

The JOY *of LOVE*

GROUP READING GUIDE

to POPE FRANCIS'
Amoris Laetitia

BILL HUEBSCH



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

Six small group sessions

Participants are asked to read the introduction (articles 1–7) before the first session.

Gather. Welcome everyone to your group. Offer a special welcome to participants from other faith traditions who may join you. Ask participants to introduce themselves if needed.

As your class or group session gets underway, always begin with the Sign of the Cross. Pray Psalm 128 together, either in unison or in choir style. Ask God to bless your time together and send the Spirit to guide you.

Read. Moving around the circle in your group, read aloud the stanzas of this summary. Rotate readers with each paragraph. Group members should note items in the pope's teaching that strike them as especially important. Do not read aloud the article numbers. They are included to help you find this section in the original document if you want to explore in more depth certain elements of this apostolic exhortation.

Discuss and Pray. When you come to the group process notes, continue around the circle, discussing or praying as the notes direct. Use our suggestions as a starting point and add your own questions, prayers, or action plans.

Six sessions

SESSION ONE: *Chapters 1 Scriptural Reflections & 9 The Spirituality of Marriage*

SESSION TWO: *Chapters 2 Current Realities of Family & 3 The Vocation of Family*

SESSION THREE: *Chapter 4 Reflections on Love in Marriage*

SESSION FOUR: *Chapters 5 Welcoming Children & 7 Educating Children*

SESSION FIVE: *Chapter 6 Pastoral Perspectives on Marriage and Divorce*

SESSION SIX: *Chapter 8 Accompanying, Discerning, and Integrating Weakness in Marriage*

Finish. As you come to the end of your process, invite participants to identify the one or two large ideas that they hear the pope teaching in that day's segment of the document. Each participant may hear the text differently; there are no "correct" answers.

Conclude your session with a brief prayer and hospitality.

The JOY of LOVE

1 What we Christians proclaim about family life is good news! The Joy of Love that families experience is also the joy of the Church. **2**] Our bishops held two meetings to discuss the situation of families in today's world. Because the questions about family life are many and complex, more discussion is needed. Neither changing every rule nor applying all the rules with rigidity is sufficient to truly help families.

3 First of all, not all discussions about the doctrinal or moral aspects of family life need to be settled by the Church's central authority. We do need to have a unified teaching, but the Spirit will guide us to find pastoral approaches suited to each culture in every nation. Every general principle needs to be tailored to fit the cultural situation in which it is being lived, as we have long taught in the Church.

4 I am writing this apostolic exhortation in order to gather up the many contributions made by the world's bishops in the meetings mentioned above. I also want to add some other thoughts to help everyone reflect on this.

5 It's good to be writing this during our Jubilee of Mercy, because it is an invitation to families to value mercy in their households, and also because it encourages everyone to be a sign of mercy where it is most needed.

6 I'll first offer a Scriptural reflection in order to set a proper tone. I'll follow that with an examination of today's family life and a treatment of Church teaching on marriage. The two central chapters here will be concerned with love. I will then consider pastoral approaches that can help us, and I will offer a full chapter on raising children; I'll offer a frank discussion of situations in marriage that fall outside the norm, and I'll conclude with a brief discussion on family spirituality.

7 I don't recommend a hurried reading of this text. Read each chapter slowly and consider how it applies to your life. Married couples may benefit most from chapters four and five, pastoral ministers chapter six, and everyone chapter eight. Remember, "families are not a problem; they are first and foremost an opportunity."

Psalm 128

*The HAPPY HOME
of the FAITHFUL*



A Song of Ascents

*Happy is everyone who fears the Lord,
who walks in his ways.*

*You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands;
you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you.*

*Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
within your house;*

*your children will be like olive shoots
around your table.*

*Thus shall the man be blessed
who fears the Lord.*

The Lord bless you from Zion.

*May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life.*

May you see your children's children.

Peace be upon Israel!

CHAPTER ONE

In the Light of the Word

8 The Bible is full of stories about families, stories about giving birth, loving deeply, and working through crises. Beginning with Adam and Eve in Genesis 1 and ending with the wedding feast of the Bride and the Lamb in Revelation 21, God speaks to us in Scripture as a family. Let us enter such a home now and allow Psalm 128 to lead us as we reflect on its meaning. (Prayerfully read Psalm 128.)

YOU AND YOUR WIFE [9–13]

9 At the center of the family are the father and mother, whose love story is the basis of life there. **10**] We were created for love, as the early chapters of Genesis teach us. We are created in God's image, male and female. The fruitfulness of the couple reflects the face of God. **11**] Such fruitful love is indeed a symbol of God's own inner life. Our ability to beget life is how the journey of salvation was carried forward. The community of the family is like the community of the Trinity, which is why St. Paul compared the union of Christ and the Church to a married couple.

12 Jesus reflected on the second chapter of Genesis when he taught in Matthew 19:5 about the bond in marriage as an intimate and solemn one, a direct encounter,

the two becoming one flesh, as it were. The wonderful voice of the Song of Solomon puts it well: “My beloved is mine and I am his ... I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine” (2:16; 6:3). **13]** The marital union is thus a very close one, a clinging of one to the other, and a joining for life of bodies and souls. The hearts of the couple, joined with their children, form the family.

YOUR CHILDREN ARE AS THE SHOOTS OF AN OLIVE TREE [14–18]

14] Children enter a marriage as olive shoots growing on a healthy tree; they’re full of energy and vitality. Throughout history, the presence of children has been a sign of the continuing family, generation after generation. **15]** The household is actually a domestic church when our homes are filled with God’s enduring presence and love. God thus blesses us. **16]** The family is also that place where children are raised in the faith. Again, from generation to generation the faith is passed, one to the next, as parents become the first teachers of their children.

17] While parents have a serious responsibility to teach their children, the children for their part must honor and obey their parents. **18]** Children also have their own lives to lead and must, at some point, part from their parents, while always continuing to honor them.

DISCUSSION

Share about your own experience of family. How did your family of origin become or fail to become a “domestic church”?

Does the pope’s idyllic description of family here ring true in your experience?

A PATH OF SUFFERING AND BLOOD [19–22]

19] But this ideal family I am describing also fits into the real picture of family life, where there can be pain and violence. Families sometimes break up and fall apart. **20]** This has been true from the beginning, as when Cain murdered his own

brother. Down through history, family-based disputes have always been part of the story.

21 Jesus' own family was of modest means and had to flee as refugees to a foreign land. Throughout the gospels, Jesus hears about sick children, dying, divorce, anxiety, tension, and even violence. **22**] From all this we can clearly see that God does not instruct us with abstract ideas but rather accompanies us on our journeys. We hope in God's love, so that in time, "every tear shall be wiped away..." (Rev 21:4).

DISCUSSION

How have you experienced family challenges or even break-ups?

THE WORK OF YOUR HANDS [23–26]

23 Psalm 128 reminds us that work is an essential part of life. Our human dignity flows from the work of our hands. We were commissioned to "till and keep" the earth (Gen 2:15), and that is still our task. **24**] Such work, whether by the father or the mother, is also how the family is supported. **25**] It is for this reason that unemployment causes such suffering and takes a serious toll on family life.

26 Likewise, when people use nature abusively, ruining the earth and causing social imbalance, evil results.

THE TENDERNESS OF AN EMBRACE [27–30]

27 The principle given to us by Jesus for family life is self-giving love. "Such love bears fruit in mercy and forgiveness." **28**] In addition to family love is another virtue that is often overlooked: tenderness. Scripture provides this image and reminds us that God loves us with the same tenderness that exists between a mother and her child, tenderly held in her bosom.

29 Having and raising children thus reflects the life of the Trinity itself. God's cre-

ative work is accomplished in the family, which is why families are called to prayer, love, and life in the Church.

30 The Holy Family is our model. Daily life for them included burdens and nightmares; they fled the incredible violence of Herod, just like the many refugee families who flee violence today. Mary and Joseph faced their situation with courage; through them, we can also find meaning in family life.

DISCUSSION

How do you see self-giving love (article 27) and tenderness (article 28) playing a key role in the family?

CHAPTER TWO

The Experiences and Challenges of Families

31 Because the welfare of the family is so important for the future of the world and the Church, I want to examine some of the family situations that the bishops addressed in their meetings and add to that my own concerns.

THE CURRENT REALITY OF THE FAMILY [32–49]

32 Families today experience greater freedom as the work of the household is shared more equitably. Old models of family life thus shift to newer models. **33**] Where such shifts in family life lead to extreme individualism or where each member of the family is an isolated unit, there is a danger. The drive to accumulate possessions and the fast pace of life both work against family peace. Freedom is a high value, but it can become self-centered if it is not used for the benefit of others.

34 Genuine freedom also entails commitment through thick and thin, in good times and in tough times. Our personal growth comes about, not by sweeping aside such commitments, but by embracing them as the means to growth.

35 Our Christian mission is to advocate for marriage as the way for women and men to respond to God's grace. It doesn't do much good to wring our hands and