

Pope's exhortation offers pragmatic view of family

by [Rosie Scammell](#) in the [May 11, 2016](#) issue

Calling for change in the way Catholics approach family issues, Pope Francis issued an apostolic exhortation that maintains church teachings on divorce and sexuality.

Francis used the document to outline his views on how the church should respond to modern-day realities of family life, such as encouraging husbands to do more household chores and parents to be less tied to their mobile phones.

*Amoris laetitia* ("The Joy of Love"), running to 263 pages in English and released on April 8 in six languages, responds to a two-year process involving two synods of bishops and questionnaires sent in from parishes around the globe. An apostolic exhortation does not carry as much weight as an encyclical and is not considered a statement of doctrine. But it does advise lower-level clergy on the implementation of church teachings.

"At times we have . . . proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families," the pope wrote.

Francis described as "reductive" the approach of simply considering whether a person's actions correspond to a rule.

James Martin of the Jesuit magazine *America*, listing the main lessons of the document, wrote: "The role of conscience is paramount in moral decision making." In Francis's words, the church is "called to form consciences, not to replace them."

Although the pope did not go as far as to allow remarried divorcees to receive communion, he said it was important for them not to be treated as though they were excommunicated.

A key area debated during the bishops' conferences was the church's response to same-sex unions, which Francis said could not be equated with marriage.

"No union that is temporary or closed to the transmission of life can ensure the future of society," he wrote.

Francis called for respect for people of any sexual orientation, but he did not change the church's definition of same-sex relationships as "intrinsically disordered."

Francis lamented that the church has not always provided solid guidance to young married couples, warning that "we can no longer be like a factory" producing courses for newlyweds that are poorly attended.

Francis remained firm in the church's opposition to contraception and abortion and criticized sex education in non-Catholic schools.

"Frequently, sex education deals primarily with 'protection' through the practice of 'safe sex,'" he wrote. "Such expressions convey a negative attitude towards the natural procreative finality of sexuality, as if an eventual child were an enemy to be protected against."

Francis addressed a wide range of topics, including praising greater gender equality.

"The equal dignity of men and women makes us rejoice to see old forms of discrimination disappear," he said.

At a Vatican press conference following the release of the document, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, whose parents divorced, said he understood the harm and sense of exclusion the church's approach has created in the past. He praised Francis's tone.

"In this climate of welcome, the discourse on the Christian vision of marriage and the family becomes an invitation, an encouragement, to the joy of love," he said.

Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry, a Catholic LGBT group, noted that the document lacks the affirmation that many had hoped for.

"Though the pope calls for church leaders and ministers to be less judgmental and to respect individuals'

consciences, he has not provided a new pastoral approach to LGBT issues or people," he wrote. —Religion News Service

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