God, having accompanied and ‘ensured’ the process, can only respect that.

One of the bishops responsible for preparing the text, Archbishop Scicluna explained that they had referred to the earlier document offered by the Argentine Bishops and the letter Pope Francis had sent to them afterwards in which he said. “*The text is very good and makes fully explicit the meaning of the eighth chapter of ‘Amoris Laetitia’*,”

Pope Francis said. "There are no other interpretations. And I am sure it will do a lot of good. May the Lord reward you for this effort of pastoral charity."

Archbishop Scicluna added that a "fundamental criterium" of the Pope's document is that "nobody, *nobody*, in whatever circumstances they are, should feel themselves excluded from, or outside of, the Church, no matter what happened to them, or no matter what they did."

Austin Inverleigh suggests that disputes over chapter 8 of 'Joy of Love' are theological arguments about how the law is to be applied and what place conscience occupies. Perhaps in the past many people believed that church teaching demanded *'this is the law, accept it or reject it'* (as many have). In an era when many people were illiterate this was understandable, but no longer.

Now people can, and must educate themselves to make responsible decisions. 'The Joy of Love' says: *'this is the law and the teaching of the Church; let us help you apply it, in your individual case, from the standpoint of eternity and with full understanding of all the Church teaches'*.

Francis is a pastoral teacher and a teaching pastor! In note 329 of 'The Joy of Love', he referred to John Paul 2nd's words from Familiaris Consortio in 1981, "Many people, *knowing and accepting the possibility of living "as brothers and sisters," which the Church offers them*, point out that if certain expressions of intimacy are lacking, *"it often happens that faithfulness is endangered and the good of the children suffers."*

In 'The Joy of Love', Francis says, *"There is a need "to avoid judgments which do not take into account the complexity of various situations" and to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience. It can no longer simply be said that all those in any "irregular" situation are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace. More is involved here than mere ignorance of the rule.*

A subject may know full well the rule, yet have great difficulty in understanding “its inherent values”, or be in a concrete situation which does not allow him or her to act differently and decide otherwise without further sin. As the Synod Fathers put it, “factors may exist which limit the ability to make a decision”.

Francis’ pastoral emphasis was highlighted in a homily in October 2013, when he said, *“I want to remind priests that the confessional must not be a torture chamber, but rather an encounter with the Lord’s mercy.” ... I would also point out that the Eucharist “is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.”*

In ‘The Joy of Love’ his pastoral words highlight that *“It is a matter of reaching out to everyone, of needing to help each person find his or her proper way of participating in the ecclesial community and thus to experience being touched by an “unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous mercy. No one can be condemned for ever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel!*

These pastoral guidelines can urge us to share with those who might remain uninformed, that our church is welcoming and inclusive and that in the spirit of Jesus, we can seek out those who need compassion and help them find their way home and to remain there.

This is after all, a fundamental aim of the Passionist Family Group Movement – to be ‘A Family for All’.

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February 2017*

To read or download ‘Amoris Laetitia’ Chapter by Chapter:
<http://www.cruxnow.com/church/2016/04/08/read-the-popes-letter-amoris-laetitia-or-on-love-in-the-family/>