



A pastoral letter on Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia* by Bishop Pedro Daniel Martínez Perea of San Luis, Argentina is being welcomed as “great news” for its clarity and directness.

Bishop Martínez's letter, issued on June 29 and sent to the priests of his diocese, is titled “Marriage, new unions, and the Eucharist in chapter 8 of *Amoris laetitia*.” It addressed confusion generated by some readings of the document and emphasized the importance of “helping married couples to follow God's plans in their lives.”

“The text is very straightforward,” reflected Dr. Kurt Martens, a professor of canon law at The Catholic University of America. “It's a very well done pastoral letter with a lot of teaching opportunity; he does use Pope Francis to emphasize the teaching of the Church. I think it's great news.”

In his pastoral letter, Bishop Martínez called *Amoris laetitia* “a great catechesis on love in the family, which is the cell of society” and said it is “a great message of hope during our sojourn in this secularized and earthly world.”

He added that marriage has a divinely ordered nature and purpose, and that sacramental marriage is “a public good in the Church, a common good.”

While calling *Amoris laetitia* “a profound catechesis,” Bishop Martínez noted that “some readings of the exhortation have aroused disquiet, perplexity, and even confusion among the faithful, especially with regard to the possibility of persons united by a previous, valid, sacramental bond and who are currently living, more uxorio, with another person in a new non-sacramental union, accessing the sacraments, in particular Holy Communion.”

To address confusion, the bishop referred to revelation and the Magisterium as “irreplaceable foundations for theological reflection in the Catholic Church,” and the essential context for understanding *Amoris laetitia*. To explain the exhortation, he referred to both the recent Magisterium and to the writings of St. Vincent of Lerins, St. Thomas Aquinas, the First Vatican Council, the Roman Curia of the early 20th century,

and popes from Leo XIII to St. John XXIII.

Bishop Martinez gave criteria for a theological and ecclesial reading of the argument given in his letter, referring extensively to the text of *Amoris laetitia*. He wrote that “the Holy Father does not intend to manifest a new moral doctrine on Christian marriage.”

The bishop recalled that the bond of a ratified and consummated sacramental marriage “cannot be dissolved by any human power, neither civil nor ecclesiastical, neither by the passage of time after separation (culpable or not; brief or elongated), nor because love no longer exists between the spouses, nor by a personal conviction in conscience, even in good faith. Certainty of personal opinion regarding the invalidity of marriage is not a cause of nullity.”

He explained that **the indissolubility of marriage is based the nature of “the union made by God in the spouses...In this is clearly manifested the priority of the existence of the Christian marriage over moral acts and their consequences.”**

Bishop Martinez also wrote on the **“mysterious grandeur of Christian marriage” and to encourage spouses to be faithful to their vocation in the face of difficulties. He then explained the conditions for receiving Holy Communion, and the Magisterium of *Amoris laetitia* on the Eucharist, new unions, and pastoral conversion.**

Pope Francis encourages a “renewed apostolic zeal” in confronting challenges to married life, he wrote, adding that the complexity of situations must be taken into account so that each person can be accompanied according to God's plan, without judgment of their subjective imputability.

Before detailing possible modes of accompaniment, Bishop Martinez noted that in every case, the faithful who are separated should be helped “to do everything possible before God to try to reconcile, with an attitude of forgiveness, thus being able to re-establish the interrupted marital life.”

If reconciliation is not possible, the primary canonical solution is to seek a declaration from the Church that the presumed marriage was, in fact, invalid.

If a declaration of nullity is granted, those who are in new unions and who have no impediments may approach the sacrament of confession, contract a marriage, and receive Communion, he taught.

Bishop Martinez laid out three possible points on a path of “accompaniment” in cases when a tribunal does not grant a declaration of nullity.

Until a judgment is found, those who are cohabiting with another person are invited to separate. If they continue to live together they “would be in an objective state of sin,” he

said. This makes the reception of Communion impossible, he said, because the state of life contradicts Christ's union with the Church which the Eucharist signifies and makes present.

If the divorced-and-remarried cannot separate but are willing to practice continence, abstaining from sexual relations, pastoral accompaniment will help them to come to the sacrament of confession and receive absolution, which will open the way to reception of Communion. "To persevere in Christian chastity it is particularly recommended that they approach frequently the sacrament of reconciliation to be fortified by that sacrament's grace, trusting 'in the mercy of God which is not denied anyone' if they have failed in the commitment they have taken on," he wrote, quoting from *Amoris laetitia*.

If responding to the Church's call to continence is not possible, then "although they cannot receive Holy Communion, we must accompany them and exhort them to cultivate a style of Christian life, since they continue to belong to the Church." Bishop Martinez explained that such persons are not to be abandoned, but to be prayed for and encouraged. He repeated the invitation of St. John Paul II that they listen to God's word, pray, and attend Mass.

For those unable to live according to the Church's call, Bishop Martinez encouraged the practice of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, noting that the Diocese of San Luis has 12 adoration chapels which they could frequent, where they should be "accompanied to commence a path of growth in prayer, in adoration of the Eucharistic Jesus. The Sacred Heart of Jesus will work wonders in them, because he waits for everyone, to say to them as the Good Shepherd: 'Come to me, all you who are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest'."

In each of these ways of pastoral accompaniment, Bishop Martinez recalled that Pope Francis "encourages us to a paternal, pastoral dedication." He wanted his priests to remember that "our accompaniment consists, precisely, in knowing at all moments that we are loved by God, who is Love and who desires that everyone be saved and come to the knowledge of the whole Truth and to eternal happiness through the Holy Spirit." He added that it is a "a great work of spiritual mercy" to help form consciences well and in conformity with truth.

Martens told CNA that Bishop Martinez "basically says that *Amoris laetitia* doesn't change anything of the previous teaching; and he gets back to the teaching of John Paul II in *Familiaris consortio* ... he does use Pope Francis to emphasize the teaching of the Church. I think it's great news."

By omitting a "conscience 'solution'", and clarifying that a personal conviction in conscience that one's marriage was invalid does not render that marriage invalid, Bishop Martinez is "on the same page" as Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia and the

bishops of western Canada, Martens said.

“There is nothing in there in the sense of what you see in the Malta guidelines, or in what the bishops of the Buenos Aires province have said ... I think it's pretty significant that also from Argentina we're hearing this voice.”

Most of the bishops of Argentina who have written on *Amoris laetitia* have interpreted it as allowing the divorced-and-remarried, in some circumstances, to receive Communion without observing continence. The bishops of the Buenos Aires province, as well as Bishop Angel José Macín of Reconquista and Archbishop Víctor Manuel Fernández, rector of the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina, have all offered such interpretations.

Among Argentine bishops, Bishop Martínez is joined by one of his predecessors in the see of San Luis, Bishop Juan Rodolfo Laise, O.F.M. Cap. Bishop Laise was among the first signatories of a Declaration of Fidelity to the Church's Unchangeable Teaching on Marriage and to Her Uninterrupted Discipline, which was publicized Aug. 29, 2016.

Bishop Laise, who led the San Luis diocese from 1971 to 2001, signed the declaration, which reaffirms the Church's teachings on marriage and morality. More than 879,000 persons have signed the document, among whom are eight cardinals.

In his pastoral letter, Bishop Martínez also reflected on the possible causes of the exhortation's “distinct interpretations.” He suggested the theological reasons for an inadequate evaluation of the ordinary Magisterium; an erroneous understanding of divine, public Revelation which sees it as a continual unfolding in history, in which the bishops can 'constitute' the deposit of faith, and not merely transmit, conserve, and defend it faithfully; and a dualistic conception of the Church, mistakenly perceiving a separation between dogma and morality, or between a visible institution and a “charismatic call.”

Martens commented to CNA that understanding the nature of *Amoris laetitia*'s teaching authority and intended purpose is critical to its interpretation.

“You can have infallible teaching proclaimed in a less solemn document,” Martens explained, “and in solemn documents you can have teaching of several levels. An example of this is *Evangelium vitae*, the encyclical of John Paul II: some of the teaching in there is put at a higher level, and it's clear from the wording of the text.”

He noted that in *Amoris laetitia*'s third paragraph, Pope Francis “says he doesn't intend to exercise his authentic Magisterium.”

“So what is he doing there? Is he giving a road map to help people, rather than to teach

and confirm what the Church has always taught? That's an important and interesting question."

Bishop Martinez concluded by exhorting his priests to preach Church teaching faithfully and to help married persons to follow God's will for their lives. "Let us remember that the Church, in her mission to announce the Gospel, both today and yesterday, does not resort to adaptation to the 'spirit of the world' or to the 'voice' of a certain 'majority', nor to purely human consensuses."

"Do not yield to the temptation to give a 'pastoral pseudo-solution without truth', so that the faithful may feel understood. Nor should you give a kind of 'poor, rigorous, and merciless recipe', as though though the faithful were only a number and not a dear son of God whom, as ministers of grace, we must help by demonstrating the way to eternal Beatitude," he exhorted them.

"Let us announce God's Message of Love ... with sincere fidelity to Revelation and the words of Jesus Christ. What we are asked to do is be faithful to the ministry which God, through the Church, has entrusted to us," he stated.