



Pope Leo XIV blesses a Bible dedicated to married couples at the Vatican after his weekly general audience June 4, 2025. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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It has been 10 years since the publication of *Amoris Laetitia*, the apostolic exhortation in which Pope Francis summarized the findings of the two Synods of Bishops on the family (2014 and 2015). Few recent documents have sparked as much controversy, particularly because of [a few lines in Chapter 8 and two footnotes](#) dealing with the pastoral treatment of Catholics living in "irregular situations" and their access to the sacraments.

Pope Leo XIV has convened in Rome all the presidents of the episcopal conferences from all five continents to commemorate the 10th anniversary of *Amoris Laetitia*. The debate on the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* is not being reopened. Rather, the meeting will be a communal discernment regarding its reception and how it can be better applied throughout the entire church.

Chapter 8 of *Amoris Laetitia* did not change the doctrine on marriage nor did it invent the distinction between the objective gravity of an act and the subjective responsibility of the person committing it. The Catechism already taught that imputability can be removed due to ignorance, fear, habits or other psychological or social factors. Francis took up this teaching, developed it, [and maintained that](#), as Albano Bishop Marcello Semeraro said: "It is no longer possible to say that all those who find themselves in a so-called 'irregular' situation are living in a state of mortal sin, deprived of sanctifying grace."

The disciplinary consequences of a norm remained unchanged. The shift introduced by *Amoris Laetitia* consists in recognizing that, if the degree of responsibility is not the same in all cases, "the consequences or effects of a norm need not always be the same" (*Amoris Laetitia*, 300). For this reason, Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, the current prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the inspiration behind the text's drafting, has maintained that the general norms remain in place but may not be applied in the same way in every case.

Furthermore, note 336 adds that this also applies to sacramental discipline, "since discernment can recognize that in a particular situation no grave fault exists." From this principle it follows that the discernment carried out may have visible effects, such as access to the sacrament of the Eucharist. This implies, for example, that although it may be argued that sexual relations between divorced persons in a new

union constitute an objective situation of sin, this does not necessarily imply the existence of sin in a subjective sense.

Some people forget that the discipline regarding divorced persons in a new union had already changed over the last century. The 1917 Code of Canon Law provided for excommunication for those who remained in an illicit union. The 1983 Code did not retain that penalty. It did not alter the church's teachings on marriage, but it did modify the practical consequences the church derived from those teachings. *Amoris Laetitia* further develops this same logic.

The correct interpretation

Amoris Laetitia was the result of a process that included consultations with local churches, two synodal assemblies, and an open debate among bishops from around the world. The text itself acknowledges that "not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium," and that in each country or region, "solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs" may be sought.

In September 2016, the bishops of the pastoral region of Buenos Aires published some basic guidelines for the application of Chapter 8. The pope declared that this was the precise interpretation of the text. [He even maintained](#) that "there are no other interpretations." The interpretation of a local church was thus adopted by the magisterium of the Successor of Peter. This marked a significant shift, as the pope was recognizing the doctrinal authority of the episcopal conferences. This had not occurred in the postconciliar period. However, it is not without historical precedent, for in 1875, Pope Pius IX recognized as authentic Catholic doctrine the statement in which the German bishops had interpreted Vatican I in opposition to Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's reading of it.

If the pope has received a charism within the church for the service of interpreting the divine Word, this cannot preclude his ability to interpret the documents he himself has written. This approach offers initial steps toward achieving what Francis called in *Evangelii Gaudium* "the conversion of the papacy." The exercise of primacy functions as a recognition and confirmation of what a local church has discerned.

Toward an ecclesial culture of pastoral discernment

The process of receiving this type of magisterial document is always slow. However, resistance does not nullify the ecclesial validity of a magisterial document. Rather, it shows that there is resistance to moving toward an *ecclesial culture of discernment*, which is more demanding than the mechanical application of rules learned or dictated by someone else. In fact, for many it is not easy to understand that, within the church's own tradition, it has been held that extenuating circumstances can nullify responsibility and guilt regarding any norm, even negative precepts and absolute moral norms.

Before *Amoris Laetitia*, a confessor could acknowledge, in conversation with a divorced and remarried person, that their guilt was lesser or even nonexistent. But the church's response remained the same for everyone: They could not receive Communion unless they committed to living with their new partner "as brother or sister," that is, without sexual relations. The discipline was based solely on the objective situation, without considering each person's history or real possibilities. The judgment of conscience and sacramental practice were on separate paths. Francis unites these two paths.

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Fernández offers an example that can help us understand this more specifically. Let us consider a woman who was abused by her husband and found refuge with another man. He helped her raise the children from her first marriage, and together they had more children. She knows that her situation does not conform to what the church teaches, but leaving that union would mean leaving her young children without a father and without a home. Nor can she impose a life of continence on a partner who does not share her faith. In such a case, honest discernment may conclude that there is no grave fault, and discipline may be applied differently.

It does not change the doctrine but situates it within the *ordo amoris*. The church ceases to look solely at the external situation and begins to take seriously the conscience and the concrete history of each person as the *discerning subject*, rather than merely as an object of discernment.

Amoris Laetitia proposes a significant shift in the way we understand ecclesial culture. It is not merely a disciplinary change, but a *way of proceeding* that rethinks the ways in which we relate to one another, understand, and discern our lives before

our brothers and sisters, and before God. The new communicative dynamics it offers, such as accompanying, discerning and integrating, help put into practice the *principle of pastorality* from the council, so dear to Pope John XXIII. This is particularly relevant today for building a synodal church that listens before deciding, that trusts in the conscience and the *sense of the faithful*, that discerns from the contexts and pastoral challenges of the local churches, and that does not renounce the Gospel ideal when recognizing the fragilities of people's life stories.

Pope Francis warned that sometimes we place so many conditions on mercy that we strip it of meaning, causing the Gospel to fade away. *Amoris Laetitia* offers us a way of ecclesial action that humanizes by putting into practice the conciliar shift achieved through the *principle of pastorality*. Ten years later, the lesson of Chapter 8 is clear: The church does not become less faithful when she discerns, but when she ceases to do so.