



## **PASTORAL MESSAGE FROM BISHOP PHILIP ABOUT THE APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION 'AMORIS LAETITIA' ('The Joy of Love')**

*This Pastoral Message to the clergy and people of the Diocese follows the recent publication of Pope Francis's Apostolic Exhortation Amoris Laetitia.*

Dear Friends,

Pope Francis has just published *Amoris Laetitia* about love, Christian marriage and family life. This document authoritatively concludes the two recent Synods of Bishops on this topic. It is a magnificent document. Breath-taking in scope, it offers a fresh presentation of Catholic doctrine with many indications for pastoral practice. It will take a long time to assimilate. On behalf of the Diocese of Portsmouth, I wish to welcome this document and to thank the Holy Father. At the same time, I commend it to all our clergy, religious and faithful for careful study and prayerful reflection.

*Amoris Laetitia* is one of the longest ever papal documents, although it is not difficult to read. It has nine chapters covering everything from the nature of love, engagement and marriage preparation, to Christian family life and the upbringing of children. Chapter Four is a beautiful reflection on the famous passage on love from St. Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians*, a reading that couples often choose for their wedding liturgy. Chapter Seven focuses on bringing up children, including the need for authentic sex education. Time and again, the Holy Father repeats the traditional teaching of the Church on chastity, marriage, sexuality and family life, but he does so in a fresh way. He acknowledges with sympathy and compassion the difficulties and challenges many face today. Like Jesus with the woman caught in adultery (John 8: 1-11), Pope Francis urges us, whilst acknowledging the reality of sin, to shew care and concern for sinners, not condemnation.

The Pope's pastoral intention, with all its balance and nuances, is especially evident in Chapter Eight on the care of Catholics in irregular situations, such as the divorced and civilly remarried. In this Year of Mercy, it seems to me that the Holy Father wants us to reach out to all those Catholics who have drifted away from the practice of their faith because they find themselves in marital situations and patterns of behaviour which the Church deems to be inauthentic. Jesus wants to offer them Good News. They are still very much

members of His Church, with a part to play. The Pope asks clergy and laity to accompany them, helping them to review their circumstances and to grow in faith. With a wise and good spiritual director, it ought to be possible to help them discern how to live better lives and whether something can be done to regularise their situation. At the Synods, there was a lively discussion about the readmission of the divorced and civilly remarried to the sacraments, and this discussion continues. But to me, the Gospel story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24: 13-35), with its themes of the presence of Jesus, grace, conversion and truth, is a good image for the kind of 'accompaniment' the Holy Father is speaking of and, of course, any process of discernment will surely involve the guidance of the diocesan marriage tribunal.

What to me is new in *Amoris Laetitia* is the Pope's application of the traditional distinction between mortal and venial sin to the many messy situations people find themselves in with regards love, sexuality and relationships. For a mortal sin to be committed, three conditions are necessary: grave matter, full knowledge and full consent of the will (cf. *Catechism* 1857). Good confessors and spiritual directors have always recognised that in sexual sins, full knowledge and/or the act of the will might sometimes be impaired. Could this be the case sometimes too in a person's entry into an irregular union? Some people are in messy situations through no real fault of their own, but through the actions of another. Bearing all this in mind can help pastors and individuals find creative ways forward. In any case, even when people continue living in an objectively sinful situation, this can never mean that God abandons them or no longer loves them.

Has the Church's teaching changed with *Amoris Laetitia*? No. It is important to read this, and all papal documents, with a 'hermeneutic of continuity and reform' not a 'hermeneutic of rupture.' *Amoris Laetitia* is totally consistent with Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae*, with *Familiaris Consortio* of St. John Paul II and with the teaching of emeritus Pope Benedict XVI, and Francis frequently cites them. There has been no change in canon law. What is new is the Pope's direct consideration of messy situations. The Holy Father wants the Church, where necessary, to adopt a new and more compassionate pastoral approach, one that acknowledges the Truth yet more vigorously reaches out with God's mercy to those who are struggling. This can be a delicate balance, especially for pastors. A pastor's role is not to be a strict sheriff, nor an indulgent 'fairy-godmother' – nor, for that matter, to adopt an attitude of 'Don't ask - Don't tell' - but to be a good shepherd, a wise mentor, a prudent spiritual guide, helping people discern their growth and development towards the ideal.

Does the Pope say the divorced and civilly remarried may now be readmitted to Holy Communion? No. What he says is that instead they need a good priest to reach out to them, to accompany them, to help them discern their situation before the Lord and to enable them to develop, to change and to take their proper place in the Church's life and mission.

Does the Pope leave a lot of matters to individual conscience, as some media commentators have suggested? No, he doesn't, if by conscience they mean 'What I feel.' Christians always see themselves first and foremost as belonging to Christ, as members of His Body, the Church. They live 'under' the Word of

God. So a Christian's conscience is never 'What I feel' or 'What I think' but a conscience informed by Catholic teaching, which seeks to apply authentically the teaching and principles of Jesus to daily life and concrete situations.

So how as a Diocese should we respond to *Amoris Laetitia*? In the first place, I urge everyone, clergy and people, to study it in depth and to mull it over. This is a document whose depths and riches will become apparent only with time. Whilst our Catholic faith and discipline remains unchanged, *Amoris Laetitia* puts greater responsibility on pastors, which is why pastors need more help in sharing good practice and expertise. At the same time, I ask our priests to take great care interpreting people's situations in the light of this document, doing so authentically and in communion of heart and mind with the Bishop and with brother priests. Otherwise, a lack of coherence and clarity will easily lead to confusion among the faithful, with the risk of injustice and even scandal. On the other hand, I am sure that with experience we will begin to find new ways forward, leading in time to an organic development of our teaching and pastoral practice.

*Amoris Laetitia* will be a great consolation to those of the faithful in irregular situations. In the Diocese of Portsmouth, we face the complex challenge of promoting the vocation and beauty of Christian marriage and family life to our young, who live in a toxic cultural context and who increasingly reject marriage or appear indifferent to it. To help address this, I hope to announce soon some new initiatives from our diocesan Marriage and Family Life Team to assist with marriage preparation across the Diocese, to care for engaged couples, and to support families. In the summer, I will dedicate the Pastoral Letter to the Sacrament of Matrimony. For early autumn, through the Bishop's Office for the Support of the Clergy, I have organised a special clergy conference on the 'Role of the Pastor in *Amoris Laetitia*.'

Let us end for now with a prayer. Here is the one the Holy Father ends with:

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, in you we contemplate the splendour of true love; to you we turn with trust.

"Holy Family of Nazareth, grant that our families too may be places of communion and prayer, authentic schools of the Gospel and small domestic churches.

"Holy Family of Nazareth, may families never again experience violence, rejection and division; may all who have been hurt or scandalized find ready comfort and healing.

"Holy Family of Nazareth, make us once more mindful of the sacredness and inviolability of the family, and its beauty in God's plan.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Graciously hear our prayer. Amen."

In Corde Iesu

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Philip". The plus sign is a simple cross, and the name "Philip" is written in a cursive, flowing script.

Bishop of Portsmouth  
24<sup>th</sup> April, The Fifth Sunday of Easter