

Edmund Adamus Director for Marriage and Family Life

At long last, the much awaited post-synodal apostolic exhortation: *Amoris Laetitia*; “On Love in the Family” (AL) has arrived. I can still recall that moment back in October 2013 when during a visit to Rome, Archbishop Nichols called me to inform me of the Vatican’s announcement to launch a worldwide consultation. I admit to feeling a knot in my stomach knowing the sheer amount of extra work it was going to generate and wondering where on earth it would all end. At 253 pages of text over 325 paragraphs distributed over nine chapters, it is not a quick nor at times an easy read. Indeed early in the document at paragraph 7, the Holy Father states; “I do not recommend a rushed reading of the text.” Considered and even prayerful reflection is required especially on the beautiful sections on the sacrament of matrimony itself [chapter 3] and what one might call the Pope’s ‘ode’ to St. Paul’s famous hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13, [chapter 4] is an excellent source for both individual and couple meditation and for even a whole family to read together.

Pope Francis is clear about the overall message of the document; “we can hardly stop advocating marriage simply to avoid countering contemporary sensibilities, or out of a desire to be fashionable or a sense of helplessness in the face of human and moral failings.” This has always been the *modus operandi* of the Marriage and Family Life office in Westminster and we are proud of trying our best with limited resources to offer programmes, information and resources that can help clergy and parishes and families themselves access the right kind of pastoral/spiritual care and sustenance needed for their commitment to authentic Catholic family life and love.

The following are just some of the type of initiatives we promote to help parishes become what the pope describes as “a family of families.” So for example, the Holy Father speaks of the “sexual union, lovingly experienced and sanctified by the sacrament, is in turn a path of growth in the life of grace for the couple.” As a response we provide the excellent marriage enrichment retreat weekend “Smart Loving” (formerly “Celebrate Love”) which we have re-branded <http://loving4life.co.uk/> designed to affirm and deepen marital graces in the light of Theology of the Body.

Over 250 couples have experienced this seminar which is led by a team of volunteer couples. Over the years no less than 8 bishops have assisted with confessions and offered Mass with participants along with many other clergy who sometimes join the group for the candlelit dinner on the Saturday evening. But what about couples who can’t afford to give up a whole weekend? In the chapter on 1 Corinthians 13 the pope wisely says: “The Gospel tells us to look to the log in our own eye (cf. Mt 7:5). Christians cannot ignore the persistent admonition of God’s word not to nurture anger: “Do not be overcome by evil” (Rm 12:21)” So it’s with this in mind that we have begun offering the excellent and rewarding “Smart Loving Breakthrough Workshop.” www.smartloving.org/breakthrough.

This is a 3 hour practical, solution-focused experience aimed at helping couples and individuals improve the quality of their communication at all stages of their married life. Drawing on contemporary research and Catholic theology, it aims to equip participants with skills and insights to transform a relationship that might be struggling with unresolved

resentments into the thriving, joy-filled encounter that it is meant to be. Also the great thing is that if a couple for whatever reason cannot attend together, spouses can come alone because whatever they learn from the experience is bound to benefit their marriage on return. Furthermore as Amoris Laetitia states that “To show understanding in the face of exceptional circumstances never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing less than what Jesus offers to the human being;” we are proud to continue supporting the ground-breaking marriage restoration programme www.retrouville.org.uk (meaning “Rediscover”) which has successfully helped rescue almost 200 couples from permanent separation and divorce in Britain since 2009. The confidential telephone number 07887296983 and email will always be answered info@retrouville.org.uk For those whose marriages have sadly irretrievably broken down we recommend the tried and tested Beginning Experience weekend and mutual support group or there is the Association for Separated and Divorced Catholics which also offers practical and spiritual help www.asdcengland.org.uk We’ve also begun investigating a similar Christian based mutual support programme for divorcees and abandoned spouses running out of Holy Trinity Anglican parish Brompton called Restored Lives (www.restoredlives.org) which was developed to be used in a Catholic context by the Diocese of Sion in Switzerland and can be facilitated at local level.

Finally the pope is adamant that when thinking of preparing people for marriage, we really do have to up our game in the period of formation we call betrothal. Our highly popular www.smartloving.org/engage programme integrating contemporary psychology with theology of the body and sexuality really builds a culture of vocation to marriage in parishes where it operates and the brides and grooms to be really embrace it as a community experience where they learn to see the difference between getting married IN the Church not simply AT the church building.

Hopefully with the inspiration of Amoris Laetitia we can move away from the over dependency on one-day or even weekend marriage prep courses to parishes providing a fuller period of catechesis in human love, rather like, as the Pope says, in the spirit of Christian initiation. This is so urgent given that the changes that the pope has made to grounds for nullity can now include lack of faith at the time of contracting marriage. With better, more robust marriage preparation we can really start preventing that happening for the long term. But it’s not just how we help the engaged couple [though there are huge challenges in this field] but indeed what we do as Francis puts it, “to” reach the hearts of young people, appealing to their capacity for generosity, commitment, love and even heroism, and in this way inviting them to take up the challenge of marriage with enthusiasm and courage.” To that end we have been running the increasingly popular “Explore” project in our diocesan high schools since 2014. www.theexploreeperience.co.uk is one of the most exciting new apostolates of remote marriage preparation being offered to schools in Key Stage 4&5 as part of the RE or RSE/SRE/PSHE curriculum.

Pope Francis exhorts us “to find the right language, arguments and forms of witness” to inspire the young to aspire to lifelong marriage and family. We have worked with over 1800 students in several schools now with just a handful of volunteers and the feedback from the

young people is outstandingly positive. We even managed to get a full page feature in the Times Saturday supplement last January. So if you have some free time during the week, during the day and think you might like to volunteer 3 or 4 times a year either as a couple or a facilitator to help an informal, honest dialogue between young people and spouses, we'd be delighted to hear from you. Young people enjoy the experience, teaching staff find it invaluable in helping achieve key educational goals and volunteer couples get automatic marital enrichment from generously giving of their time and insights.

Further information is available from the Development Officer Mary McGhee at marymcghee@rcdow.org.uk or on 07786 737437 or if you live in another region contact the CEO Chris Ford direct on fordsatfareham@aol.com All of the above is underpinned by the well-established and much appreciated Annual Mass of Thanksgiving for Matrimony in the cathedral on the vigil of Pentecost which, since 2008 has welcomed over 10,000 spouses to publicly renew their commitment to one another in the presence of the Cardinal. I have to confess though that Southwark diocese who have been doing this a bit longer gave me the idea but I am delighted to see it happening annually now in other dioceses too. And there's no reason why every parish at least once a year couldn't invite all couples celebrating significant wedding anniversaries to publicly invoke a blessing for renewal on their matrimonial bond. This is only the hint of the possibilities to big up marriage and promote family life ministry at local level. The joy of love is all around us but we've got to start recognising it for its unique and invaluable contribution to the Gospel of the family and the Gospel of life. Edmund writes a weekly column on family spirituality which reaches over 2000 regular readers. Edmund Adamus Director for Marriage and Family Life