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EUCCHARISTIC CONCEPT IN THE APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *AMORIS LAETITIA* (2016)

Amoris Laetitia (=AL) “The Joy of Love”, the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation published on 8 April 2016, brings together the results of the two Synods on the family convoked by Pope Francis in 2014 and 2015. It often cites their final reports, documents, and teachings of Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis on family. Its 325 paragraphs are distributed over nine chapters. Through this Apostolic Exhortation, Pope Francis carefully analyses the contemporary challenges that the family faces. Throughout the document, he highlights the significance of Eucharist in the family life. According to him, Eucharist has an important role in the creation and formation of the Christian families. Understanding its great importance, Pope Francis has used the term Eucharist 21 times in this apostolic letter. He calls Eucharist “a medicine for the imperfect” to heal the wounds of the family. Therefore, all the Christian families have to meditate on the great mystery of Eucharist to learn the basic lessons of Christian love and communion.

1. Challenges of Christian family

The Pope Francis analyzes the reality of the family today in all its complexity, with both its lights and shadows (AL 32)¹. He invites us to listen the agonies and sorrows experienced by the modern families. The real threats to the existence of the families in the contemporary era are divorce, violence against children and women, pornography, consumerism, secularization and relativism. As a result of the above mentioned social realities so many traditional values safeguarded in the family setup are endangered. The diminishing nature of daily family prayer, the increasing number of nuclear families, the decreasing rate of conjugal fidelity, the

¹ THIRD EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Relatio Synodi*, Vatican (18 October 2014), 5.

accelerating rate of alcoholism etc. are creating unprecedented problems in family life. The document points out that “the tensions created by an overly individualistic culture, caught up with possessions and pleasures, leads to intolerance and hostility in families”². The present culture promotes narcissistic, hedonistic and changing affectivity instead of self-giving and lasting affectivity. Narcissism makes people incapable of looking beyond their own desires and needs. Pope notes that rampant individualism makes it difficult for a person to give oneself generously to another (AL 33). At present, individualism has intruded into every area of family life. It is leading towards radical loneliness within family life. Nobody has got time to take care of the other. Consequently, the children, the elderly etc. are completely thrown into loneliness. Euthanasia and assisted suicide are serious threats to families world-wide (AL 48). The weakening of faith and religious practice is another threat to the existence and survival of good Christian families (AL 43).

2. Marriage and Family

Amoris Laetitia speaks extensively about the intrinsic relation between marriage and family (AL 63). The letter reiterates that Jesus has restored and redeemed the marriage and family (Mt 10: 1-12; Eph 5:21-23). It is through the Church that Christ bestows on the marriage and the family the grace necessary to bear witness to the love of God and to live the life of communion. The document defines marriage as a “mixture of enjoyment and struggles, tensions and repose, pain and relief, satisfactions and longings, annoyances and pleasures” (AL 126). It enriches the couples’ prospects of mutual love and self-giving (AL 307).

Christian marriage, a reflection of the union between Christ and Church, is fully realized in the union between a man and a woman who give themselves to each other in a free, faithful and exclusive love and are consecrated by the sacrament, which grants them the grace to become a domestic church (AL 292). The document vehemently affirms the indissolubility and sacramental nature of marriage, the transmission of life and the education of children. The indissolubility of marriage — ‘what God has joined together, let no man put asunder’ (Mt 19:6) — should be viewed as a gift granted to those who are joined in marriage” (AL 62).

Ephrem, an East Syrian Church father, postulates that baptism is the betrothal and the Eucharist is the wedding feast of Christ and the Church. Ephrem attributes the imagery of bridegroom to Christ to show His relationship with the Church, the bride. He sees Eucharist as the wedding feast of Christ, where the bride is both the

² *Ibidem*, 8.

Church and the individual soul. Marriage is holy and good (*Hymn on Virginity* 5, 14) and it is the symbol of Christ's union with the Church. Matrimony sanctifies the family since it is blessed and instituted by God (*Hymn on Virginity* 5, 14). Ephrem thinks of Christ as the bridegroom and the individual soul as the bride. Jesus raised marriage to the sacramental sign of his love for the Church (Mt 19:1-12; Mk 10:1-12; Eph 5:21-32)³. *Amoris Laetitia* sees marriage as a vocation and a response to a specific call to experience conjugal love. In this sense, Pope Francis sees the marriage and family as the fruit of vocational discernment (AL 72).

3. Family: the domestic Church

Family is called the “domestic church” by the Vatican II (LG 11). It is the primary unit and authentic cell of the church. Since the spouses are consecrated, they have the responsibility to build up the domestic Church by the grace they have received through the sacrament of marriage (AL 67). According to Pope Francis the food of Eucharist offers the spouses the strength and incentive needed to live the marriage covenant each day as “domestic church” (AL 318). Family is trained to be the proto type of the Church. In the early church, the faithful were gathering in houses for prayer and Eucharistic celebration. The New Testament speaks of “churches that meet in homes” (1 Cor 16:19, Rom 16:15, Col 4:15, Philem 2). The Apostolic letter clearly affirms that the Christian families are the principal agents of the family apostolate especially through “their joy-filled witness as “domestic churches” (AL 200).

The Pope Francis says: “a family’s living space could turn into a domestic Church, a setting for the Eucharist, the presence of Christ, seated at its table” (AL 15). The Christian Spirit and prayer atmosphere can be fostered in the family only if the family members get proper Christian formation, through the participation in the Eucharistic celebration. Eucharist bestows the grace that helps the family members to face the challenges of marriage and the family (AL 38). It heals the wounds of the family members and prompts them to live in love and harmony. The family may turn into a domestic church, when the children are brought up in the Eucharistic faith (Ps 78: 3-6). The children are called to accept and respect their parents (Ex 20:12) who are the first teachers in the Eucharistic faith (AL16). The parents have a serious responsibility to teach the basic lessons of faith (Prov 3:11-12) to their children. Further, by transmitting the mystery of faith to the children, the parents may invite them to the ecclesial life and encourage them to participate

³ Sacred Scripture presents God’s covenant with His people as an espousal (cf. Ez 16:8, 60; Is 62:5; Hos 2:21-22), and that the new covenant is also presented as a betrothal (cf. Rev 19:7; 21:2).

in the Eucharistic celebration. Thus the family can live its spirituality by being a domestic church.

4. Family and Eucharist

The word Eucharist means thanksgiving. Christian families are thanking in and through the person of Jesus in the Holy *Qurbana*. All family members are to be gathered together before the Eucharistic celebration to thank God for the gift of family. They should make the Eucharist the source of their unity. The Eucharistic love demands that the faithful should thank each other for the gift of familial love and communion. After the model of Eucharistic love, all are called to love each other. The love that flows among the family members is the most important element of their spirituality. Pope Francis says; “the strength of the family lies in its capacity to love and to teach how to love. The family is called to care for and empower each of its members” (AL 53). Pope Benedict XVI writes:

I encourage families in particular to draw inspiration and strength from this sacrament (Eucharist). The love between man and woman, openness to life, and the raising of children are privileged spheres in which the Eucharist can reveal its power to transform life and give it its full meaning⁴.

The Syriac word for Eucharist is *Qurbana* which means offering. The prefatory dialogue, the *gehanta* prayers, the *kusapa* of intercession, the prayer request of the celebrant and the response and the epiclesis of the anaphora of Addai Mari and Anaphora of Theodore contain explicit reference to Eucharist as *Qurbana* or offering⁵. Actually, it is a sacrament of the self offering of God for the salvation of man. God gives His Son, the Son offers himself and the Holy Spirit sanctifies people. The family is also the locus for offering oneself for the other. The parents and children are called to be broken for the other and for the entire family. The document states that the family communion can only be preserved and perfected through a great spirit of sacrifice (AL 105).

Pope Francis reiterates the role of Sunday Eucharist in the family life (AL 223). Christian families should make the Eucharist the source of their unity. They can do this through actively and consciously participating in Holy *Qurbana* each Sunday. Pope Benedict speaks about the importance of living the Sunday obligation in the apostolic letter *Sacramentum Caritatis*. He says that Sunday Mass, being an obli-

⁴ BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, AAS 99 (2007), 79.

⁵ Cf. The prayer request and response of people, the *kusapa* of intercession, the fourth *gehanta* and epiclesis of AM (*Raza*, 39, 42, 44): the fourth and fifth *gehantas* and epiclesis of AN (S. NADUTHADAM, *L'Anaphore de Mar Nestorius*, Paris 1992, 250, 258, 269); *kusapa* of intercession, fourth *gehanta*, and epiclesis of AT (J. VADAKEL, *The East Syrian Anaphora of Mar Theodore of Mopsuestia*, Kottayam 1989, 87, 88, 90).

gation for all the faithful, is the wellspring of authentic freedom enabling them to live each day in accordance with what they celebrated on “the Lord’s Day”⁶. Speaking of the various dimensions of the Christian celebration of Sunday, Pope John Paul II said that it is *Dies Domini* with regard to the work of creation, *Dies Christi* as the day of the new creation and the Risen Lord’s gift of the Holy Spirit, *Dies Ecclesiae* as the day on which the Christian community gathers for the celebration, and *Dies Hominis* as the day of joy, rest and fraternal charity⁷. Therefore, on every Sunday the faithful are to be gathered before the Eucharistic altar for the celebration of the salvific events.

The Sunday is the memorial day of the marriage of Christ, the Bridegroom and the Church, His Bride. Here, the focus is on the “value of the Sunday Eucharistic celebration, where the family can always draw the strength of the Spirit to be itself in all its truth and beauty”. The reception of Holy Communion deepens our union with Christ and draws us more deeply into the one Body of Christ, the Church.

5. Eucharist: a powerful medicine

The Syriac fathers spoke of the Eucharistic bread as the medicine of life (*Sam hayye*). According to St. Ephrem by the Lord’s blessing, the bread became the medicine of life during the Last Supper⁸. It is well expressed by Narsai of Nisibis in the 5th century who states that the healing through this medicine purifies us from the debts and forgives our offences⁹. St. Ambrose says, “I must receive it always, so that it may always forgive my sins. If I sin continually, I must always have a remedy”¹⁰.

The Syro-Malabar Qurbana emphatically affirms the power of the Eucharist to forgive sins. The prayer of epiclesis makes it clear that the Eucharist aims at remission of sins (*Raza* 45). The Holy Spirit is invoked to sanctify the offering: “that it may be to us unto pardons of debts, remission of sins and the great hope of resurrection from the dead and new life in the kingdom” (*Raza* 45). The Eucharist is given for the communion with the acclamation that it is for the forgiveness of sins (*Raza* 57).

⁶ BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 73.

⁷ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Dies Domini*, Vatican, AAS 90 (1998), 713–766.

⁸ EPHREM, *Hymnen de Azymis*, 14, 16.

⁹ NARSAL, *Homily XVII, An Expositon of the Mysteries*, in *Liturgical Homilies*, TS 8, Cambridge 1909, 29.

¹⁰ AMBROSE, *De Sacramentis*, IV, 6, 28, PL 16, 463–464. “Those who ate manna died: those who eat this body will obtain the forgiveness of their sins”; CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *In Ioannis Evangelium*, IV, 2, PG 73, 584–585: “I examined myself and I found myself unworthy. To those who speak thus I say: when will you be worth? When at last you present yourself before Christ? And if your sins prevent you from drawing nigh, and you never cease to fall — for, as the Psalm say, ‘what man knows his faults? — will you remain without partaking of the sanctification that gives life for eternity?’”.

The Pope Francis says that “the Eucharist is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine for the imperfect” (AL351). This beautiful expression of Pope is an encouragement for those who acknowledge their unworthiness to receive the body and blood of Christ. This dictum is already familiar in the *Evangelii Gaudium* where Pope Francis writes “The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak”¹¹. Here the Eucharist is depicted as a medicine for the imperfect. The bounteous effects of the Eucharist, specifically in regard to forgiveness of and preservation from sin, are laid out in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*¹². As medicine of life the Eucharist liberates us from the chains of sins, purifies and remits our debts which are the consequences of sins.

6. Spirituality of the Family

Just like priestly or religious spirituality, we need to articulate and foster a familial spirituality. Families acquire the knowledge and skills for sharing faith and moral values at home. The family spirituality, which essentially includes evening prayer, participation in the Eucharist and Bible reading, fosters the bond between the family members. The dictum that “the family that prays together stays together” is true with regard to the existence of every family. In this context, the Pope encourages the devotional practices and the Eucharistic celebrations conducted in the connection with the wedding anniversary of the couples¹³. The Holy Eucharist, Vatican II tells us, is “the source and summit of the Christian life”¹⁴. Since the Christian family life is essentially a spiritual life, we might say as well that the Eucharist is the “source and summit of family spirituality” too.

Pope Francis clearly states that

those who have deep spiritual aspirations should not feel that the family detracts from their growth in the life of the Spirit, but rather see it as a path which the Lord is using to lead them to the heights of mystical union (AL 316).

The family is a means and way for the faithful to attain spiritual perfection. It is a profound “spiritual experience to contemplate our loved ones with the eyes of God and to see Christ in them” (AL 323). It helps them to grow further in divine love and human love. *Amoris Laetitia* affirms that if a family is centered on Jesus, He will unify and illumine its entire life” (AL 317).

¹¹ FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, AAS 105 (2013), n. 47.

¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (=CCC), Città del Vaticano – Washington 1997, nn. 1393–1395, 1436, 1846. However, CCC states, “Anyone conscious of a grave sin must receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before coming to communion”. CCC 1385.

¹³ THIRD EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL..., 40.

¹⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, AAS 57 (1965), n. 11; cf. CCC, n. 1324.

Family prayer is a specific way of expressing and strengthening the Eucharistic spirituality celebrated in the parish. The moments of prayer can do immense good for the Christian family. Pope encourages the various expressions of popular piety which are really a treasure of spirituality for many families. The letter states that the family's communal journey of prayer culminates by sharing together in the Eucharist (AL 318). Jesus knocks on the door of the families to share with them the Eucharistic supper (Rev 3:20).

The family spirituality could be cherished and nurtured by means of mutual sharing of the word of God among the family members. In the words of Pope Francis, Word of God is not a series of abstract ideas but rather a source of comfort and companionship for every family (AL 22). It helps the family to discern the various challenges and difficulties that married couples and families encounter (AL 227).

7. Spirituality of the Parish

Amoris Laetitia delineates the parish based spirituality along with the family spirituality. The parish is the family of the families, where small communities, ecclesial movements and associations live in harmony¹⁵. The active participation in pious associations and other parish activities also help the faithful to grow in both spiritual and social life. The core of the parish spirituality is the Eucharistic celebration, for which all the parishioners come together. There should not be any discrimination between the rich and the poor, for, all are sons of God and therefore, equal before the Eucharistic table. Here Pope Francis, the apostle of mercy, quotes the imbalanced situation of the Corinthian community where the rich enjoyed their food and the poor were hungry (1 Cor 11:17-34). The Eucharist makes us aware that we are members of the one body of the Church (AL 186). The Pope exhorts us to avoid all the scandalous divisions and distinctions among the members of the mystical body of Christ.

The letter emphasizes that the participation in the Eucharist is a constant summon for everyone to examine himself or herself (1 Cor 11:28). According to Pope Benedict XVI the 'mysticism' of the Eucharist has a social character¹⁶. It opens the doors of the family to a greater fellowship with the underprivileged. The Eucharistic love which makes us one body, enables us to overcome the barriers of divisions that exist in the families and society. Further, the letter points out the distinction between those who receive the Eucharist worthily and unworthily. The apostolic

¹⁵ FOURTEENTH ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Relatio Finalis*, Vatican 2015, 77.

¹⁶ BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, AAS 98 (2006), n. 14.

letter vehemently affirms that when those who receive it, turn a blind eye to the poor and suffering, or consent to various forms of division, contempt and inequality, the Eucharist is received unworthily. The worthy participants imbibe social consciousness and fraternal communion in the family (AL 186).

8. Relevance of pastoral companionship

Pope Francis points out the importance of pastoral companionship of the couples by the experienced couples with the eventual cooperation of associations and ecclesiastical movements. The Pope asks the pastors to avoid judgments over the people who live in the complexities of married life (AL 79). The pastors are obliged to exercise careful discernment of the situations. As far as discernment with regard to “irregular” situations is concerned, the Pope states that there is a need ‘to avoid judgments which do not take into account the complexity of various situations’ and ‘to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience distress because of their condition’ (AL 296). Pope Francis exhorts the pastors to discern carefully those who live in irregular situation. They have to be more integrated into the Christian communities in a variety of ways. They are to live and grow in the church and experience her as a mother who welcomes them always.

Therefore, the Pope encourages the practical pastoral care of ministers and of communities towards those who live in irregular situations. In order to confront the life situations of the wounded and broken families, the Church must be capable of imparting the divine love to those wounded broken families. The Church shall never fail to realize the truth that whenever the families are broken, the Church is broken. The logic of pastoral mercy can strengthen the marriages and family relations. The pastors should avoid all the prejudices towards those who are in the complexities of family. Rather the pastors should prompt them to walk hand in hand with the mystical body of Christ. On the “logic of pastoral mercy”, Pope Francis emphasizes:

At times we find it hard to make room for God’s unconditional love in our pastoral activity. We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance. That is the worst way of watering down the Gospel (AL 311).

Pope Francis clarifies the close bond between Eucharist and marriage in the context of covenant. Eucharist is the sacrament of the new covenant where Christ’s redemptive work is carried out (Lk 22:20). The covenant between Jesus, the bridegroom and the Church, the bride was sealed on the Cross. So also marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman. They can seal anew their covenant in the context of paschal covenant which God sealed with mankind on the Cross (AL 318).

9. Conclusion

Amoris Laetitia is an apostolic letter which offers distinctive and specific theology of family based on the Eucharist. The document asserts that marriage is an icon of God's love for us (AL121). Pope's Francis language of mercy is used throughout the letter to face and overcome the challenges of family life. He exhorts the priests to apply the logic of mercy in the pastoral field. Since Eucharist is the 'medicine of life', its reception helps the faithful to glorify God and to sanctify the family. The family prayer and reading of the word of God lend a hand to the family to stay together and to give a commendable witness to Christ. The Church, the family of families, is necessary for the family and the family for the Church. Further, the family spirituality and parish spirituality are to be fostered for the well being of both the family and Church. *Amoris Laetitia* strongly emphasises the need for the pastoral accompaniment by the priests to those who are weak and live in the situation of error. They have to be invited to come to the main stream of the Church since Church is the house of all the faithful. Every family may try to live according to the Eucharistic love which is broken for others. In short, *Amoris Laetitia* is a handbook for all the faithful to know the basic principles of Christian family life and a soothing for the imperfect.

SUMMARY

The post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* published on 8 April 2016, offers distinctive and specific theology of family based on the Eucharist. Throughout the document, Pope Francis highlights the significance of Eucharist in the family life. According to him, Eucharist has a unique role in the creation and formation of the Christian families. He calls Eucharist "a medicine for the imperfect" to heal the wounds of the family. Therefore, all the Christian families have to meditate on the great mystery of Eucharist to learn the basic lessons of Christian love and communion. Pope Francis exhorts the priests to apply the logic of mercy in the pastoral field. *Amoris Laetitia* strongly emphasises the need for the pastoral companionship by the priests to those who are weak and live in the situation of error. They have to be invited to come to the main stream of the Church, since Church is the house of all the faithful. In fact, every family may try to practise the Eucharistic love. In short, *Amoris Laetitia* is a useful handbook for all the faithful to know the basic principles of family life and the value of Eucharistic centred Christian life.

Key words: *Amoris Laetitia*, Eucharist, Family, Spirituality, pastoral work.

Zagadnienie Eucharystii w adhortacji apostolskiej *Amoris Laetitia* (2016)

Streszczenie

Posynodalna adhortacja apostolska *Amoris Laetitia* ukazuje specyficzną teologię rodziny opartą o Eucharystię. W całym dokumencie papież Franciszek uwypatnia znaczenie Eucharystii w życiu rodziny. Według niego Eucharystia spełnia niezastąpioną rolę w tworzeniu i formacji chrześcijańskich rodzin. Papież nazywa Eucharystię „lekarstwem dla niedoskonałych” leczącą rany rodzin. Dlatego też chrześcijańskie rodziny powinny medytować tajemnice Eucharystii, aby nauczyć się podstaw prawdziwej miłości i komunii. Papież Franciszek wzywa kapłanów do stosowania logiki miłosierdzia na gruncie duszpasterskim. *Amoris Laetitia* usilnie podkreśla potrzebę duszpasterskiego towarzyszenia wszystkim tym, którzy są słabi i żyją w grzechu. Także oni powinni być zaproszeni do życia w Kościele, gdyż ten Kościół jest domem dla wszystkich wierzących. Wszak każda rodzina może żyć miłością ewangelijną. *Amoris Laetitia* jest użyteczną wskazówką dla poznania podstawowych zasad życia rodzinnego i wartości Eucharystii skupiającej chrześcijańskie życie.

Słowa kluczowe: *Amoris Laetitia*, Eucharystia, rodzina, duchowość, duszpasterstwo rodzin.

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