Europe's bishops still at odds over how to apply 'Amoris Laetitia'

by Jonathan Luxmoore

Oxford, England — When Germany's Catholic bishops released a pastoral letter Feb. 1, urging sympathetic pastoral approaches to marriage and family problems, there were hopes it might signal a coherent European church response to Pope Francis' much-discussed apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia.*
Just one day later, however, a bishop in neighboring Switzerland took a very different position, telling his priests to stick to traditional Catholic teaching on "the perfect ideal of marriage."

With divisions running deep, many European Catholics are unsure which direction their spiritual leaders are now likely to take on key issues such as the granting of Communion to the divorced and remarried.

"Personally, I think the bishops' conferences need more time. They know they have to look at these issues differently after Amoris Laetitia, but they also have to seek agreement," Thierry Bonaventura, spokesman for the Council of European Bishops' Conferences* (CCEE), explained to NCR. "Yet they're working on themes contained in the document, and they're well aware society is changing, intensifying the many complexities in current marriage and family life."

Amoris Laetitia was published April 2016 in response to the Synod of Bishops on the family debates in 2014 and 2015. The document warned that not all doctrinal and moral issues could be "settled by interventions of the magisterium" and called on its first page for "each country or region" to find solutions "suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions" (paragraph 3).

Different communities "will have to devise more practical and effective initiatives," the document affirmed, "that respect both the Church's teaching and local problems and needs" (199). There had to be a "continued open discussion" and "honest, realistic and creative" thinking by priests and theologians, which avoided both an "immoderate desire for total change" and a tendency to "solve everything by applying general rules" (2).

Last September, just a few short months after the apostolic exhortation was released, four semi-retired cardinals asked Francis in an open letter to help resolve the "uncertainty, confusion and disorientation" surrounding Amoris Laetitia.

Related: Four cardinals openly challenge Francis over 'Amoris Laetitia' (Nov. 14, 2016)

In November, the cardinals ? Raymond Burke, Joachim Meisner, Walter Brandmuller and Carlo Caffarra ? went public with formal doubts, or dubia, even hinting they could table a "fraternal correction" if Francis failed to respond.

Since then, while some European bishops have readily endorsed the pope's reformist stance, others have stood firm, indicating they'll resist attempts to modify long-established sacramental practices.

"Marriage and family dilemmas are salient everywhere, even in conservative countries like ours where many devout Catholics are now divorced but wish to remain active in church life," Malgorzata Glabisz-Pniewska, a senior Catholic presenter with Polish Radio, told NCR. "While some go to church with new families and hope to receive Communion, others oppose all concessions and defend the sanctity of marriage. Here as elsewhere, problems occur when priests and bishops generalize and fail to consider the pastoral needs of individuals."

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Marriage and family have long set Catholic modernizers and traditionalists apart in Europe, and these surfaced with a vengeance during the synods, pitting more liberal bishops from Germany and the West
against conservative counterparts in Poland and Eastern Europe.

Not surprisingly, the upbeat tone of *Amoris Laetitia*, with its calls for "a healthy dose of self-criticism" (35) and warnings against seeking "to impose rules by sheer authority," was welcomed by many as pointing the way forward.

The 325-point exhortation counseled against proposing "a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families" (35).

And while reiterating that "de facto or same-sex unions" could not be "equated with marriage," it also recognized "the great variety of family situations that can offer a certain stability" and criticized "older forms of the traditional family marked by authoritarianism and even violence" (52-53).

Crucially for Europeans, *Amoris Laetitia* was also conciliatory towards divorced Catholics living in new unions, insisting they should "be made to feel part of the Church," rather than "pigeonholed or fitted into overly rigid classifications" (243 and 298). The individual conscience should be "better incorporated into the Church's praxis in certain situations," the exhortation noted, based on "pastoral discernment" (302-3).

"It can no longer simply be said that all those in any 'irregular' situation are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace," the document continued. "This offers us a framework and a setting which help us avoid a cold bureaucratic morality in dealing with more sensitive issues. Instead, it sets us in the context of a pastoral discernment filled with merciful love, which is ever ready to understand, forgive, accompany, hope and above all integrate" (301 and 312).

Among Europe's bishops, however, there's been discord over how to apply *Amoris Laetitia* in practice and how much pastoral leeway it allows.

This helps explain why, though most bishops' conferences have published summaries of the exhortation's key points, only a handful have come up with proposals for applying them in practice.

In the pope's own Rome diocese, guidelines last September suggested some couples living in a "sinful state" could receive Holy Communion "in a discreet manner," as part of "an itinerary of long, patient conversion, made of small steps and progressive verifications" in league with their priest.

Germany went ahead with its pastoral letter on Feb. 1, emphasizing the "pastoral and theological benefits" of *Amoris Laetitia* in bringing "the triangle of accompaniment, distinction and integration into conversation." The German bishops thanked married couples and families "for their life and witness of faith," and all those "making an invaluable contribution to society" as partners, parents, caretakers and educators.

They quoted *Amoris Laetitia*’s stipulation that complex situations should be taken into account, and that no one "can be condemned forever" or made to "feel excommunicated." And they confirmed that receiving sacraments was possible "in some cases" for divorced and remarried Catholics.

"The indissolubility of marriage is part of the Church's indispensable deposit of faith, and *Amoris Laetitia* permits little doubt as to the need for a differentiated view of people's respective life situations," the pastoral letter noted. "Not all faithful with broken marriages, who have been civilly divorced and remarried, can be excluded from the sacraments. Much more differentiated solutions are needed in response to individual circumstances."
The German guidelines were the second by a European bishops’ conference after Malta, which were republished in the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* in mid-January in an evident sign of approval.

The Maltese document concurred that some divorced and remarried Catholics could receive sacraments "under certain circumstances, after long prayer and a profound examination of conscience." And it quoted *Amoris Laetitia* in affirming they could do so "as a result of the process of discernment ... with an informed and enlightened conscience."

Both church statements have been hotly contested, however, not least by the German prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Gerhard Müller, who has insisted *Amoris Laetitia* shouldn't be used to justify departures from established church doctrine.

If these continued, Müller warned in February, the church risked "disintegrating into national churches and ultimately atomizing."

"It isn't right that so many bishops are now interpreting *Amoris Laetitia* according to their way of understanding the pope's teaching," Müller told the Italian monthly *Catholic Il Timone*. "Adultery is always a mortal sin, and bishops who create confusion about this must study church doctrine."

They've also been counterbalanced by other statements, notably by Bishop Vitus Huonder of Chur, Switzerland, who has instructed his priests to rely on "objective conditions," rather than "subjective decisions."

Respecting an existing first marriage must "remain decisive," Huonder confirmed in a nine-point message dated Feb. 2; and in this area, no "new legal regulation of a canonical nature" could be derived from *Amoris Laetitia*. Only those willing to "live together as brother and sister," as stipulated by Pope John Paul II's 1981 apostolic letter, *Familiaris Consortio*, could apply for sacraments if civilly remarried.

The strong feelings over the current pope's reforms were highlighted when posters appeared on Rome billboards in February, accusing him of "lacking mercy," and a fake edition of *L'Osservatore Romano* was emailed to Vatican officials, giving an equivocal papal answer to Burke and his fellow cardinal critics.

Both provocations elicited messages of fidelity and support from Italy's Catholic bishops, as well as from the pope's nine-member Council of Cardinals.

But with the battle now joined between reformists and traditionalists, most European bishops are biding their time before declaring themselves.

"The bishops' conferences are all preparing responses to *Amoris Laetitia*, but we should remember some meet infrequently, so final decisions could take time," Bonaventura, the CCEE spokesman, assured *NCR*. "In the meantime, the church is rooted in society's grassroots, not just in its hierarchies; and while it defends the family unit of a man and woman, it's fully aware people are living in many different situations."

In Britain, where conservative clergy have fiercely criticized the Maltese and German bishops, the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales published new instructions for marriage preparation in early February "in response to the Pope's call in *Amoris Laetitia*," pledging the church's readiness to accompany all couples "in a Christ-like, loving, steady, reassuring way."
Maggie Doherty, the press officer for the England and Wales bishops' conference, says she's heartened that more separated Catholics are now following the pope's streamlined procedures and applying for annulments, in a country where 42 percent of marriages currently end in divorce.

But when it comes to *Amoris Laetitia*, "the bishops are continuing to discuss and discern with their priests and among themselves," Doherty told *NCR*. "There are no immediate plans for guidelines, and we're not sure how the bishops will take things forward. All matters concerning the church's universality land in the end on the pope's desk."

Spain's Catholic bishops have so far said little about *Amoris Laetitia*, beyond a brief reflection by Bishop Mario Iceta Gavicagogeascoa of Bilbao, head of the church's Family and Defense of Life Commission, at a plenary last November.

However, in France, Bishop Jean-Luc Brunin of Le Havre, who chairs his church's Family and Society Council, reminded fellow bishops in a January report that Catholic parishes and associations had contributed substantially to church debates before the 2014 and 2015 synods.

Although *Amoris Laetitia* had been received warmly for its assessment of the synod debates, Brunin added, its lack of "clear and precise prescriptive norms" had caused "a certain confusion." This could be cleared up by a special edition to help shape "the forms and methods of a family pastoral scheme at diocesan level."

"This isn't a text one scrutinizes and then puts away on the bookshelf," Brunin said. "The challenge of receiving *Amoris Laetitia* will be to transform this confusion into a kind of mobilizing instability, allowing pastoral actors to throw themselves with confidence into an adventure of accompaniment, help and discernment."

Back in Germany, where many Catholics have long pressed for a more tolerant and realistic attitude to marriage and family issues, Cardinal Reinhard Marx of Munich-Freising, the bishops' conference president, is adamant the bishops' February pastoral accords with the pope's own thinking.

"*Amoris Laetitia* reflects the Synod discussions and offers clear answers," Marx told journalists in February. "It allows Communion for divorced and remarried Catholics. I think the pope's line is very clear on this."

But in neighboring Poland, Glabisz-Pniewska thinks church leaders will reach very different conclusions in their determination to resist change.

Even here, where Catholic culture and styles of leadership are quite different, there've been signs of movement, the Polish Radio presenter said. Having until recently refused Communion to all divorced Catholics, even those abandoned, most bishops will now permit those not in new unions to receive the sacrament, while many priests will be sympathetic, recognizing that "delicate issues can't be governed by rules and instructions."

"But the Polish church sees itself as the last united bastion for defending traditional teachings at a time when all established values are viewed under threat in the West ? it won't give up on this," Glabisz-Pniewska told *NCR*.

"Though some changes are occurring quietly here, too, all clergy will publicly repeat the official church position. It often isn't so much as question of who's liberal or conservative, but of how firm and
centralized the methods of governance and control are. And these contrast widely around the church in Europe."

*An earlier version of this story included an incorrect name for the Council of European Bishops' Conference.


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