

Synodal Assembly on the Mission of the Christian Family in Asia

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- I. Welcoming / Orientation Talk by Bishop Emmanuel Rozario
- II. *Familiaris Consortio* and *Amoris Laetitia*: Controversial Issues, Theological Developments and Pastoral Prospects by Vimal Tirimanna, CSsR
- III. THE FAMILY AND THE WORD OF GOD, A Biblical-Theological Reflection, by Cardinal Pablo Virgilio Siongco David
- IV. The BEC's in the *Bangkok Document* by Vimal Tirimanna, CSsR

Welcoming / Orientation Talk

Bishop Emmanuel Rozario

Your Eminence, Excellencies, Priests, Religious and distinguished members of different Bishops'-Conferences,

1. Introductory Words of Welcome

I extend a very cordial and warm welcome to you to this important Synodal Assembly on the Mission of the Christian Family in Asia Today organized by the FABC Office of Laity and Family. I wholeheartedly thank the Bishops' Conferences for responding positively to our invitation and for sending you.

The FABC Office of Laity and Family includes Youth, Women and BECs/AsIPA Desks. It is, indeed, the largest office. In view of the Synodal perspective, we have invited representatives of all the respective Commissions and Desks to think, share, plan and work together in a Synodal way.

This Synodal Assembly is organized on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of *Amoris Laetitia*, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotis*; the 45th anniversary of *Familiaris Consortio*, 60 Years after Vat II / *Apostolicam Actuositatem* and 3 Years after the FABC 50's *Bangkok Document*.

2. Objectives of the Synodal Assembly

The general objective of this Synodal Assembly is: To listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying regarding the mission of the Christian family in the Church and in Asian societies today (cf. Rev 3:22; and the Specific objectives are: (i) to share and listen to how the Holy Spirit has led the family ministry in respective countries or conferences: challenges overcome, fruits realized, future directions; (ii) to discern how the Holy Spirit wants FABC's Office for Laity and Family to serve the laity, family, women, youth, BECs animation in various countries/conferences in the light of the *Bangkok Document*. This listening and sharing will definitely encourage, enlighten and inspire each other.

3. Essential Documents to Refer

We will keep in mind and focus on some important documents which will clarify the understanding of the importance of our ministries.

These are: *Amoris Laetitia*, *Familiaris Consortio*, *Christus Vivit*, and *Bangkok Document*.

3.1. *Amoris Laetitia*:

The joy of love is one of the most beautiful and tender documents of our time. In a world where families are under pressure, misunderstood and under-valued, AL reminds us that love is still possible, still sacred and still the key to true happiness.

Pope Francis begins by affirming the real world-challenges facing the family: financial difficulties, emotional wounds, cultural pressures and brokenness. But instead of judging or idealizing, AL invites us to walk with families. Pope Francis says, no family drops down from heaven perfectly formed (325). Every family is work in progress and God journeys with us in ups and downs.

The heart of AL is Chapter four, where Pope Francis meditates on love using Paul's most beautiful hymn of love in 1 Cor 13. Love is not a feeding feeling, it is a daily decision. Tenderness, forgiveness, humour, self-sacrifice these are the bricks that build the house of marriage.

AL calls for accompaniment. Not every situation is ideal. Divorce, remarried Catholics, struggling couples, single parents all are called to experience the mercy of God. Rather than rigidly applying laws, Pope Francis calls for pastoral discernment, a deep listening to people's journey, a careful reading of their hearts. Mercy and truth must walk hand in hand. In AL the Church is called to be creative in reaching families, forming conscience, offering healing and nurturing love in every stage. The Church is not a fortress for the perfect. It is a field hospital for the wounded. Programs, Catechesis, marriage preparation all must be adapted with compassion and realism. Not idealism in judgment.

Finally, AL speaks about family spirituality. A spirituality that is not lived in monasteries or cathedrals alone, but at home, around the dinner table, during bed-time prayers, in patient conversations and simple daily acts of kindness. Holiness grows in the soil of ordinary life. AL is more than a document. It is a love letter to every family, every marriage, and every person longing for home. It tells us that love is mercy. It struggles, stumbles but endures. And in that enduring love God dwells.

Pope beautifully reminds us that the joy of love experienced by family is the joy of the Church (1). So let's not be afraid of the real, the broken, the unfinished. Let us build our families on patience, mercy and hope. For on this humble foundation the true joy of love shines brightest. In every crake love can still grow, in every heart love can still triumph.

3.1. *Familiaris Consortio* (1981)

According to the plan of God, marriage is the foundation of wider community of the family. Since the very institution of marriage and conjugal love are ordained to the procreation and education of children in whom they find their crowing. FC is a document that speaks to every home, every couple and every family.

In a world where family is often confused or challenged, this document reminds us of God's beautiful vision for marriage and family life. It remains deeply relevant as it invites us to rediscover the family as the first and vital cell of the society.

At the heart of *Familiaris Consortio* is truth, marriage is not just a human institution, it is a divine calling. John Paul II says that the spouses are called to be "cooperate with the love of God the creator, and as his interpreters, they transmit life and, build the human family" (FC 28).

Pope outlines four tasks of the family in the modern world: **(i) forming a community of persons:** "love begins at home! Families are called to build a communion of life and love, respecting the dignity of every member (FC 18), the family is then called the seed of communion, likewise receiving the mission as agent of communion. **(ii) serving life:** FC 28 describes the second task. This includes both welcoming new life through procreation and nurturing life through parenting. It's a gift and a mission. Family is a sanctuary of life and called also to become an agent of life, **(iii) participating in the development of society:** families are the first schools of virtues and citizenship. This follows that the participation in the development of society is an important task of the family. The Pope says, "The family is the first and vital cell of society" (FC 42). The family is then called to be an agent of social development. **(iv) sharing in the life and mission of the Church:** Families not just receive the Gospel, they proclaim it. They are domestic Church where faith is first taught and lived (FC 49). As the domestic church families share in the life and

mission of the Church. The family becomes a leaven and agent of evangelization.

Families face a lot of challenges, yet no family is excluded from the love and mercy of God. The Church is called not to judge, but to accompany with truth, love and hope. The family is not just an ideal; it's a sacred gift. It's where we first learn to love, to pray, to forgive and to hope. *Familiaris Consortio* reminds us that in every father's embrace, every mother's care, and every child's laughter, God is present.

3.2. *Christus Vivit* (2019)

It is addressed to the young people and the entire people of God. It reflects on the role of the young people in the Church and in the World. The document presents the challenges and aspirations of the young people today urging the Church to listen attentively and to accompany them with love and trust.

It presents key themes, such as, the living presence of Christ, the importance of discernment and vocation, the role of memory and tradition and the call for a youthful and missionary Church.

The core message is Christ is alive. He is our hope, and in a wonderful way, he brings youth to our world (CV 1). Hence, the young people are to live fully and with purpose.

The Church must have a listening heart, because young people possess insights, questions and experiences that can renew and enrich the Church's life and mission. By genuinely listening, the Church affirms their dignity, walks with them in a journey of faith and helps them to discern their vocation with trust and love. Pope writes, "*The Church wishes to listen to your voice, your sensitivities and your faith even your doubts and your criticism*" (CV 242).

The document also highlight the value of youth. Pope Francis emphasized that the young people are not merely the future, but the now of God. ("*You are the 'now' of God, and he wants you to bear fruit*" CV 178). Their energy, creativity, and ideas are needed in the Church and society.

In CV, Pope Francis highlights **the need to maintain the Roots and Memory** because they provide young people with the sense of identity, stability, and belonging. Remembering the faith, struggle

and wisdom of the past generations, crowns youth in values, that help them to face their future with hope and clarity. (*"A tree without roots can neither grow nor bear flowers or fruit"* CV 179).

The document highlights the importance of discerning one's vocation whether it be marriage, consecrated life, priesthood or professional calling as a way of living, love and service. (*"Your own vocation inspires you to bring out the best in yourself for the glory of God and the good of others"* CV 257).

Holiness and Mission: in the document Pope Francis called young people to be missionaries and saints in today's world not by being perfect, but by following Christ with passion and authenticity. The young people have the energy, creativity, and generosity needed to renew the Church and to transform the society with the joy of the Gospel (CV 177). (*"you too need to see the entire Church as a mother who can show you the way and accompany you"* CV 243).

According to CV, the Church is a youthful Church because she is capable of constant renewal, remaining open to the Spirit, and ever ready to be challenged by the dreams and questions of the young people. Her youthfulness is not tied to age, but her ability to radiate the joy, compassion and the boldness of Christ in every generation.

The key themes of CV invite the Church to walk closely with the youth, recognizing Christ's living presence in their lives and nurturing their journey with listening, love, and guidance. By embracing their energy, upholding tradition, encouraging discernment, and calling them to holiness and mission, the Church becomes ever more youthful and alive. Christ is alive and ever present in the journey of every young person. Let us continue to listen, accompany, and walk together in faith renewing the Church with youthful hope, rooted wisdom, and a shared mission of love.

4. Word of God

Through His inspired Word written in the Holy Bible, God speaks to us, reveals his plan, nourishes our spiritual life, strengthens the bond of family, helps to recognize the dignity and mission of women and to form the Basic Ecclesial Communities. Hence, based on *Dei Verbum* and *Verbum Domini* together with *Familiaris Consortio* and *Amoris Laetitia*, the theme of "Family and the Word of God" will be dealt in order to enlighten and inspire our ministries. The Word of God is not

only the Sacred texts in the Bible, but more importantly the Word became Flesh and this incarnated Word is Jesus Christ who came into a Family. So the theme Family and the Word of God will emphasize the relationship between the Family and Jesus and will show how family can be home for the Word of God.

5. Conversation in the Spirit

Moreover, this Synodal Assembly will give us the opportunity to practice the Conversation in the Spirit in order to learn how to listen, to discern the new pathways the Holy Spirit is unveiling for the Ministry to the Family, the Youth, the Women, the Animation of BECs in Asia today, and how to work in collaboration. The open-hearted and active participation of all will make this Synodal Assembly fruitful, successful, and meaningful.

Thank You!

Familiaris Consortio and Amoris Laetitia: Controversial Issues, Theological Developments and Pastoral Prospects

Vimal Tirimanna, CSsR

Introduction

From the earliest times, the Church has accorded a central place to family mainly because a Christian family is also the foundation of the believing community or the Church community. Although there are diverse types of what would call a ‘family’ in the contemporary world, one may define a Christian family as:

Ideally, a Christian family is an association of persons comprised of a woman and a man married to each other, and who are the parents of children to which both are biologically related. This structure is derived from scriptural teaching on the one-flesh unity of marriage, and the development of subsequent theological precepts.¹

But customarily, in almost every society whether Christian or not, a family is based on marriage. Hence, in general, there is an intrinsic link between family and marriage, and this is one of the central messages the Church has been trying to proclaim all along the centuries. So much so, we may conclude that according to the Church, if marriage is healthy and sound, family is also invariably healthy and sound! In recent times, that is during the last seven decades or so, with the rising of so many modern secular trends, there have been all sorts of problems with regard to both marriage and family. Hence, they need constant pastoral care, as AL 325 says: “no family drops down from heaven perfectly formed; families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love”.

That is why even way back in 1965, Vatican-II could include marriage and family among the “Problems of Special Urgency”! Some 15 years later, just after his election as Pope, when Pope John Paul II called a Synod of Bishops in Rome in 1980 to discuss on family and marriage, they were still the “Problems of Special Urgency”! Based on the

¹ Brent Waters, “Is There a Normative Christian Family?”, *INTAMS Review* 18 (Summer 2012), 53.

Propositions of this Synod, John Paul II wrote his post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (FC) in 1981.

Similarly, within six months of his election as Pope, Pope Francis, too, called for two successive Synods of Bishops in 2014 and 2015 to treat the same topic. In order to prepare the Working Paper (*Instrumentum Laboris*) of these two Synods, he launched an unprecedented world-wide consultation process of all the baptized (at least through their representatives) to know the mind of the Catholic Church because those issues were still the “Problems of Special Urgency”! True to the primarily pastoral orientation of his pontificate, the Pope wished to follow a synodal method in analysing and discerning the issues to do with Catholic marriage and family which involved a representation of all the baptized Catholics. This unprecedented consultation process climaxed with the two successive Synods of Bishops in 2014 and 2015 which discerned at the episcopal level the same issues raised by the world-wide consultation. Finally, Pope Francis wrote his post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (AL) in 2016, basing himself on the results of the consultation and the propositions of the two Synods of Bishops. So, AL is the ultimate result of a long process of consultation and discernment involving all the People of God (all the baptized) at various levels in the local and universal Churches. According to Pope Leo XIV, AL is the “the fruit of three years of synodal discernment enriched by the Jubilee Year of Mercy”.² Interestingly, this year marks the 10th anniversary of AL! When AL was written, some 35 years had already passed since the FC, and the issues to do with marriage and family not only remained still unresolved, but they were getting more and more complicated. That’s precisely why in his special Message to commemorate the 10th anniversary of AL, Pope Leo XIV could write: “Recognizing that «anthropological and cultural changes» (AL 32) have become increasingly pronounced over the past thirty-five years, Pope Francis

² Pope Leo XIV, “Message of His Holiness Pope Leo XIV on the Occasion of the Tenth Anniversary of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*”, 19th March 2026, available at <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/messages/pont-messages/2026/documents/20260319-messaggio-amorislaetitia.html> (accessed on 20th March 2026).

wanted to further engage the Church in the path of synodal discernment”.

In what follows, we will discuss the matters relevant to our main theme in two main Parts. In Part-I we will enumerate a few main controversial issues to do with AL, and then, we will deal with some of the developments, first regarding theological concepts, and then, regarding theological/pastoral principles. In Part-II, we will discuss the pastoral prospects that emerge from these developments.

PART - I

1. Controversial Issues

Although the contents of AL are mostly to do with repeating what the Catholic Moral/Pastoral Tradition had been (especially the teachings of Vatican-II and FC)³, AL has been mis-understood by quite a number of clerics – both bishops and priests!⁴ They seemed to have presumed that AL is a clear-cut deviation from the cherished Catholic Tradition. Here, we use the term “misunderstood” deliberately because a careful study of the arguments promoted against AL clearly shows that the critics have either not understood or they were ignorant of what the contents of AL really say. Let’s take some of the main criticisms as given below:

- 1.1. AL is the Personal Views of Pope Francis**
- 1.2. AL is a Rupture from the earlier Magisterium**
- 1.3. AL has changed the Catholic concept of Marriage**
- 1.4. AL allows Homosexual Activities**
- 1.5. AL allows the Civilly Remarried Catholics to Receive Sacraments**

³ Cf., Thomas P. Rausch, “Introduction” in Thomas P. Rausch and Roberto Dell’Oro (Eds.), *Pope Francis on the Joy of Love: Theological and Pastoral Reflections on Amoris Laetitia*, Paulist Press, New York 2018, 1.

⁴ Most of the controversies about AL stem from this misunderstanding.

In analysing AL deftly, the Italian moral theologian, Mauro Cozzoli has highlighted what is “new” in AL when he comments:

Innovation is not in content but in the structure of morality. “Not in content” means that the novelty is not normative; that is, it does not concern the norms taught by the Church. Pope Francis has not changed a single norm, nor excluded any. He is faithful—as he himself says—to the moral doctrine of the Church, with explicit references to the moral teachings of the Second Vatican Council, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and his predecessors. However, these do not occupy a prominent place in the document. This reflects the very innovation brought by Francis. A novelty in the methodological structure of the way of thinking, structuring, teaching, and living morality. **This innovation consists in the axial shift of morality from law to person.**⁵

This is a fitting response to the above-mentioned controversies over AL. Since I myself have already dealt with the main criticisms levelled against AL in the *FABC Papers No.59* published in June 2019, entitled: “Responses to Doubts, Questions and Criticisms with Regard to Chapter Eight of *Amoris Laetitia*”, I do not intend to deal with them again, here. Moreover, when we come to the next section of this Paper, entitled “Theological and Pastoral Developments”, it will be clear that the contents of AL are developments based on the previous magisterial teachings, rather than ‘innovations’, ‘ruptures’ or ‘deviations’ introduced by Pope Francis, as alleged by those who have criticized AL.

2. Theological and Pastoral Developments

Under this title, we intend to highlight some developments in the theology and pastoral practice with regard to marriage and family that have taken place thanks mainly to FC and AL, under the following two main sub-titles: Development of Concepts and Development of Fundamental Catholic Pastoral/Moral Principles.

⁵ Mauro Cozzoli, “Le Novità in Campo Morale di Papa Francesco”, *Bioetica*, Nos.2-3 (2017), 200. This translation from the original Italian to English is mine. The bold letters are not in the original text.

2.1. Development of Concepts

Under this title, we wish to highlight how a few important theological concepts linked to our main title have had a linear development within the magisterial teachings, under the following five sub-titles.

2.1.1. Family as “the Domestic Church”

This is a cherished Catholic theological concept which has its traditional roots running way back to the First Christian ancestors of ours. In fact, we cannot forget that the first Churches were house or family ‘Churches’ (*oikos*). Evidently, at first, the believers in Jesus the Risen Messiah met in the Temple in Jerusalem and in the Jewish synagogues, and at times, in houses. But with the persecution against them intensifying, they were forced to meet exclusively in some of the chosen ‘households’. Thus, the New Testament itself could speak of such “churches that meet in homes” (cf., Acts.8:1; 11:22; 12:12; 13:1; 16:40; 20:17-21, 1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:5; Col 4:15; Philem 2, ...etc.).

Even at the time of the Fathers who belonged to the generation just after the Apostles and their immediate successors, we see how the family was considered as the ‘domestic Church’. For example, in the writings of John Chrysostom we often find the family described as ‘ecclesia’, the gathering of the baptized. As Vatican-II described, the wider Christian family (the Church) is a community of all the baptized, a gathering of all the baptized in the name of the Lord. Hence, the Church is “a community of the baptized”, a People of God. Thus, LG 11 refers to family as “the domestic Church”:

From the wedlock of Christians there comes the family, in which new citizens of human society are born, who by the grace of the Holy Spirit received in baptism are made children of God, thus perpetuating the people of God through the centuries. The family is, so to speak, the domestic church. In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children; they should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each of them, fostering with special care vocation to a sacred state.

In FC, we find the term domestic church being used six times, and in N.21, Pope JP-II says: “The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion, and for this reason too it can and should be called ‘the domestic Church’”. No wonder

then that the two Synods of Bishops in 2014 and 2015 described the parish as a “family of families”.⁶ In AL which is the post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, we find the term used at least 11 times. Repeating what the CCC 1657 and the Final Report of the Synod on Family and Marriage said in 2014, AL 86 says:

Within the family ‘which could be called a domestic church’ (Lumen Gentium, 11), individuals enter upon an ecclesial experience of communion among persons, which reflects, through grace, the mystery of the Holy Trinity. ‘Here one learns endurance and the joy of work, fraternal love, generous – even repeated – forgiveness, and above all divine worship in prayer and the offering of one’s life’ (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1657)”.

2.1.2. Joy of Love

AL opens with the words: “The Joy of Love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church”. This phrase can be perceived as a development of the opening phrase of GS 1: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ”.

Moreover, it was not Pope Francis, but Pope John Paul II who first used the phrase ‘the joy of love’ (*amoris laetitia*) in N.52 of his *Familiaris Consortio* when he wrote: “Particularly today, the Christian family has a special vocation to witness to the paschal covenant of Christ by constantly radiating **the joy of love** and the certainty of the hope for which it must give an account”.

2.1.3. Wounded Love

Although the magisterium correctly speaks of the joy of love, in lived reality, for quite a number of married couples in our contemporary world, instead of it being a joy, their love has turned into a pain – “a wounded love”!⁷ Towards the end of FC, there is a discussion of such

⁶ See for example, *Relatio Finalis* (2015), N.77.

⁷ Of course, from the point of view of the official Church, this wounded love is seen as a result of deviating from the ideal of marriage as proposed by the Church’s teaching magisterium. But if one considers, the same reality from the point of view of those persons in such marriages, often if

wounded love which result from difficult marriages under the title “Pastoral Care of the Family in Difficult Cases”. After having elaborated some common concrete situations of difficulties of marriage in the contemporary world, Pope John Paul II goes on to highlight a few painful types of marriage (NN.80-84) which deviate from the Catholic ideal under the title: “Pastoral Action in Certain Irregular Situations”. One needs to keep in mind that it is not only the Church’s witnessing to the gospel teachings is wounded by those in such marriages, but more so, they themselves (those in such marriages) are wounded in one form or the other. Those who had already been in a marriage/or in an unmarried union earlier, but now not living in that relationship, humanly speaking would feel hurt or wounded. This is the case, especially with regard to those who are abandoned by the other spouse or entered into another union. Often, the presence of children makes these so-called “irregular” situations very complicated, pastorally speaking. The socio-cultural hurts and humiliations experienced by the spouses of such marriages along with their children, from various sectors of society (especially in Asia) and the Church (which traditionally used to call them as ‘those living in sin’), are never to be forgotten. It is in this sense that the Synod of Bishops 2015 used the term “wounded” four times in their final Propositions, with regard to love, marriage and family.⁸ AL, too, refers to such realities four times using the adjective “wounded”.⁹

In AL, N.78, the Pope bluntly says: “What is urgently needed today is a ministry to care for those whose marital relationship has broken down”. After all, as Francis has been repeatedly saying, the Church is first of all “a field hospital” attending to those who are wounded or unwell:

The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has

not always, such deviated marriages have caused deep wounds in the spouses involved and in those closely linked to them, such as their parents, children and relatives/friends. This latter aspect is, unfortunately, forgotten very often even by the pastors of the Church.

⁸ Cf., *Relatio Finalis* (2015), NN.10,40,51,55.

⁹ Cf., AL, NN. 79, 237, 291, 305.

high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds. ... And you have to start from the ground up.¹⁰

According to Pope Francis there are “situations of fragility” marked by “wounded love”, such as divorced and civilly remarried couples, those married only in a civil marriage, registered partners, and *de facto* partners.¹¹ He calls for “merciful and encouraging pastoral attention” in these situations, so as to foster “greater openness to the Gospel of marriage in its fullness” and “human and spiritual growth”.¹²

2.1.4. From merely Condemning to Bringing Christ's Salvation

This was the novelty introduced into the pastoral approach of the Catholic Church by the Vatican-II.¹³ In fact, it is an effort to go back to the spirit of Jesus in the gospels. After all, the Church is the sacrament of salvation, not of condemnation!¹⁴ As Jesus himself told Nicodemus: “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (Jn.3:16-17)¹⁵. And so, the

¹⁰ Cf., Pope Francis as cited in Dennis Coday, “The Pope’s Quotes: The field hospital Church”, National Catholic Reporter, 26th October 2023, available at <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/francis-chronicles/pope-s-quotes-field-hospital-church#:~:text=I%20see%20the%20church%20as,level%20of%20his%20blood%20sugars!>

¹¹ Cf., Ennio Antonelli e Rocco Buttiglione, *Terapia dell'amore in «Amoris Laetitia»*, Ares, Milano 2017.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ When Pope John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council, one of his main aims was to make the Church move from condemnations to healing souls. See his opening speech, *Gaudete Mater Ecclesia*.

¹⁴ Interestingly, Jesus never avoided or condemned sinners, as the Pharisaic custom of his day was, but he always found ways to integrate them into those who believed in him. The woman caught in adultery (Jn.8), the woman by the well (Jn.4), the story of Zaccheus (Lk.19),...etc., are just a few of the many such instances we find in the gospels.

¹⁵ See also Jn.12:47b, which reads “I did not come to judge the world but to save the world”.

Church as the Sacrament of Christ exists to call sinners to repentance, not the virtuous, as Jesus himself did during his earthly ministry. That's why Vatican-II could teach: "Inspired by no earthly ambition, the Church seeks but a solitary goal: to carry forward the work of Christ under the lead of the befriending Spirit. And Christ entered this world to give witness to the truth, to rescue and not to sit in judgment, to serve and not to be served" (GS 3).

All the post-Vatican-II Popes have tried to follow this conciliar approach. Thus, in N.84 of FC, while speaking about the civilly remarried Catholics, Pope John Paul II simply teaches:

Daily experience unfortunately shows that people who have obtained a divorce usually intend to enter into a new union, obviously not with a Catholic religious ceremony. Since this is an evil that, like the others, is affecting more and more Catholics as well, the problem must be faced with resolution and without delay. The Synod Fathers studied it expressly. **The Church, which was set up to lead to salvation all people and especially the baptized, cannot abandon to their own devices those who have been previously bound by sacramental marriage and who have attempted a second marriage. The Church will therefore make untiring efforts to put at their disposal her means of salvation.**¹⁶

Following the post-conciliar pastoral spirit (which is also the spirit of the gospels) and the teachings of his Predecessors, Pope Francis in AL does not stop merely condemning what is morally wrong (in the eyes of the magisterium) with regard to marriage and family life in the contemporary world, but tries to find diverse ways of bringing Christ's over-flowing salvation to those who have fallen short of what the Church teaches. In other words, according to AL, instead of just condemning those who are already 'wounded' as a result of their own deviation from the ideals proposed by the Church, the Church also has a duty to activate in the here and now the fruits of the salvation of Christ with regard to those who are 'wounded'. After all, for Francis, the Church is "a Field Hospital" for the wounded. This, in fact was one of the main concerns of the two Synods of Bishops that preceded AL, and it is also the main pastoral prospect of AL which

¹⁶ The highlighting in bold letters is mine.

followed them (on which we will speak at the end). Following the two Synods of 2014 and 2015, AL tries to find pastoral solutions and heal the wounds but always making sure to stay well within the cherished Catholic moral and pastoral tradition. In doing so, it uses the rich values and principles of the Catholic tradition. In the use of these principles, too, there is a continuation or a development in the magisterial tradition as we see under the following sub-topics.

2.1.5. No one can be condemned forever!

AL repeats this phrase twice, and it is a further development of Church's pastoral practice with regard to the divorced and remarried Catholics. Until FC in 1980, all such persons were considered as excommunicated from the Church.¹⁷ It was at the Synod of Bishops in 1980 that this was examined seriously by the bishops together with the Pope. Thus, in N.84 of his FC, Pope JP-II said:

The Church, which was set up to lead to salvation all people and especially the baptized, cannot abandon to their own devices those who have been previously bound by sacramental marriage and who have attempted a second marriage. The Church will therefore make untiring efforts to put at their disposal her means of salvation.

Then, the Pope goes on to say in the same N.84:

Together with the Synod, I earnestly call upon pastors and the whole community of the faithful to help the divorced, and with solicitous care to make sure that they do not consider themselves as separated from the Church, for as baptized persons they can, and indeed must, share in her life. They should be encouraged to listen to the word of God, to attend the Sacrifice of the Mass, to persevere in prayer, to contribute to works of charity and to community efforts in favour of justice, to bring up their children in the Christian faith, to cultivate the spirit and practice of penance and thus implore, day by day, God's grace. Let the Church pray for them, encourage them and show herself a merciful mother, and thus sustain them in faith and hope.

¹⁷ See for example, the *Code of Canon Law* (1917), N. 2356.

In AL, Pope Francis continues this pastoral attitude of JP-II and says: “No one can be condemned forever” (AL NN. 296, 297), as it had been the ecclesial custom for centuries to excommunicate them from the Church. In fact, in AL NN. 243, 246, 299, he explicitly repeats what JP-II had taught, namely, that the civilly remarried Catholics are not excommunicated. In Chapter 8 of AL, Pope Francis, thus, tries to find ways and means to re-integrate them to the Church community because as JP-II already said they too, as baptized Catholics, are the sons and daughters of the Church. Here is a clear development of the theology and pastoral practice towards the civilly remarried Catholics.

2.2. Development of Fundamental Catholic Moral/Pastoral Principles

In what follows, we will highlight the main moral and pastoral principles that have had their own development (growth) from Vatican-II teachings and FC, till the AL. Interestingly, these are the very principles that are employed by AL with regard to the family and marriage issues in the pastoral field, especially in Chapter 8, as we will see in Part-II of this Paper entitle “Pastoral Prospects”.

2.2.1. The Use of the Traditional Catholic Moral Theological Principles to Heal the “Wounds”

There is a development in AL which can be perceived as something “new”, namely, the use of the already existing Catholic fundamental moral principles with regard to those ‘wounded’ or the so-called “irregular” marriages. These principles had been either forgotten or ignored in the past when it came to the pastoral care of the wounded marriages. One of the important moral principles in the pastoral field for Catholic pastors has always been the distinction between the objective ethical order and subjective personal responsibility. This distinction has been used all along by the magisterium but particularly in the post-Vatican-II period. Put in a nut-shell, it amounts to holding that an objectively evil act need not always be subjectively culpable. Already, FC had highlighted the fundamental moral difference of those cases in which diverse remarried couples live (FC 84). All the divorced and remarried couples, accordingly are perceived as having committed a moral evil in the objective moral order. But they are not equally guilty in their subjective moral responsibility, as John Paul II so convincingly highlights in N.84 of

FC. Similarly, Francis uses the cherished moral principle of seriously considering the circumstances that surround each wounded marriage.¹⁸ While the circumstances cannot make what is objectively immoral to be moral, they certainly can diminish the guilt and the subjective culpability of the moral agent for performing such acts, as is taught so clearly in every course on Fundamental moral theology in seminaries and other institutes of learning.

Similarly, there are also other attenuating factors which make certain acts less culpable or even not culpable at all. Thus, even the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* N.1735 we read: “imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors”. Then, in N.2352, the same Catechism refers once again to circumstances which mitigate moral responsibility, and mentions at length “affective immaturity, force of acquired habit, conditions of anxiety or other psychological or social factors that lessen or even extenuate moral culpability”. Therefore, AL N. 302 highlights a fundamental moral theological fact: “For this reason, a negative judgment about an objective situation does not imply a judgment about the imputability or culpability of the person involved”. Then, in the same AL N.302, basing himself on what the *Relatio Finalis* of the Synod of Bishops in 2015 said, Pope Francis concludes:

On the basis of these convictions, I consider very fitting what many Synod Fathers wanted to affirm: “Under certain circumstances people find it very difficult to act differently. Therefore, 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. Pastoral discernment, while taking into account a person’s properly formed conscience, must take responsibility for these situations. Even the consequences of actions taken are not necessarily the same in all cases”

¹⁸ Cf., Vimal Tirimanna, “*Amoris Laetitia*: The Official Catholic Re-discovery of the Vital Importance of Circumstances in Moral Evaluation”, *Studia Moralia*, 56:2 (2018), pp.9-37.

Since all these signify a return to the cherished moral theological patrimony of the Church, such pastoral care as recommended by AL is not “new” or something invented by Pope Francis. Rather, it is a return to the forgotten or ignored moral and pastoral tradition of the Church.

2.2.2. Rather than Condemning in an Abstract/General way, Discerning Case by Case

Almost similar, if not parallel, to the moral reasoning of what we just discussed above is the Aristotelian-Thomistic principle according to which when a general rule is applied to particular cases with particular surroundings, one needs to take into account those particular circumstances in arriving at moral conclusions. That is to say that in Catholic Fundamental moral theology, a general rule cannot be applied to particular cases without considering their particularity.¹⁹ Hence, the need for treating each and every case carefully. In other words, there exists the need for a careful personal and pastoral discernment of each case as wished by JP-II in FC N.84 and Francis in AL N.300.

Already, FC called for this pastoral principle of case-by-case study and discernment of the diverse cases of broken or wounded marriages. For example, speaking on couples that simply live together without getting married either civilly or religiously, FC says: “The pastors and the ecclesial community should take care to become acquainted with such situations and their actual causes, case by case”.²⁰ Similarly, with regard to the civilly divorced and remarried Catholics, FC repeats the same pastoral principle. Interestingly, in 2007, Pope Benedict XVI in his *Sacramentum Caritatis*, N.29 repeated what FC 84 said: “The Church's pastors, out of love for the truth, are obliged to discern different situations carefully, in order to be able to offer appropriate spiritual guidance to the faithful involved”.²¹ In AL, Pope Francis repeats what his two immediate predecessors had been saying, and uses this as one of the main principles in the pastoral field

¹⁹ It is here that Fundamental moral theology has the *tre-fontatis moralitatis* theory, namely, an action cannot be judged as moral or immoral without considering the circumstances that surround it and the intention of the acting agent.

²⁰ FC N.81.

²¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (2007), N. 29.

with regard to all the difficult or wounded marriage cases, as we read in AL N.300:

If we consider the immense variety of concrete situations such as those I have mentioned, it is understandable that neither the Synod nor this Exhortation could be expected to provide a new set of general rules, canonical in nature and applicable to all cases. What is possible is simply a renewed encouragement to undertake a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases, one which would recognize that, since “the degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases”, the consequences or effects of a rule need not necessarily always be the same.

2.2.3. Law of Gradualness

This is one of the main principles that AL applies in healing those who are wounded in their marriages, and then, in integrating them to the ecclesial community. Already at the 1980 Synod of Bishops on Family and Marriage the Bishop-delegates from all over the world in their sincere struggle for a pastoral way out for those couples who had failed to live up to the ideal proposed by the magisterium, spoke about the “dynamic progression” that is to be realistically expected in a marriage relationship. This concept came to be described as “the law of gradualness” which “played a principal role in repeatedly making it possible for the Synod to exhibit a certain openness on pastoral grounds”.²² It was precisely this concept of the law of gradualness that appeared in N. 34 of FC. Consequently, it was Pope John Paul II who recommended (for the first time in a papal magisterial document) the need to follow the law of gradualness in the pastoral field when he taught:

They cannot however look on the law as merely an ideal to be achieved in the future: they must consider it as a command of Christ the Lord to overcome difficulties with constancy. "And so, what is known as 'the law of gradualness' or step-by-step advance cannot be identified with 'gradualness of the law,' as if there were different degrees or forms of precept in God's

²² Jan Grootaers, “An Exposition of the Events of the Synod” in Jan Grootaers and Joseph A. Selling, *The 1980 Synod of Bishops “On the Role of the Family”: An Exposition of the Event and An Analysis of its Texts*, Leuven University Press, Leuven 1983, 157.

law for different individuals and situations. In God's plan, all husbands and wives are called in marriage to holiness, and this lofty vocation is fulfilled to the extent that the human person is able to respond to God's command with serene confidence in God's grace and in his or her own will."²³

Then, in the Final Report of the Synod of Bishops in 2015 we notice a resonance of it:

To maintain a pastoral dialogue with these Church members to enable them to achieve a consistent openness to the fullness of the Gospel of Marriage and the Family, is a serious responsibility. Pastors should identify elements which can promote evangelization and the human and spiritual growth of those who are entrusted by the Lord to their care.²⁴

In N.71, the Bishops were more explicit when they said:

In many circumstances, the decision to live together is a sign of a relationship which wants, in reality, to lead to a stable union in the future. This intention, which translates into a lasting, reliable bond, open to life, can be considered a commitment on which to base a path to the Sacrament of Marriage, discovered as God's plan in one's life. The path of growth, which can lead to a sacramental marriage, is to be encouraged by recognizing the traces of a generous and enduring love, namely, the desire of a couple to seek the good of others before their own; the experience of forgiveness requested and given; and the aspiration to form a family not for itself but open to the good of the ecclesial community and all of society. While pursuing these goals, value can also be given to those signs of love which properly correspond to the reflection of God's love in an authentic conjugal plan.

Following the above-mentioned Propositions of the two Synods of Bishops in 2014 and 2015, Pope Francis, in his turn, develops this law of gradualness further in his AL, applying it to those cases of Catholic marriages that have deviated from what the Church teaches officially, such as with regard to those many couples who simply live together,

²³ FC N.34.

²⁴ *Relatio Finalis* (2015), N.69.

those in civil marriages and those that are into re-marriages civilly (NN.78,297).

2.2.4. The Re-discovery of the Vital role of Mercy

Already, Pope John XXIII pointed out that the Church is not only a Sure Teacher of the Truth of the gospels, but that she is also a Tender Loving Mother.²⁵ Later, Pope JP-II established in a convincing way of the need to be merciful in our contemporary world in his Encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* in 1980. In this document, having established that Jesus Christ himself is mercy, in N.2 of DM he goes on to write:

The present-day mentality, more perhaps than that of people in the past, seems opposed to a God of mercy, and in fact tends to exclude from life and to remove from the human heart the very idea of mercy. The word and the concept of "mercy" seem to cause uneasiness in man, who, thanks to the enormous development of science and technology, never before known in history, has become the master of the earth and has subdued and dominated it.

But in N.12, JP-II emphatically stated: "The Church must profess and proclaim God's mercy in all its truth, as it has been handed down to us by revelation". He went on further to say in N.13: "The Church lives an authentic life when she professes and proclaims mercy-the most stupendous attribute of the Creator and of the Redeemer-and when she brings people close to the sources of the Savior's mercy, of which she is the trustee and dispenser". Then, in N.14 he concludes: "For this reason, the Church must consider it **one of her principal duties -at every stage of history and especially in our modern age- to proclaim and to introduce into life the mystery of mercy, supremely revealed in Jesus Christ**".²⁶

Francis picks up from where JP-II had left! For example, his Bull on the proclamation of the Jubilee Year of Mercy is a fine summary of mercy as an essential part of our Catholic faith. In AL, he is speaking of the vital importance of the logic of mercy in the pastoral caring of those who have deviated from what the Church has been teaching.

²⁵ See for example, his *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and his opening speech at the Vatican-II entitled *Gaudet mater ecclesia* (1962).

²⁶ The highlighting in bold letters is mine.

PART – II

3. Pastoral Prospects

Finally, under this title, we intend to highlight very briefly the various (formerly unnoticed or ignored) pastoral prospects that are opened by both FC and AL, in the form of two main sections:

1. General Pastoral Prospects
2. Specific Pastoral Prospects for different Types of Marriages that are not Sacramental

3.1. General Pastoral Prospects

3.1.1. A Radical Change in the Way of Presenting the Church's Official Teachings

In carrying out the saving mission of Jesus Christ in our contemporary world, the Church needs to read the signs of the times, as Vatican-II taught:

To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics. Some of the main features of the modern world can be sketched as follows. (GS 4)

Following this recommendation of Vatican-II, the unprecedented Consultation of all sections of the People of God (in and through the questionnaire of 2013) and the Propositions of the two Synods of Bishops in 2014 and 2015, AL seriously considers the 'signs of the times', and earnestly endeavours to find pastoral solutions to those who have deviated from the ideal Catholic concept of marriage. Consequently, a clear pastoral prospect (rather a radical development in the pastoral orientations of the Church) is found in AL's understanding of the pastoral role of the hierarchical magisterium, among other things, especially on the way/manner of presenting the

Church's cherished teachings to our flocks, as we read in NN 35-37. Thus, in AL N 35 we read:

"It is true that there is no sense in simply decrying present-day evils, as if this could change things. Nor is it helpful to try to impose rules by sheer authority. What we need is a more responsible and generous effort to present the reasons and motivations for choosing marriage and the family, and in this way to help men and women better to respond to the grace that God offers them".

With regard to the manner of presenting the official Church teachings, an important pastoral prospect is opened in N.36 of AL which says:

We also need to be humble and realistic, acknowledging that at times the way we present our Christian beliefs and treat other people has helped contribute to today's problematic situation. We need a healthy dose of self-criticism. Then too, we often present marriage in such a way that its unitive meaning, its call to grow in love and its ideal of mutual assistance are overshadowed by an almost exclusive insistence on the duty of procreation. Nor have we always provided solid guidance to young married couples, understanding their timetables, their way of thinking and their concrete concerns. At times we have also proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families. This excessive idealization, especially when we have failed to inspire trust in God's grace, has not helped to make marriage more desirable and attractive, but quite the opposite.

Then, in N.37, too, there is a very concrete self-criticism of the Church's pastoral approaches thus far, which itself opens new pastoral prospects:

We have long thought that simply by stressing doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace, we were providing sufficient support to families, strengthening the marriage bond and giving meaning to marital life. We find it difficult to present marriage more as a

dynamic path to personal development and fulfilment than as a lifelong burden. We also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them.

The firm conviction of AL that no one can be condemned forever which is repeated twice (AL 296-297) further substantiates the above new pastoral direction particularly in the manner of presenting the Church teachings, thus opening more pastoral prospects. In order to lead those in the flock who have strayed away from the Church's doctrinal teachings, AL demonstrates how the good and fruitful use of the Church's moral doctrines and principles (that have been forgotten or overlooked) can become the medicine for the wounded marriages, in the pastoral field. **In this regard, AL highlights three crucial verbs that are important in opening prospects in the pastoral field: accompanying, discerning and integrating those couples that have deviated from the evangelical ideal proposed by the Church (Ch.8).**

3.1.2. Formation of Consciences according to the Teachings of the Church

AL boldly and bluntly reminds that the primary role of the pastors together with the magisterium is to form the consciences of the respective flocks entrusted to them. The statement that the pastors are called **only to form** the consciences of the people **and not to substitute** them, provides a fine pastoral prospect (N.37), because it is precisely on this point that the Church's pastors have often if not always assumed an erroneous paternalistic attitude towards the married couples, at times, even ignoring the need for those in marriage problems to take responsibility themselves for their actions. Let's not forget that on the Last Judgment Day in which all of us believe (Mt.25:31-46), it is not the pastors who will be questioned by the Divine Judge about a person's good or bad behaviour in this world, but those who have acted well or badly, themselves! Thus, the unique and indispensable role of the pastors is to train/form their

flocks to act responsibly, by forming their consciences as the Catholic tradition and Vatican-II so convincingly have taught.²⁷

Once the consciences of their respective flocks are formed with the Church's teaching, the pastors have the duty to do what is humanly and ecclesially possible to bring Christ's salvation based on his never-ending mercy to those Catholics who have deviated from the ideals proposed by the Church. Thus, AL goes beyond mere condemning those who have fallen short of living up to this Catholic ideal, and seeks to find what could be done for those who have already fallen short of the ideals proposed by the Church, as we read in AL N.307: "Today, more important than the pastoral care of failures is the pastoral effort to strengthen marriages and thus to prevent their breakdown". In this way, AL opens many pastoral prospects to do with those Catholic couples who are living together, those Catholics who are civilly remarried and those who are merely civilly married.

3.1.3. Preparation for Marriages

Preparation for marriage was one of the major themes in FC, and Pope John Paul II divided such preparation (following the Synod of 1980) into three main parts: "Marriage preparation has to be seen and put into practice as **a gradual and continuous process**. It includes three main stages: remote, proximate and immediate preparation".²⁸ Although he did not call them 'medicine to heal the wounds', in FC, Pope John Paul II already called for concrete and workable approaches for marriage preparation as a remedy to solve those difficulties faced in married and family life, when he speaks regarding the preparation of the young for married life:

This is even more applicable to Christian marriage, which influences the holiness of large numbers of men and women. The Church must therefore promote better and more intensive programs of marriage preparation, in order to eliminate as far as possible the difficulties that many married couples find

²⁷ Cf., *Gaudium et spes* (1965), N.16; *Dignitatis Humanae* (1965), NN.1-3, 14.

²⁸ FC N.66. A contextual study of such preparation is done by the OTC of the FABC. Cf., *FABC Papers* (2006), N.118 and *FABC Papers* (2009), N. 127.

themselves in, and even more in order to favor positively the establishing and maturing of successful marriages.²⁹

In his AL, Pope Francis refers to marriage preparation eight times. He deepens what FC already said about such preparation, and speaks in very concrete and familiar terms as how to go about such preparations in the pastoral field. Thus, in N.207, AL says:

There are a number of legitimate ways to structure programmes of marriage preparation, and each local Church will discern how best to provide a suitable formation without distancing young people from the sacrament. They do not need to be taught the entire Catechism or overwhelmed with too much information. Here too, “it is not great knowledge, but rather the ability to feel and relish things interiorly that contents and satisfies the soul”. Quality is more important than quantity, and priority should be given – along with a renewed proclamation of the kerygma – to an attractive and helpful presentation of information that can help couples to live the rest of their lives together “with great courage and generosity”. Marriage preparation should be a kind of “initiation” to the sacrament of matrimony, providing couples with the help they need to receive the sacrament worthily and to make a solid beginning of life as a family.

In AL N.208, the Pope is even more concrete when he says:

Learning to love someone does not happen automatically, nor can it be taught in a workshop just prior to the celebration of marriage. For every couple, marriage preparation begins at birth. What they received from their family should prepare them to know themselves and to make a full and definitive commitment. Those best prepared for marriage are probably those who learned what Christian marriage is from their own parents, who chose each other unconditionally and daily renew this decision. In this sense, pastoral initiatives aimed at helping married couples to grow in love and in the Gospel of the family also help their children, by preparing them for their future married life. Nor should we underestimate the pastoral value of traditional religious practices. To give just one

²⁹ FC N.66.

example: I think of Saint Valentine's Day; in some countries, commercial interests are quicker to see the potential of this celebration than are we in the Church.

In N.211, Francis says: "Both short-term and long-term marriage preparation should ensure that the couple do not view the wedding ceremony as the end of the road, but instead embark upon marriage as a lifelong calling based on a firm and realistic decision to face all trials and difficult moments together".

In the same article 211, the Pope is very concrete in says: "Marriage preparation should also provide couples with the names of places, people and services to which they can turn for help when problems arise. It is also important to remind them of the availability of the sacrament of Reconciliation, which allows them to bring their sins and past mistakes, and their relationship itself, before God, and to receive in turn his merciful forgiveness and healing strength".

In 218, AL reminds that marriage is a life-long process: "Another great challenge of marriage preparation is to help couples realize that marriage is not something that happens once for all. Their union is real and irrevocable, confirmed and consecrated by the sacrament of matrimony. Yet in joining their lives, the spouses assume an active and creative role in a lifelong project".

3.2. Specific Pastoral Prospects of AL for different Types of Marriages that are not Sacramental

In giving a fresh pastoral orientation, AL N.78 repeats what the Synod of Bishops (2015) said in their *Relatio Finalis*, NN.53.54:

The light of Christ enlightens every person (cf. Jn 1:9; *Gaudium et Spes*, 22). Seeing things with the eyes of Christ inspires the Church's pastoral care for the faithful who are living together, or are only married civilly, or are divorced and remarried. Following this divine pedagogy, the Church turns with love to those who participate in her life in an imperfect manner: she seeks the grace of conversion for them; she encourages them to do good, to take loving care of each other and to serve the community in which they live and work... When a couple in an irregular union attains a noteworthy stability through a public bond – and is characterized by deep affection, responsibility towards the children and the ability to

overcome trials – this can be seen as an opportunity where possible, to lead them to celebrate the sacrament of Matrimony.

Then, in AL N.297, Pope Francis says:

As for the way of dealing with different “irregular” situations, the Synod Fathers reached a general consensus, which I support: “In considering a pastoral approach towards people who have contracted a civil marriage, who are divorced and remarried, or simply living together, the Church has the responsibility of helping them understand the divine pedagogy of grace in their lives and offering them assistance so they can reach the fullness of God’s plan for them”,³² something which is always possible by the power of the Holy Spirit.³⁰

In view of the above general pastoral prospects indicated by AL, in what follows, we will highlight how those indications ought to be contextualized in the particular Asian contexts, under the following sub-titles.

3.2.1. Inter-Faith Marriages (Mixed Religion and Disparity of Cult)³¹

With the Vatican-II opening up the Church to the world, dialogue among various religions were used as a means of evangelizing, especially in Asia, in the form of inter-religious dialogue (IRD). Today, it is part of the universal Church’s main means of evangelizing according to the magisterial documents. With this fundamental change of attitude, mixed marriages (both Mixed Religion and Disparity of Cult marriages), too, became widely accepted by the Church all over the world, though with some important conditions, with regard to the freedom to practice the Catholic faith on the part of the Catholic spouse and the would-be-children. Since Asia is mostly multi-religious, what matters most for our Churches are the disparity of Cult marriages which are popularly

³⁰ See also *Relatio Synodi* (2014), N.25.

³¹ Only the mixed communion marriages are considered as ‘sacramental marriages’ by the Church.

known as 'inter-faith marriages' (IFM).³² Thus, Pope John Paul II could write:

Today in many parts of the world marriages between Catholics and non-baptized persons are growing in numbers. In many such marriages the non-baptized partner professes another religion, and his beliefs are to be treated with respect, in accordance with the principles set out in the Second Vatican Council's Declaration *Nostra aetate* on relations with non-Christian religions.³³

In N.73 of the *Relatio Finalis*, the 2015 Synod says:

Marriages of disparity of cult represent a privileged place for inter-religious dialogue in everyday life, and can be a sign of hope for religious communities, especially where there are situations of tension. Each one shares his/her spiritual experiences or the journey of seeking a religion, if one is not a believer (1 Cor 7:14). At the same time, marriages of disparity of cult involve special difficulties regarding both the Christian identity of the family and the religious upbringing of the children. The spouses are called to transform more and more their initial feeling of attraction in a sincere desire for the good of the other. This opening also transforms belonging to various religious persuasions into an opportunity to enrich the quality of the relationship. The number of households with married couples of disparity of cult, on the rise in mission territories and even in countries of long Christian tradition, urgently requires providing a differentiated pastoral care according to various social and cultural contexts. In some countries where freedom of religion does not exist, the Christian spouses are obliged to convert to another religion in order to marry, and, therefore, cannot celebrate a canonical marriage of disparity of cult or baptize their children. We must therefore reiterate the necessity to respect the religious freedom of everyone.

³² The OTC of the FABC has produced two important documents on IFM's which are very useful for Asian pastors. See *FABC Papers*, N.118 (2006), N.127 (2009).

³³ FC N.78.

Following what the Synod said, Pope Francis highlights that such inter-faith marriages can also serve as bridges in IRD. Thus, in AL N.248, quoting *Relatio Finalis* (2015), N.73, Pope Francis says:

“Marriages involving disparity of cult represent a privileged place for interreligious dialogue in everyday life... They involve special difficulties regarding both the Christian identity of the family and the religious upbringing of the children... The number of households with married couples with disparity of cult, on the rise in mission territories, and even in countries of long Christian tradition, urgently requires providing a differentiated pastoral care according to various social and cultural contexts”.

Again, quoting *Relatio Finalis* (2015), N.74, he says:

“Attention needs to be given to the persons who enter such marriages, not only in the period before the wedding. Unique challenges face couples and families in which one partner is Catholic and the other is a non-believer. In such cases, bearing witness to the ability of the Gospel to immerse itself in these situations will make possible the upbringing of their children in the Christian faith”.

3.2.2. Couples that Live Together

Couples which simply live together (as husband and wife) without getting married either civilly or religiously, continue to increase in numbers all over the world, not only in the so-called developed countries but also in the rest of the world. Already FC referred to this contemporary phenomenon in two main forms: “Trial Marriages” (N.80) and “De Facto Free Unions” (N.81). With regard to the latter, Pope John Paul II advises: “The pastors and the ecclesial community should take care to become acquainted with such situations and their actual causes, case by case”.³⁴ That is to say that pastors, together with the believing community have to make a careful discernment, taking such unions case by case, though none of these forms living together is acceptable to the Church.

In AL N.53, Pope Francis repeats what the Synod of Bishops (2015) said in N.25 of their *Relatio Finalis*: “In many places, not only in the

³⁴ FC N.81.

West, the practice of living together before marriage is widespread, as well as a type of cohabitation which totally excludes any intention to marry". In N.71, of the *Relatio Finalis* (2015), the Bishops said:

In many circumstances, the decision to live together is a sign of a relationship which wants, in reality, to lead to a stable union in the future. This intention, which translates into a lasting, reliable bond, open to life, can be considered a commitment on which to base a path to the Sacrament of Marriage, discovered as God's plan in one's life. The path of growth, which can lead to a sacramental marriage, is to be encouraged by recognizing the traces of a generous and enduring love, namely, the desire of a couple to seek the good of others before their own; the experience of forgiveness requested and given; and the aspiration to form a family not for itself but open to the good of the ecclesial community and all of society. While pursuing these goals, value can also be given to those signs of love which properly correspond to the reflection of God's love in an authentic conjugal plan.

Following this, AL advocates a pastoral accompaniment that gradually makes progress towards the ideal sacramental marriage with the active accompaniment of the pastors (AL NN.78, 297). In other words, here AL is using a principle first officially proposed by FC N.34.

3.2.3. Those who live in a Civil Union

What was recommended above by both *Relatio Finalis* (2015) and AL with regard to the pastoral care of those simply living-together, was also recommended for those who are only into a civil marriage. That is, they too, need to be pastorally accompanied towards the realization of the ideal proposed by the Church, namely, a sacramental marriage. In other words, the law of gradualness or growth is to be applied here, too (AL NN.78,297).

3.2.4. The Civilly Re-married Catholics

For centuries, the Church considered the civilly divorced and remarried Catholics as excommunicated from the Church. Thus, even as late as the 20th century, the 1917 Code of Canon Law could stipulate:

Bigamists, that is, those who, notwithstanding a conjugal bond, attempt to enter another marriage, even a civil one as they say, are by that fact infamous; and if, spurning the admonition of the Ordinary, they stay in the illicit relationship, they are excommunicated according to the gravity of the deed or struck with personal interdict.³⁵

Some six decades later, (in the post-Vatican-II period), signs of a first breakthrough of this traditional Catholic position were apparent in what the Vatican-approved International Theological Commission said in 1977 with regard to the re-married Catholics: “They are not dispensed from the numerous obligations stemming from baptism, especially the duty of providing for the Christian education of their children. The paths of Christian prayer, both public and private, penance, and certain apostolic activities remain open to them”.³⁶ But, it was the Synod of Bishops of 1980 that first made an official statement that such remarried Catholic couples are not excommunicated from the Church. As Selling points out, «in a complete turn about the bishops did literally throw open the doors of the Church for those persons».³⁷ Selling’s conclusion is crisp when he writes: «this is nothing less than a departure from tradition».³⁸ He rightly holds that this «refusal to shun divorced-remarried Catholics was a definite step forward, inspired by recognition of the fact that the Church is not a public judge but as representative of Christ must reconcile , heal, and continuously find means of reaching out to all persons».³⁹ As a matter of fact, the Bishops gave various concrete participatory ways in and through which they are to be considered as

³⁵ Canon 2356 of the 1917 Code of Canon Law as re-produced in E. N. Peters (Curator), *The 1917 Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law: In English Translation with Extensive Scholarly Apparatus*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2001, 748. All the subsequent references to the 1917 Code are taken from this version of Peters. See also J. A. Selling, «An Analysis of the Major Texts of the Synod» in J. Grootaers and J. A. Selling, *The 1980 Synod of Bishops “On the Role of the Family”: An Exposition of the Event and an Analysis of its Texts*, Leuven University Press, Leuven 1983, 273.

³⁶ The International Theological Commission, «Propositions on the Doctrine of Christian Marriage» (1977), n. 5.4.

³⁷ Selling, «An Analysis of the Major Texts of the Synod», 273.

³⁸ Selling, «An Analysis of the Major Texts of the Synod», 273.

³⁹ Selling, «An Analysis of the Major Texts of the Synod», 273.

members of the Church, such as attending mass, practising charity, justice, penance,...etc., and raising their children in the Catholic faith.⁴⁰

Later, in his post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Pope John Paul II would re-echo what the Bishops said but editing most of the contents of the Proposition N.14 of the Synod, as we read in N.84 of the FC:

Pastors must know that, for the sake of truth, they are obliged to exercise careful discernment of situations. There is in fact a difference between those who have sincerely tried to save their first marriage and have been unjustly abandoned, and those who through their own grave fault have destroyed a canonically valid marriage. Finally, there are those who have entered into a second union for the sake of the children's upbringing, and who are sometimes subjectively certain in conscience that their previous and irreparably destroyed marriage had never been valid.

Here, we need to notice carefully a radical development in the Church's official moral perception of the civilly remarried Catholics. Whereas they were simply condemned and excommunicated in the past, in N.84 of FC (for the first time in a papal magisterial document), Pope John Paul II says that pastors have "to make sure that they do not consider themselves as separated from the Church". Moreover, for the first time in magisterial teachings, he highlights an important moral difference of the diverse cases of the civilly divorced and remarried Catholics, and says that Pastors "for the sake of truth are obliged to exercise a careful discernment of situations". It is an acknowledgment that all the diverse cases of remarried Catholics cannot simply be generalized and lumped together into a single moral category and condemn them, as was done in the past. This, indeed, is a turning point not only in the Church's pastoral practice, but also in her fundamental theological perception of the civilly remarried Catholics. But as already mentioned above, with regard to *de facto* marriages, here too, Pope John Paul II advised pastors that

⁴⁰ Cf., Proposition 14/2 of the Synod of Bishops 1980, as re-produced in Grootaers and Selling, *The 1980 Synod of Bishops "On the Role of the Family"*, 352.

they should carefully take them “case by case” according to the diverse situations.

Interestingly, in 2007, Pope Benedict XVI in his *Sacramentum Caritatis*, N.29 repeated what FC 84 said: “The Church’s pastors, out of love for the truth, are obliged to discern different situations carefully, in order to be able to offer appropriate spiritual guidance to the faithful involved”.⁴¹

In following what the two Synods of Bishops said in 2014 and 2015, Pope Francis develops these contents of FC and SC further, in his AL. in fact, the latter Synod in 2015 said: “the degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases”.⁴² Repeating the earlier magisterial teachings, Pope Francis says the civilly remarried Catholics are not excommunicated (NN. 243, 246, 299). Then, he repeats what FC 84 and SC 29 already said, namely that there are diverse types of remarried cases (AL N. 298), and adds a few more diverse cases of the remarried Catholics. Then, he repeats what FC 84 implied, namely, that all the civilly remarried Catholics cannot be generalized or “pigeon-holed” into one category of those “living in sin” as it was done in the past. Consequently, just as his predecessor, Francis, too advocates a case-by-case discernment when he says in AL N.300:

If we consider the immense variety of concrete situations such as those I have mentioned, it is understandable that neither the Synod nor this Exhortation could be expected to provide a new set of general rules, canonical in nature and applicable to all cases. What is possible is simply a renewed encouragement to undertake a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases, one which would recognize that, since “the degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases”, the consequences or effects of a rule need not necessarily always be the same.

In spite of his earnest appeal to pastors to fulfil their “obligation” to make “a careful discernment of situations”, in FC 84, Pope John Paul II for some inexplicable reason did not arrive at the equally important obligation of the pastors to treat the remarried cases differently as it was implicit in the above-mentioned (his own) appeal to the pastors.

⁴¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (2007), N. 29.

⁴² *Relatio Finalis* (2015), N.51.

Whereas FC concluded that all the remarried Catholics are not to be admitted to the sacraments (though there is a moral difference of the diverse remarried cases, according to the same FC), Pope Francis in his AL (following the Propositions of the **three** Synods of Bishops of 1980, 2014 and 2015) says:

If we consider the immense variety of concrete situations such as those I have mentioned, it is understandable that neither the Synod nor this Exhortation could be expected to provide a new set of general rules, canonical in nature and applicable to all cases. What is possible is simply a renewed encouragement to undertake a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases, one which would recognize that, since “the degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases”, the consequences or effects of a rule need not necessarily always be the same.

It is precisely here that one needs to notice the crucial point of **development** (deviation?!) of AL with its firm roots in FC and SC.⁴³ Whoever does not grasp this crucial development will not be able to understand or accept the pastoral prospects which AL opens to the contemporary Church. It is in this sense that the pastors of the Church need to keep in mind their prime duty to accompany their flocks devoting quality time for them: 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”.⁴⁴ Therefore, as the Canon Law Society of India said in 2019:

The canonical norms regarding the sacramental discipline cannot have one universal interpretation rather the interpretation and the application of the norms are left to the discernment of each pastor according to the particular case and situation. The pastors are exhorted to make a contextualized interpretation and a merciful application of the

⁴³ For more information on this doctrinal and pastoral development, see Vimal Tirimanna, “Development of Catholic Moral Teachings: A Glaring Discrepancy of Reception”, *Studia Moralia*, 59:1 (Gennaio-Giugno 2021), 115-142.

⁴⁴ AL N.300.

norms after the example of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who went after the lost sheep.⁴⁵

Conclusion

At a gathering like ours here in Bangkok, what is important are the specific pastoral prospects that are opened up for us by FC and AL, the teachings of which are a linear theological and pastoral development of the magisterial teachings since Vatican-II. However, there are challenges in making those prospects realities especially in our pastoral work with regard to families and marriages, most of which eventually boil down to a lack of knowledge of what the magisterium officially teaches. It is precisely here that the formation of our pastors (both priests and bishops), future pastors (seminarians) and those religious and lay men and women who are actively involved in family apostolates become vitally important.

⁴⁵ Cf., The Statement of the Canon Law Society of India (2019) available at <https://www.canonlawsocietyofindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Pastoral-Care-of-Couples-in-Irregular-Marriages-A-Reflection-onAmoris-Laetitia.pdf> (Accessed on 23rd March 2026).

THE FAMILY AND THE WORD OF GOD

A Biblical-Theological Reflection

FABC Office for the Laity and Family

Familiaris Consortio Amoris Laetitia Dei Verbum Verbum Domini

Cardinal Pablo Virgilio Siongco David

INTRODUCTION: THE FAMILY AS THE HOME OF THE WORD

When the Church speaks about the 'Word of God,' she does not speak merely about a sacred text. Nor does she refer only to a religious tradition preserved in writing. The expression has a depth and richness that unfolds gradually within salvation history and reaches its fullness in Jesus Christ himself. Likewise, when the Church speaks about 'the family,' she does not refer merely to a sociological unit or a biological structure founded on blood relations. In the Christian vision, the family becomes something far greater: a communion of persons transformed by the Word of God, called to become a living image of God's own covenantal love.

It is precisely at this intersection — between the Word of God and the family — that the Church situates one of her most urgent pastoral concerns today. For, as *Familiaris Consortio* famously declared, the future of humanity and the future of the Church pass through the family. And the family itself can only discover its deepest identity when it listens to, welcomes, and lives by the Word of God.

The Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, reminds us that in Sacred Scripture 'the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them' (DV 21). Notice the familial language: Father, children. The very paradigm of divine revelation is already a family relationship. Scripture is not a legal code dropped from heaven. It is the speech of a Father to his household. And Pope Benedict XVI, in *Verbum Domini*, takes this further: the family is meant to be 'a domestic church where God's word is read and lived' (VD 85). The

family is not simply a recipient of evangelization. It becomes itself a place where the Word continues to dwell.

The purpose of this reflection is to explore, in a biblical and theological way, how the Word of God forms, transforms, widens, and sustains the family. We will draw principally from *Familiaris Consortio* and *Amoris Laetitia*, while grounding the discussion in the theological vision of *Dei Verbum* and *Verbum Domini*.

I. THE WORD OF GOD: FROM SACRED TEXT TO INCARNATE PERSON

Before speaking about the family and the Word of God, we must first clarify what the Church means by 'Word of God' – because in the Christian tradition, this word operates on more than one level simultaneously.

In its most immediate sense, it refers to the Sacred Scriptures shared, though not always with identical boundaries, by Jewish and Christian traditions. Within Judaism itself, there existed different canonical traditions: the Palestinian canon associated with Hebrew-speaking Jews of the homeland, and the Alexandrian canon, the Septuagint, used by Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora. This is why differences also exist within Christianity: Protestant Bibles omit what Catholics call the Deuterocanonical books, classifying them as Apocrypha. This canonical diversity reminds us that the Word of God has always been received within a living community of faith, not in isolation.

To call these writings the 'Word of God' is, above all, a liturgical claim. When Scripture is proclaimed in a liturgical assembly – whether in the synagogue or the church – it is received as God's living address to his people. This insight is already present in the Book of Deuteronomy:

Deut 8:3 'Not by bread alone does one live, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the LORD.'

The context is illuminating. God allows Israel to experience hunger in the desert before feeding them with manna. Physical hunger becomes a teacher of spiritual hunger. The people discover that life cannot be sustained by material bread alone. Human beings also need the nourishment of God's Word. This is why the rabbi or pastor who

presides at the liturgical assembly assumes a role analogous to that of a shepherd feeding a flock. There is already something sacramental here: human words become mediators of divine speech. *Dei Verbum* captures this beautifully: 'The force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life' (DV 21).

But the Christian tradition goes further still. Inspired by the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel, the Church understands that the Word of God is not only a text. The Word of God is ultimately a Person.

Jn 1:1, 14 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... and the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.'

In Jesus Christ, divinity and humanity become inseparable. The Word is not merely communication from God. The Word is God himself entering human history. *Verbum Domini* insists on this with great clarity: Christianity is not 'a religion of the book' but 'a religion of the Word of God' — and this Word is 'not a written and mute word, but the incarnate and living Word' (VD 7). This is why the Church nourishes herself from two tables: the table of the Word and the table of the Eucharist. After the proclamation of the Gospel, the priest announces 'The Gospel of the Lord,' and the people respond: 'Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.' The Good News proclaimed is not merely literature. It is a Person. And it is this Person who will be the living center of family life.

[DV 21] "The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since from the table of both the word of God and of the body of Christ she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life."

II. THE FAMILY IN THE PLAN OF GOD

Having clarified the meaning of the Word of God, we now turn to the family. And immediately we find that the story of the family does not begin with the family. It begins with God.

This is the central conviction of *Familiaris Consortio*. Pope John Paul II opens his theological reflection by following Christ's own method in

Matthew 19: when questioned about marriage and divorce, Jesus does not consult legal traditions. He goes back to 'the beginning' — back to Genesis. The foundational text is Genesis 1:26-27:

Gen 1:26-27 'God created humankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.'

John Paul II draws from this a profoundly personalist anthropology: 'God created man in his own image and likeness: calling him to existence through love, he called him at the same time for love' (FC 11). Because God is Love, the human person — made in God's image — is made for love. The family therefore becomes the privileged place where this imaging of God takes visible, concrete, human form. A man and a woman loving each other faithfully and fruitfully are, in a real sense, a living icon of the Trinity.

The second creation narrative deepens this further. In Genesis 2:23-24, when God presents the woman to the man, the man's response is a cry of recognition and delight: 'This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!' And the narrator draws an immediate theological conclusion: 'Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two become one flesh.' Marriage is not presented merely as a legal arrangement. It is communion. It is covenant. It is participation in God's own relational life.

Amoris Laetitia affirms this same foundation: 'The majestic early chapters of Genesis present the human couple in its deepest reality' (AL 10). But Pope Francis is equally attentive to what comes next: Genesis 3. The fall disrupts the original harmony between man and woman. Shame enters. Blame enters. The beautiful icon cracks. *Amoris Laetitia* is honest about this in a way that is deeply pastoral: the same Scripture that presents us with the ideal couple also runs throughout with stories of wounded families, sibling rivalries, betrayal, infertility, and grief. The biblical family is never perfect. Yet it remains the privileged place where God continues to work out the history of salvation.

[AL 10] "Sacred Scripture begins with man and woman's creation (Gen 1-2) and ends with 'the wedding of the Lamb' (Rev 19:7). The fulfilment of the family is eschatological."

III. THE WORD OF GOD TRANSFORMS AND WIDENS THE FAMILY

We arrive now at a decisive theological insight. We normally understand family in terms of blood relationships: parents and children, kinship and clan. But once the Word of God enters a household and is welcomed in faith, the family begins to change. The Word does not merely instruct the family. It transforms it. And one of the primary ways it transforms the family is by widening it.

Isaiah already anticipated this: 'Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back' (Is 54:2). The family no longer exists merely for itself. It becomes hospitable. It opens space for others. It begins to resemble what Jesus describes in John 14:2 as 'my Father's house' — a house with many rooms. This widening of family is already visible in the early Christian communities. Entire households converted to the faith and opened their homes to fellow believers who had been rejected by their own blood relatives for embracing Christianity. The domestic home became the domestic Church.

Lumen Gentium first used the expression 'domestic Church' (LG 11), and both *Familiaris Consortio* and *Amoris Laetitia* develop it extensively. The architecture of the Roman domus itself was spiritually transformed. Homes became places of Eucharistic assembly. The walls separating slave and free, Jew and Gentile, male and female began to crumble under the pressure of the Gospel. Paul articulates this new reality with stunning boldness:

Gal 3:28 *'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'*

The new organizing principle of the family is no longer bloodline but communion in Christ, the Word made flesh. And *Verbum Domini* makes this concrete with a deceptively simple but deeply significant pastoral recommendation: every Catholic family should have a Bible in the home, kept in a place of honor and used for daily reading and prayer (VD 85). The physical presence of the Bible in the household is a sign of the family's identity as a domestic church. God's Word does not belong only in the sanctuary. It belongs at the dinner table, in the bedroom, in the quiet moments before sleep.

[VD 85] *"The Synod recommended that every family should have its own Bible, kept in a worthy place and used for reading and prayer... the word of God is at the very origin of marriage."*

IV. THE HOLY FAMILY AS ICON OF THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD

The infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke do not merely give us biographical information about Jesus' origins. They give us a theological portrait of what the family of God looks like when the Word of God takes up residence within it.

Consider the scene at Bethlehem. Joseph is asked to father a child he did not biologically engender. His fatherhood is constituted entirely by obedience to the Word of God — to the angel's announcement in a dream. Mary receives into her very flesh the Word that was in the beginning with God. She becomes, in Benedict XVI's phrase, the 'Mother of God's Word' and the 'Mother of Faith' (VD 27). And the Child who is born is laid in a manger — a feeding trough — as if from the very first moment of his earthly life he announces that he has come to be food for the world.

Luke's nativity scene has no dividing walls. Shepherds and Magi, angels and animals, the holy and the humble — all are gathered in one space around the Word made flesh. It is an icon of what every family is called to become: a home with many rooms, a dwelling large enough to welcome not only those related by blood but all who are one in Christ Jesus.

As the child Jesus grows, Luke notes something quietly remarkable. Twice the evangelist tells us that Mary 'kept all these things, pondering them in her heart' (Lk 2:19, 51). *Dei Verbum* uses precisely these verses to describe how divine Tradition grows and deepens within the Church — through the contemplation of believers who treasure the Word within them (DV 8). Mary is not only the Mother of the Incarnate Word. She is the model of how every family receives, keeps, and hands on the Word across generations. Every family that gathers around Scripture, that prays together, that tells the story of God's love to its children — such a family is doing what Mary did: pondering the Word until it bears fruit in life.

[DV 8] "Tradition... makes progress in the Church, with the help of the Holy Spirit... through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts."

V. BUILDING THE HOUSE ON ROCK

At the close of his great Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers one of the most important biblical images for family life. He speaks of two builders — one wise, one foolish. The wise man builds his house on rock; the fool builds on sand. When the rains fall and the floods rise and the winds blow — and they will come, he promises, for every household — the house on rock stands firm, while the house on sand is completely ruined (Mt 7:24-27).

There will never be a season of family life unthreatened by storm. Crises come — between husband and wife, between parents and children, among siblings, in the form of illness, loss, infidelity, addiction, financial ruin. Marriages that once shone with promise collapse into ruin. Jesus is forthright about what makes the difference: 'Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock' (Mt 7:24). The foundation is not sentiment, tradition, or social convention.

It is the Word of God heard and lived.

Amoris Laetitia develops this theme with characteristic pastoral warmth. Pope Francis insists that family life is sustained not by heroic achievement or moral perfection, but by grace — by the daily practice of patience, forgiveness, tenderness, and return. These are not merely human virtues. They are fruits of a family that has let the Word of God take root in its daily rhythms. 'The word of God,' Benedict XVI reminds us, 'sheds light on human existence and stirs the conscience, pointing a way forward' (VD 99). A family that lives by the Word does not merely survive its storms. It grows through them.

VI. DO WHATEVER HE TELLS YOU: THE FAMILY AT CANA

If the Sermon on the Mount gives us the structural image — the house built on rock — the Wedding Feast at Cana in John 2 gives us the dynamic image: the Word of God as the one who rescues the family in the midst of crisis.

The evangelist has just introduced Jesus in his prologue as the Word made flesh. Immediately afterward, he places him at a wedding feast where a crisis emerges: the wine runs out. Wine in the biblical world is not merely a pleasant drink. It symbolizes joy, covenant, abundance, the fulfillment of messianic promise. When the wine runs out, something essential has been lost.

Jewish scholar Amy-Jill Levine, in a lecture to the Catholic Biblical Association of the Philippines, illuminated the cultural background of this scene in a way I have never forgotten. In first-century Jewish and Mediterranean culture, wine was inseparable from wedding festivities and family honor. An adult man of Jesus' age who remained unmarried was socially conspicuous — something any good Jewish mother would have been acutely aware of. Levine observed that Mary's remark — 'They have no wine' — may carry a teasing, provocative edge: 'When are you going to give the community a taste of your wine?' And Jesus' response — 'My hour has not yet come' — would then carry a double meaning: my messianic wedding hour has not yet arrived. This reading aligns beautifully with the whole of Johannine theology, in which Jesus is the Bridegroom, the hour of his glorification on the Cross is the hour of consummation, and the Church becomes his Bride.

But what matters most for our reflection is what Mary says to the servants after Jesus demurs. She does not argue. She does not press. She simply turns and says:

Jn 2:5 'Do whatever he tells you.'

These are the last recorded words of Mary in the Fourth Gospel. Her entire legacy is contained in them. Her counsel to every family in crisis, in every age and culture: heed the Word. Trust the Word. Do what the Word asks of you. It is perhaps not coincidental that Robert Prevost, on his election as Pope Leo XIV, distributed an icon of Our Lady of Good Counsel — a Marian devotion popularized by the Augustinians, bearing the Latin inscription *Acquiesce consiliis meis*: Heed my counsel. Whether we are choosing a pope or choosing how to save a marriage, Mary's word remains the same.

Jesus then commands the servants to fill six stone jars — the jars of Jewish ritual purification — with water, and to draw from them and take to the headwaiter. The water becomes wine of surpassing

quality. The steward of the feast, astonished, says to the bridegroom: 'You have kept the good wine until now.' The Word made flesh transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary. And he does so in the context of a family celebration, a domestic crisis, a moment of ordinary human need. The domestic becomes the site of the divine.

VII. MARRIAGE AS PARTICIPATION IN THE COVENANT OF CHRIST

The Wedding at Cana prepares us naturally for the great Pauline theology of marriage in Ephesians 5, which is the doctrinal summit of both *Familiaris Consortio* and *Amoris Laetitia* on the meaning of Christian marriage.

Eph 5:25, 31-32 'Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the Church and handed himself over for her... The two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, and I mean it in reference to Christ and the Church.'

Paul's word for 'mystery' here is the Greek *mysterion* — the very word the Latin tradition translates as *sacramentum*. Christian marriage is not merely symbolic of the union between Christ and the Church. It is a sacramental participation in that union. The husband who loves his wife as Christ loved the Church does not merely imitate Christ from the outside. Through the grace of the sacrament, he is drawn into the love of Christ itself, and the marriage becomes a real, imperfect, but genuine embodiment of the divine covenant.

This is why Matthew 19 is so central to both documents. When the Pharisees question Jesus about divorce, he goes back to 'the beginning' — to Genesis 1 and 2. He affirms that what God has joined together, no human authority can separate. *Familiaris Consortio* reads this as the definitive foundation of indissolubility: it is not a juridical imposition but an ontological reality rooted in God's own faithfulness (FC 19-20). Indissolubility endures because marriage participates in the fidelity of God, who himself never revokes his covenant. As *Familiaris Consortio* notes, Christ is the 'faithful witness,' the divine Yes that is never withdrawn — and spouses are called to participate in that same irrevocable faithfulness (FC 20, cf. 2 Cor 1:20; Rev 3:14).

Amoris Laetitia approaches the same text with a different, but complementary, pastoral emphasis. Pope Francis notes that Jesus' teaching on the indissolubility of marriage appears precisely within a

dispute about divorce — not in a theological seminar but in the midst of conflict and pastoral difficulty. The Gospel speaks to families not in abstract ideals but in the reality of their struggles. There is a beautiful old wedding song that captures the discernment at the heart of this teaching. Its refrain asks: 'What's to be the reason for becoming man and wife? Is it love that brings you here, or love that brings you life?' The point is simple and profound: a marriage is indissoluble only when it is truly what Matthew 19:6 describes — when God himself has joined it. The bond endures not by human determination alone but because God is its author. What God has not truly joined together, human pressure alone cannot sustain indefinitely.

Verbum Domini grounds this entire teaching in the broadest possible theological frame: 'The word of God is at the very origin of marriage' (VD 85). Marriage is not a human institution that God subsequently blesses. It is a divine institution into which human beings enter by grace. And it is the Word of God — proclaimed, received, and lived by the couple — that makes this grace available day after day.

Amoris Laetitia's magnificent fourth chapter, a line-by-line meditation on 1 Corinthians 13, shows what living the Word looks like in the concrete daily life of a marriage. 'Love is patient, love is kind, love is not jealous...' — Paul is not describing an emotion. He is describing a practice, learned slowly over a lifetime, through the ordinary struggles of shared life. Pope Francis takes each phrase and applies it to the daily reality of marriage and family with extraordinary pastoral concreteness. This is unprecedented in papal teaching: the Hymn to Love as a practical manual for family life.

[AL 90] "Married love is not defended primarily by presenting indissolubility as a rule... but by helping it to grow ever stronger under the impulse of grace."

CONCLUSION: THE FAMILY AS THE DWELLING PLACE OF THE WORD

In the end, the deepest vocation of the family is to become the dwelling place of the Word.

Let us gather the threads of everything we have reflected upon.

The Word of God first forms the family through creation: the God who is Love creates human beings in his image — male and female

— and calls them to image his love in the covenant of marriage and the gift of children. The Word of God then transforms the family through covenant: the family that receives the Word in faith is widened beyond blood, beyond kinship, beyond culture, into the household of God, the domestic Church. The Word of God sustains the family through crisis: when the storms come, when the wine runs out, it is the Word who turns water into wine and builds the house on rock. And finally, the Word of God consecrates the family through the sacrament of marriage, which is nothing less than a participation in Christ's own covenantal love for the Church.

Pope John Paul II gave the Christian family one of its most memorable imperatives in *Familiaris Consortio*: 'Family, become what you are!' (FC 17). You are, by God's design, an image of the Trinity. You are a domestic church. You are a sacrament of Christ's love. The task of the Word of God in your life is to reveal this identity and to empower you to live it — not perfectly, not without struggle, but faithfully, day by day, with the patience and kindness and endurance that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13.

The four documents we have drawn on trace a coherent and beautiful trajectory. *Dei Verbum* establishes the theological foundation: the Word of God is the Father's speech to his children, nourishing them, giving them their identity. *Verbum Domini* draws out the pastoral consequences for family life: the Bible in every home, the practice of *lectio divina*, families gathered around Scripture in small communities. *Familiaris Consortio* reads the family through the lens of the Word — from Genesis to Ephesians, from indissolubility to sacrament — and sees in the Christian family nothing less than the visible form of God's covenant with humanity. And *Amoris Laetitia* brings all of this down to the level of real families: meeting them where they are, accompanying them in their struggles, reminding them that the love of God is patient and kind and does not brood over injury.

The future of evangelization in Asia may depend less on grand programs than on whether our families once again become homes where the Word is heard, prayed, and embodied. For the goal of the Word of God is not merely to be read. Its goal is communion. Its goal is family. And its final fulfillment is that humanity itself may become the household of God.

And so Mary's last words in the Fourth Gospel remain the most practical, the most pastoral, and the most profound counsel that can be offered to any family in any crisis in any age:

"Do whatever he tells you."

May every family you serve hear that word, receive that word, and be transformed by it into the living image of God's own household of love.

KEY REFERENCES

Document Sigla

DV — *Dei Verbum* (Second Vatican Council, 1965)

FC — *Familiaris Consortio* (Pope John Paul II, 1981)

VD — *Verbum Domini* (Pope Benedict XVI, 2010)

AL — *Amoris Laetitia* (Pope Francis, 2016)

LG — *Lumen Gentium* (Second Vatican Council, 1964)

Principal Scripture Passages

Deuteronomy 8:3 — Not by bread alone

Genesis 1:26-27 — Image and likeness; male and female

Genesis 2:23-24 — Bone of my bones; the two become one flesh

Isaiah 54:2 — Enlarge the place of your tent

John 1:1, 14 — The Word was God; the Word became flesh

Luke 2:19, 51 — Mary pondered all these things in her heart

Matthew 7:24-27 — House built on rock

Matthew 19:4-6 — What God has joined together

John 2:1-11 — Wedding Feast at Cana; Do whatever he tells you

Galatians 3:28 — All one in Christ Jesus

Ephesians 5:25-32 — Marriage as sacrament of Christ and the Church

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 — The Hymn to Love

The Round Table Talk
The BEC's in the *Bangkok Document*
Vimal Tirimanna, CSsR

Introduction

Just as in the Early Christian communities, today, there is an ever-increasing tendency for Christians to get back to the “household churches” (oikos) that existed during the New Testament times. The BEC's/BHC's are ideal for many Asian countries and dioceses, especially where Christians are in tiny minorities. In fact, in his *Ecclesia in Asia*, referring to what the Asian bishops have been saying at the special Synod for Asia in 1998, Pope John Paul II wrote: “drawing on their pastoral experience, the Synod Fathers underlined the value of basic ecclesial communities as an effective way of promoting communion and participation in parishes and Dioceses, and as a genuine force for evangelization”.¹

The Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC's) and the Basic Human Communities (BHC's) originated with the Liberation theology movements in Latin America since the CELAM meeting in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968. It later spread to some parts of both Asia and Africa.² Without a doubt, these small communities are ideal for many multi-religious Asian countries and dioceses, especially where Christians are in tiny minorities, i.e., the so-called “missionary dioceses”. In fact, the Final Document (FD) of the recent Synod on Synodality (2024) also referred to the vital role played by BEC's and BHC's in Christian living all over the world when it said: “In many regions of the world, small Christian communities or basic ecclesial communities are the terrain where meaningful relationships of closeness and reciprocity can flourish, offering the opportunity to experience synodality concretely”.³

¹ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* (1999), N.25.

² However, the BEC's have been already present in the Philippines since the late 1960's, perhaps at the same time during which they were born in Latin America, if not, even earlier. In fact, the diocese of Tagum in Mindanao, the Philippines, celebrated the 25th anniversary of BEC's in 1993.

³ The Final Document of the Synod on Synodality (2024), N.117.

FABC and the BEC's

It was at their 5th Plenary Assembly of the FABC in Bandung in 1990 (some 36 years ago) that the Asian bishops officially accepted BEC's as a fundamental way of proclaiming the good news in Asia. The underlying principle was to be a participatory Church in Asia. In other words, in the collective mind of the bishops, the Church in Asia has to be "a communion of communities". This was perceived by them as "a new way of being Church in Asia".⁴

In order to put this FABC Episcopal missionary conviction into practice, a special Consultation meeting was held in Malaysia in 1993, jointly sponsored by the FABC Office for Human Development (OHD) and the FABC Office for the Laity (OL). It was during this consultation that the concrete pastoral process for promoting a "Participatory Church" in Asia was born under the abbreviated title **AsIPA** (Asian Integral Pastoral Approach). In fact, later, a special FABC Desk was set up for AsIPA, attached to the Office for the Laity (OL).

All the Plenary Assemblies of the FABC since Bandung meeting in 1990 have **consistently continued to insist** on this basic Asian Episcopal missionary conviction, namely, the need to be a participatory Church in Asia, in and through the BEC's or the Small Christian Communities (SCC's). For example, under the sub-title, "A Few Pastoral Directions", the 7th Plenary Assembly in Sampran, Thailand in 2000, N. III.C. 7. says: "The Vision of a New Way of Being Church (AsIPA), promoted by the FABC is proving to be a very good help in the growth and development of the BEC's and deserves our attention and support. Ecclesial Movements, duly discerned by the local church with its hierarchy, can also offer specific and creative contributions to the being and ministry of the Church". At the 10th Plenary Assembly in Vietnam in 2012, the optimistic comments of the Final Document, in N.12 are illustrative of what the BECs and SCCs have been in many parts of the Church in Asia:

⁴ Cf., Vimal Tirimanna (Ed.), *Fifty Golden Years of Asian Pastoral Guidance: Collection of the Statements of the Asian Bishops' Meeting and the Plenary Assemblies of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) 1970-2020*, Bangkok, 2020, 108-109.

They are biblically oriented, formative, participatory and designed to build Word-centred communities of faith. One of the approaches – **the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach** – is used in Asia. Adapted to the Asian situation from the Lumko method of South Africa,⁵ it has also attracted interest of some churches outside Asia. A similar method, with adaptation, is used by local churches in building *basic human communities* where Christians and people of other religions live together. (highlighting with bold and italics in the original text)

It is within this historical context that we need to situate what the Bangkok Document says about the BEC's.

The Bangkok 50 Document and the BEC's

The Bangkok Document (BD) refers to BEC's and BHC's at least 13 times. First of all, in footnote N.2, it recalls: *"In our General Assembly in Bandung in 1990, we resolved to pursue a new way of being Church by promoting the growth of BECs (Basic Ecclesial Communities) that would serve as our most concrete expression of a truly participatory Church"*. Then, it dedicates an entire Section (B) under the title: *«FROM BASIC ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES (BECs) TO BASIC HUMAN COMMUNITIES (BHCs)»*, in NN.148-149. In N.148, it says:

Our Basic Ecclesial Communities will not be truly incarnating synodality as a lifestyle if our communities only stick to themselves and their own 'churchy' concerns. If they are to be true to their mission, i.e., to be like yeast in a mass of dough, then we must build the kind of Christian communities that will lead to Basic Human Communities.

In predominantly multi-religious and multi-cultural contexts of Asia, this encouragement to shift our attention from concentrating only on institutional aspects of the Church is significant, because it resonates well with the well-known appeal of Pope Francis to move out from being a maintenance Church to the peripheries of the Church and the world. In both the above NN.148 and 149, we notice how the mission

⁵ The Lumko method, developed in South Africa in the 1970s by the **Lumko Pastoral Institute**, is a participatory pastoral approach designed to build **Small Christian Communities** (SCCs). Its hallmark is the **"Seven-Step Gospel sharing method"**, which connects biblical texts to daily life, fostering local leadership and community engagement.

of the Church is extended from inward-looking to outward-looking, from *ad intra* to *ad extra*, so to say! It is a timely invitation to Catholics in Asia to join hands with the rest of the Asians and “to walk together” (irrespective of their religious, ethnic or other man-made differences). The phrase “walking together” is very familiar to the FABC ethos, especially in its cherished fundamental principle of the “triple dialogue”. It also resonates perfectly with the contemporary ecclesial concept of synodality which is nothing but “a walking together” while “building bridges” among the vast ocean of humanity.

Moreover, N.149 of the BD says:

We must also be more ready to let go of ministries that no longer serve their purpose and be disposed instead to identify the charisms generously bestowed on us by the Holy Spirit and create new ministries, not just the kind that would get the faithful to serve the Church, but more importantly, those that empower them, as members to serve all society. Our laity should use the 60 best resources of our faith to help especially in managing conflicts at all levels, to engage proactively in the politics of the common good, especially in the work for peace and reconciliation based on justice and mutual respect for human dignity.

But here we need to face sincerely a realistic pastoral question: “Will the priests and bishops in Asia (almost all of whom are trained in the traditional institutional model of the Church that normally promotes “a maintenance Church”) be ready to “let go” of the ministries (even those ministries that do not belong exclusively to the ordained ministry) to which they have got so used to traditionally? It is here that special formation programs are needed for bishops and priests (and religious) who still play a leading and vital role in many Churches in Asia.

Closely linked to the above issue is the important pastoral prospect that emerges from NN.148 and 149, namely, the creation of space for those ecclesial ministries (that are not reserved to the ordained ministry but are based on the *charisms* received from the Holy Spirit at Baptism). In fact, this is precisely one of the desires of the Bandung Plenary Assembly which described BEC’s as: “It is a *participatory* Church where the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to all the faithful –

lay, Religious and cleric alike – are recognized and activated, so that the Church may be built up and its mission realized”.⁶

For example, there are some baptismal charisms that can be used in the grassroots level with regard to those who have deviated from the Church’s ideal teachings on Marriage and Family. In other words, the BEC’s can be used even in a more fruitful way in Catechetical and theological instructions with regard to the fundamentals of Christian living (Cf., BD 155) on which most of our Catholics are badly ignorant, and so, vulnerable to easily fall victims to the various Christian Fundamentalist distortions of the Catholic Church and her teachings. In fact, under the title: “The Family and the Basic Ecclesial/Human Community”, N.98 of the 8th Plenary Assembly of the FABC in Daejong, Korea said:

There is no doubt that the family as the domestic church has a central place in the pastoral thrust of building Basic Ecclesial Communities in Asia. The family is the most fundamental community component of the BEC. In most cases, the BEC is made up of clusters of neighbourhood families that come together regularly to pray, read and reflect on the Word of God, and apply it to their daily lives. In like manner, clusters of inter-religious prayer, reflection, fellowship and common action for the good of the neighbourhood.

It is in this sense that the BEC’s can be used effectively also to divulge the fundamentals of Catholic spiritual, theological and pastoral practices, through the in-puts by well-informed experts and those lay men and women with first-hand experiences in marriage and family life. This, too, would demand special formation programs for such lay leaders.

It is important also to highlight that the BECs, especially in the form of BHC’s, also exist in and through the Disparity of Cult marriages which are now popularly known as “Inter-faith Marriages”. Such marriages which are so common in the multi-religious and multi-cultural Asian contexts can be perceived as ready-made platforms for

⁶ Final Statement of the 5th Plenary Assembly of the FABC, N.8.1.2. as given in Tirimanna, *Fifty Golden Years of Asian Pastoral Guidance*, 109. The highlighting in italics as in the original text.

BHC's, which are also effective bridges for interreligious dialogue as Pope Francis reminded us in *Amoris Laetitia* (2016), N. 248. This is implied in N.118 of BD. Let's not forget that whenever such an inter-religious marriage takes place in Asia, it is not only the two spouses who enter into an intimate relationship with each other, but also their own relatives and friends enter into a closer relationship, thus creating a network of relationships that itself leads to a sort of a wider BHC [Cf., the two OTC documents on inter-faith marriages in *FABC Papers* NN.118 (2006) and 127 (2009)].

N.158 of BD says: «We commit ourselves to transforming our parishes from maintenance to mission, by fostering Basic Ecclesial Communities that build Basic Human Communities». This is already happening in some Asian parishes, esp. in the missionary dioceses, but it needs to be implemented in many other parishes in Asia as well. For this, obviously, the bishops and parish priests in Asia need to take the initiative.

At a Synodal Assembly on Family and marriage as this one in Bangkok, we need to highlight also how the BEC's can also follow the now popular synodal method in consulting and discerning on matters to do with family and marriage at the local or grassroots levels (N.148). After all, as N.117 of the Final Document of the Synod on Synodality says BEC's "are the terrain where meaningful relationships of closeness and reciprocity can flourish, offering the opportunity to experience synodality concretely". This is very relevant with regard to many parts of Asia. Last but not least, BD 118 says:

The participation of lay people, including women, in their human, spiritual, pastoral, and intellectual formation, the close personal mentoring by good role models, the guided immersion of the candidates for the ordained ministries in the life-situations of the poor, their exposure to the basic ecclesial and human communities and their involvement in interreligious, ecumenical and cultural dialogue will create the necessary atmosphere of formation that will raise "shepherds with the smell of the sheep". We have also pointed out, specifically, the need to include the FABC's teachings and traditions in their academic curriculum.

The best means to achieve the above wish of the Asian bishops are undoubtedly the BEC's and BHC's.

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