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Pastoral Letter on 'The Joy of Love', Amoris Laetitia

My brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ

Just three weeks ago, Pope Francis made public his Apostolic Exhortation on love in the family, entitled 'The Joy of Love'. It followed wide consultation and two Synods of Bishops. Many have started reading it and find it quite remarkable. I heard from one husband who found his wife in tears. He asked her why. She said she was weeping because the words of Pope Francis touched her so deeply.

This Exhortation embraces many topics; it also embraces the reality of our lives. Pope Francis talks to us as if he had his arms around us. He speaks of the beauty of love, reflecting on the words of St Paul that love is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful, arrogant or rude, never rejoicing in what is wrong, but hoping and enduring all things (1 Cor. 13. 4-7). He writes of how this love finds its place in family life and grows through many crises and difficulties. Indeed he speaks of love as a craft, something at which we have to work hard, with care, understanding and perseverance. Love is always a journey, in all true friendship and especially in family life. It was these reflections that brought tears of recognition to the eyes of that good woman.

The Holy Father spells out three reasons why this sensitive appreciation of the journey of love is so crucial.

Firstly, he tells us how important it is to prepare for this journey. This begins within a person's own experience of family life. Then, as young people grow, this preparation continues with clear guidance and a vision of the dignity of love. The Pope reminds us of the importance of 'positive and prudent' sex education (280) and says that 'it is always irresponsible to invite adolescents to toy with their bodies and their desires as if they possessed the maturity, values, mutual commitment and goals proper to marriage' (283). He lays great stress on the importance of the ways in which we prepare couples for marriage itself.

Secondly, Pope Francis speaks very realistically about the problems which we face on this journey of love. He appeals again and again that we learn to help each other and work always for the strengthening of marriage and family life.

Thirdly, he explains that we always have to work out, step by step, the journey that we are on. He puts this very simply: 'No family drops down from heaven perfectly formed' (352). At every stage of this journey he asks that we never lose sight of our true goal, and never give up on it. That goal is expressed in the vision of faithful married love, which he describes as a place where God truly

dwells and a true and precious pathway to holiness on which we are never without His presence. Family love, he says, is 'a God enlightened space' (317) always to be revered and nurtured. For this reason he insists that we must never stop proposing 'the full ideal of marriage, God's plan in all its grandeur' (307).

Pope Francis speaks so sensitively about all these matters. While expressing beautifully God's plan for marriage, he wants the Church to be like a 'field hospital', with a particular concern for all those who, as he puts it, are in 'situations which do not yet or no longer correspond to her teaching on marriage' (292). This is the most sensitive part of his message. He presents afresh the clear teaching of the Church about marriage and reminds us persistently of the truth of the endless mercy of God for each one of us.

At this point, it is so important not to reduce this great Exhortation to being simply about whether people who have been divorced and remarried can go forward to receive Holy Communion. The quest is much wider. It is a quest for every person to understand much more deeply their situation before God. When we hide nothing from the Lord, when we reflect carefully in prayer, when we open our hearts to the wonder of God's plan for our happiness, we begin to sense the call of our conscience, that inner core and sanctuary where God's voice echoes within us. Here we are led both to a painful admission of our past failings and to a careful consideration of what the next step in our journey might be. Such considerations, which the Holy Father speaks of as discernment, are always best carried out in thoughtful dialogue with an experienced guide, usually a priest.

I thank God that this great Exhortation has come to us during the Year of Mercy when so many people are turning again to Confession, the Sacrament of Reconciliation. That is a good place and a good time to start this discernment, accompanied by a priest. Pope Francis puts it like this: 'I encourage the faithful who find themselves in complicated situations to speak confidently with their pastors or with other lay people whose lives are committed to the Lord. They may not always encounter in them a confirmation of their own ideas or desires, but they will surely receive some light to help them better understand their situation and discover a path to personal growth' (312).

Love in the family is 'a never-ending vocation' (325), 'a shepherding in mercy' (322), across the generations. Indeed it is the first way in which God's love is made real in our world and by which the Gospel of Hope is proclaimed in situations that can be demanding and harsh.

Our study of this Exhortation will take time and effort. For all of us it will be a great source of joy and encouragement. Please do read it, at home, together with loved ones. You too may share its beauty in tears of joy.

Yours devotedly

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vincent Nichols". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

✠ Cardinal Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster