Opinion
Guest Voices



Participants of "Amoris Laetitia: A New Momentum for Moral Formation and Pastoral Practice," Oct. 5-6 (Courtesy of Boston College)



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In January 2017, I received the proofs of an article I wrote for Theological Studies entitled, "Receiving *Amoris Laetitia.*" In it I studied how other countries were pastorally implementing Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation, known in English as "The Joy of Love" and released in April 2016 after the pope held two synods of bishops on family life.

The exhortation is a beautiful, readable document that offers to help priestly and lay ministers in their outreach ministries to families. In my research, I found that in Argentina, Austria, France, Germany, Italy and South Africa, bishops and cardinals together with theologians had taken creative steps to share "The Joy of Love" with their people. Could our bishops do the same, I wondered.

I sent the proofs to Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich and San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy. I sent it to the former because I write for The Chicago Catholic and to the latter because he had sponsored an actual synod on *Amoris Laetitia* in his diocese.

With his easy "let's-get-to-the-point" style, Cupich called me the next day. "Listen, Jim, I want to sponsor a seminar on *Amoris* at a university. Would Boston College be interested?" he asked. I said yes. I knew the college's president, Jesuit Fr. William Leahy, would be very interested in supporting the idea, and I had some of the funds to do it as the director of the Jesuit Institute. We would later get support from the Healey Family Foundation, the Henry Luce Foundation, and another donor.

It seemed the seminar could learn from one held last year in Paris, where Cardinal André Vingt-Trois hosted a similar event with Msgr. Philippe Bordeyne, the rector/president of the Institut Catholique, for university theologians and French bishops to break open *Amoris Laetitia*. As we began to plan, Cupich was thinking the same way.

Mindful that much of the public discourse about *Amoris Laetitia* in the United States focuses almost exclusively on the polarized views about footnote 351 that mentions the "help of the sacraments" for divorced and remarried Catholics, we were more interested in a reading of the exhortation’s entire nine chapters.

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All we wanted was a conversation in the U.S. among bishops, theologians and other experts on the papal exhortation that invited us to consider the full array of resources from Scripture and tradition in responding to the challenges of the contemporary Catholic family. We believed that our families and the pope deserved such a hearing.

In order to get a right balance, we realized we needed some outside help. We invited Cardinal Kevin Farrell, prefect of the Vatican's new Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life; Malta Archbishop Charles Scicluna, a canonist; Cardinal Reinhard Marx, president of the German Bishops' Conference; Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro, editor of Italian magazine Civiltà Cattolica; and Bordeyne from Paris. All accepted but Marx, who sent Bishop Franz-Josef Overbeck, who, having participated in both synods, was involved in drafting the German bishops' response to the exhortation.

From the States we invited Boston Cardinal Seán O'Malley; Newark Cardinal Joseph Tobin; Houston-Galveston Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, president of the U.S. bishops conference; Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez, vice president of the conference; and Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth. All five were unable to come, but both O'Malley and Chaput sent delegates to the meeting.

We invited another nine members of the episcopacy including Atlanta Archbishop Wilton Gregory and McElroy who all agreed to come. We invited 12 theologians (six women; six men) and another 12 other interlocutors. On Oct. 5, 14 members of the hierarchy, 24 "experts" and two donors arrived at Boston College for our two-day seminar.

We designed a seminar with five panels, each one with three or four presenters. Each panel would be followed by an hour-long discussion, and each would be the very foundation for the next.

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> — Lisa Sowle Cahill

The first panel addressed how *Amoris Laetitia* is or could be received in different communities around the U.S. This panel gave us a profound appreciation of the challenges felt by families in the United States. The second panel raised the question of how the newness of *Amoris Laetitia* affected the church in France and how it might affect our clergy, canonists, and families — particularly those in second marriages.

The third panel looked at whether *Amoris Laetitia* could help in the on-going work of evangelization with women, millennials, Hispanics and the growing number of "nones," or those who self-describe as no longer affiliated with church communities.

The fourth panel focused on synods, getting a sense of the theology of synods and how the synods happened both in Rome and in San Diego. The final consisted of reports from Scicluna and Overbeck about the work in their countries implementing *Amoris Laetitia*, and with a reflection from Gregory regarding the course of future work between theologians and bishops on the document.

These panel presentations were stimulating and prompted an extraordinary amount of discourse among all 40 participants, not only in the five discussion sessions, but in the lunches, coffee breaks and an evening dinner hosted by Leahy. Of course, a lot of this was due to the prayer that accompanied this conference, at the Eucharistic liturgies that began each day and in those intercessory prayers that we asked from others.

It was also successful because of the generous good will of all those present. As one bishop remarked, "no one has the shields up." The discussion was also successful because no presenter spoke for more than 15 minutes. Each presenter was offering the first word on the question, not the unforgettable last one.

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Five moments struck me as providing significant catch phrases for describing the style and content of our seminar.

At the start of the first discussion, Lisa Sowle Cahill remarked: "It's so good that the speakers basically chose to describe the contemporary situation in terms of families, instead of marriages." Her insight was that the politics of marriage often sidetrack us

from the more complicated issues of family where questions of profound economic pressures and inequities, discrimination, physical and mental health, and other issues are so profoundly challenging.

The second moment arose when Farrell replied to a question by a bishop who asked what Roman document should take priority over others. Farrell stated emphatically: "*Amoris Laetitia*! This is the document that talks about the entry level of the pastoral ministry of the entire church."

Third, a much repeated claim was "we have discovered that there are eight other chapters to *Amoris Laetitia.*" The language of *Amoris* was repeatedly echoed throughout the two days, with many quoting notably from Chapters 2 ("The Experiences and Challenges of Families"), 4 ("Love in Marriage") and 5 ("Love Made Fruitful").

While not ignoring Chapter 8 ("Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating Weakness") at all, Cupich added: "I would caution us that there are other dimensions of family life that the pope treats in *Amoris Laetitia* that have to do not just with the moral questions but also the social life, the economic constraints and the difficulties that people face in raising families and raising children."

In talking about the eighth chapter, Scicluna gave us the fourth phrase when he spoke of "the principle of affective collegiality and communion with the Holy Father." I would suggest that the "affective collegiality" that each of us sense with Francis was extended to one another and that episcopal collegiality and the collegiality among theologians was specifically bridged.

In discussing his synod in San Diego, McElroy commented at the end of his striking presentation: "I was a learner there." That’s the fifth catch phase. I do not think that anyone left the seminar with anything but having experientially glimpsed from one another the church that Francis is inviting us to be.

Using Francis' terms like "the church as field hospital," "the irreplaceable conscience," "accompaniment," and "authentic discernment," we became for 36 hours a bit more forgetful of ourselves and more mindful of the papal exhortation on our families. It was a refreshing moment.

[Jesuit Fr. James Keenan is a moral theologian who serves as Canisius Professor and Director of The Jesuit Institute at Boston College. He co-organized the Oct. 5-6 conference, "*Amoris Laetitia*: A New Momentum for Moral Formation and Pastoral

Practice," with Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich. In 10 days, each of the five panels will be available at the Jesuit Institute here. The 15 presentations from the conference are also to be edited by Keenan and Grant Gallicho for forthcoming publication by Paulist Press.]

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