May Reflections, 2016 Vol 38 No 9

James Bacik

After extensive consultations and two intensive Synods of Bishops in 2014 and 2015, Pope Francis has issued his apostolic exhortation on family life entitled *Amoris Laetitia* (“The Joy of Love”). The long document (over 50,000 words with 391 footnotes, organized in nine chapters), which was dated on the feast of St. Joseph, March 19, 2016, has generated a great deal of reaction in church circles and in the secular media, much of it focused on controversial issues, especially communion for divorced and remarried Catholics. Most of the exhortation, however, deals with broader issues, such as the biblical understanding of marriage, the contemporary challenges to family life, Church teaching on marriage, the procreation and education of children and a family-oriented spirituality. Of special interest is Chapter 4 on Love in Marriage. The eminent theologian, Richard Gaillardetz, a married father of four boys, sees this “extraordinary chapter” as a “remarkable example of pastoral encouragement” and as “an inspirational meditation” which “could be put into the hands of engaged and married couples,” confident that “they might read it, understand it, and profit by it.”

The Chapter begins with an extended reflection on Paul’s popular Hymn to Love (1Cor13:1-7),

which includes insightful commentaries on each of the noted characteristics of love: patient, kind, not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude, not irritable or resentful, rejoicing in right not wrong, and finally bearing, believing, hoping and enduring all things. In discussing the first characteristic, for example, Francis points out that the Greek word translated as “patient” is used in the Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures to speak about our God who is “slow to anger” and always merciful to sinners.

For us, being patient does not mean allowing ourselves to be used or mistreated, but it does suggest that we exercise restraint by not acting on impulses that could give offense to others. We run into trouble when we think family life should be perfect and expect everything to go our way. Then anything that is out of order in ordinary family life can make us impatient, prone to angry responses. When we are unable “to control our impulses,” we risk turning our families into “battle grounds.” With great pastoral wisdom, Francis insists that the key to avoiding impatience, which causes family strife, is by accepting others in their uniqueness. He puts it this way: “Patience takes root when I recognize that other people also have a right to live in this world, just as they are.” Genuine love accepts others even when they are imperfect and behave in ways we do not like. This fundamental acceptance enables us to stay patient with others even when they unsettle our plans or get in our way. True Christian love exercises patience even in the midst of the stresses of contemporary family life.

The apostolic exhortation offers valuable interpretations and applications of all the Pauline characteristics of love, including the last one: love endures all things. Again drawing on the meaning of the Greek term, Francis insists that “love bears every trial with a positive attitude,” standing “firm in hostile surroundings.” Genuine endurance not only tolerates aggravations; it is constantly ready to confront any challenge. In the second chapter, Francis noted some of those challenges: including lack of housing, pornography, abuse of minors, legal dismantling of the family, violence against women, rampant individualism and fear of entrapment. Love “never gives up, even in the darkest hour,” but demonstrates a “dogged heroism” and an “irrepressible commitment to goodness.” To exemplify his point, Francis raises up Martin Luther King, who “met every kind of trial and tribulation with fraternal love.” He goes on to cite at length one of King’s sermons where he insisted we overcome hate with enduring love by seeing “the image of God” in other people, even those who seek to hurt us. When we “rise to the level of love” we do not try to defeat enemies but concentrate on defeating systems that breed hatred. We need dedicated persons who “inject within the very structure of the universe that strong and powerful element of love.”

Francis applies Dr. King’s insight to family life. Christian love practiced in families “never gives up,” not yielding to “resentment, scorn for others or the desire to hurt or to gain some advantage.” The pope then interjects a personal note, as he sometimes does throughout the long exhortation, expressing his amazement at divorced spouses, who later come to the aid of their former married partners when they encounter some illness or other suffering. For Francis, this exemplifies a love that never gives up and endures all things.

Many couples pick Paul’s Hymn to Love as one of the readings for their wedding ceremony. Spending some time with the pope’s commentary will enrich their preparation for marriage. We might also anticipate fresh approaches to preaching on this hymn as priests and deacons gradually appropriate some of the valuable insights found in the beginning of the fourth chapter.

The next section of the chapter is headed Growing in Conjugal Love. Francis says the love between husband and wife is enriched by the grace of the sacrament of marriage, that combines “the warmth of friendship and erotic passion” in an “effective union” that “endures long after emotions and passion subside.” This powerful love “is a reflection of the unbroken covenant between Christ and humanity,” a broad concept that moves beyond the usual Christ and the Church image. Marriage is “the icon” of God’s love for us, which makes of “the two spouses one single existence.”

Francis follows this lofty description of marriage with a crucial caution: “there is no need to lay upon two limited persons the tremendous burden of having to reproduce perfectly the union existing between Christ and his Church.” Accepting this realistic limitation frees couples to engage in a “dynamic process” which gradually brings them closer to the ideal. The pope makes another important move by adopting the teaching of Thomas Aquinas that, after the love that unites us to God, conjugal love is “the greatest form of friendship,” which means married couples are called “to share and shape together the whole of life” in an “indissoluble exclusivity,” characterized by “reciprocity, intimacy, warmth, stability and the resemblance born of a shared life.”

Statistical studies support linking conjugal love with friendship. Married couples who consider their spouse as their best friend have a better chance of sustaining their commitment and making a happy marriage. Christian couples who see marriage as a “covenant before God” and their love as part of the divine plan have added motivation for staying together in a permanent and definitive union.

Drawing on the teachings of Vatican II, Francis presents marriage as “a friendship marked by passion,” which promotes “an ever more stable and intense union.” The Council taught “marriage was not instituted solely for the procreation of children” but also that mutual love might “grow and mature” and “be properly expressed” (GS 50). Conjugal love “leads the partners to a free and mutual self-giving, experienced in tenderness and action, and permeating their entire lives.”

After analyzing human emotions in general, which are not in themselves morally good or evil, Francis presents sexuality as “a marvelous gift” from God, which must be cultivated and directed “to preserve it as “an authentic value.” Relying on previous teaching of Pope John Paul II, Francis insists that sexuality is not a means of gratification or entertainment; it is “an interpersonal language,” which takes seriously the “sacred and inviolable dignity” of the partner. The erotic dimension of love is not simply “a permissible evil;” it is a “gift from God that enriches the relationship of the spouses” and reveals “the marvels of which the human heart is capable.”

Having established a positive Christian outlook on sexuality, Francis offers a realistic assessment of how sex can be depersonalized as an instrument of “self-assertion” and “selfish satisfaction,” which treats the body of another as an object of pleasure to be used and discarded at will. In marriage sex can be used to manipulate and control one’s spouse, violating the essential notion of marriage as an interpersonal communion based on equality and respect. As the pope puts it: “Sexuality is inseparably at the service” of “conjugal friendship” which seeks the good of the spouse.

Some married Catholic theologians, along with others, have criticized Pope John Paul II’s theology of the body for overly romanticizing the total self-giving involved in marital intercourse. They can find greater realism in the statement of Francis: “The ideal of marriage cannot be seen purely as generous donation and self-sacrifice, where each spouse renounces all personal needs and seeks only the other’s good without concern for personal satisfaction.” Spouses need to accept their “own vulnerabilities and needs” and to welcome various expressions of love from their partners. Those who want to give love must be ready to receive love as a gift.

Francis continues his realistic examination of conjugal love by pointing out that with today’s longer life spans, couples must maintain their commitment for many decades, during which physical appearances change and sexual desire may diminish. The pope reminds couples that they are companions on life’s journey and that they love their spouse for “who they are, not simply for their body.” He encourages couples to frequently renew their initial commitment and to come up with “a shared and lasting life project.” He advises believers to pray to the Holy Spirit for strength “to confirm, direct and transform” their lives as they face each new stage of their shared journey.

According to Francis: “Dialogue is essential for experiencing, expressing and fostering love in marriages and family life,“ but this requires a “long and demanding apprenticeship” since men and women , young and old, communicate in such different ways. The pope offers some helpful suggestions for improving family dialogue. Listen carefully to the other person. Be sure we have heard them out before offering an opinion or advice. Cultivate “an interior silence” so we can listen without distractions. Put aside our own needs and worries to make space for the needs of others. He also reminds married couples that their spouse often is not looking for a solution to a problem but simply wants to feel that their partner acknowledges their pain, disappointments, fears, and anger as well as their “hopes and dreams.” To do this we need “to put ourselves in their shoes and try to peer into their hearts, to perceive their deepest concerns and to take them as a point of departure for their dialogue.” We should “keep an open mind” ready to change or expand our own limited ideas and opinions. We need to free ourselves from feeling that we all have to be alike. In discussing difficult issues we should choose our words carefully so as not to offend the other. Avoid venting anger or adopting a patronizing tone. Set aside the need “to win an argument or to be proved right.” Resist the temptation to see family members as “rivals” while expressing genuine concern and affection for them. Finally, Francis ends his treatment of dialogue with a reminder to married couples that they will be better dialogue partners if they “have something to say,” which is “the fruit of an interior richness nourished by reading, personal reflection, prayer and openness to the world around us.”

Pope Francis has produced a marvelous resource for enriching marriages and family life. We can hope that his penetrating insights and wise advice will reach a wide audience.