

Walking with Families During the Year of Amoris Laetitia

Goal #6: Involve married couples in the pastoral family care of the diocese (cf. AL 86-88), and in the formation of pastoral workers, seminarians, and priests, so that they may fruitfully collaborate with families and live up to the challenges of today's world (cf. AL 202-ff.). To this end, it will be important to foster reciprocity between the "domestic Church" and the Church (AL 200), so that each may mutually discover and value each other as an irreplaceable gift.

Since the family plays a pivotal role in the lives of its members and in the Church, Pope Francis is able to say in the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, "the Church is good for the family, and the family is good for the Church" (AL, 87). As we seek to support and minister to married couples and families, the Holy Father asks us to consider the ways in which we can involve family members in the structure of pastoral ministry. Pope Francis challenges us to consider how pastoral leaders can establish a mutuality of ministry where married couples and family members are not only ministered to but minister to each other and collaborate with pastoral leaders. Let's take a closer look at these bold ideas.

*"The Church is good for the family, and the family is good for the Church."
(Amoris Laetitia, 87)*

In the United States, pastoral leaders – lay and clergy – have a long history of not only serving married couples and families but also including them in pastoral work as trained leaders.

At the diocesan level, staff in offices of Marriage and Family Life regularly recruit married couples to assist in pastoral programming such as marriage preparation seminars and classes in which the married couples offer testimony of their lived experiences. In addition, married couples often are involved in leadership at the national level in a variety of marriage ministry organizations (e.g., Worldwide Marriage Encounter, Teams of Our Lady, etc.). Even in such a rich environment, it is always important to step back and to reflect upon one's ministry and how the involvement of married couples might shape pastoral ministry for engaged or married couples.

The National Pastoral Framework for Marriage and Family Life, *Called to the Joy of Love*, offers helpful guidelines by which to ensure a harmonious interplay between the work of educating, encouraging, and engaging married couples and families in the Church. It encourages the collaboration of all pastoral ministers – lay and clergy – in the important work of forming missionary disciples among the faithful, regardless of their vocation and state in life.

Married couples and families are among the first evangelizers to other families. They are called to partake actively in the work of evangelization in their homes, workplaces, and communities,

as well as in their parish. It is the duty and responsibility of pastoral workers and the clergy to remind families of their place in this role of evangelization. At the same time, these pastoral workers and clergy should themselves be reminded that their own ministry in the Church is fortified and enriched by the witness of married couples and their families.

The priestly formation of candidates in the seminary should, therefore, include many opportunities to learn about the Sacrament of Marriage, the theology of the family, and even sociological research that reveals and explains the current challenges that impact the family (e.g., addiction, domestic violence, divorce trends, poverty, immigration, etc.). Priestly formation should include opportunities to deepen an understanding and appreciation for the significance of marriage and the family. These may include:

- Opportunities for seminary faculty and seminarians to work alongside diocesan directors in: pastoral programming for engaged and married couples; pastoral programming and catechesis for families; classes, workshops, or discussion groups that address sensitive issues facing married couples and their family members.
- Partnerships with parishes to allow for seminarians to assist in marriage preparation classes and marriage enrichment seminars.
- Guest speaking events for seminarians featuring experts on a range of issues impacting families, to be held regularly throughout formation years.
- Invitations to married couples and their families to visit the seminary and share a meal or an evening of prayer for a reciprocal experience of vocational witness.

Although seasoned priests and deacons usually have extensive pastoral experience in working with married couples and families, diocesan workshops should be provided for continuing education for clergy around areas of concern that impact marriages and families (addictions, pornography, incarceration, domestic violence, influence of social media and gender ideologies, etc.).

Consecrated and religious leaders who provide pastoral care in a diocese may also benefit from additional training concerning specific socio-economic realities of married couples and families, as well as concerning theological issues of particular relevance to families.

To better inform their ministry, clergy and religious might consider:

- A series of listening sessions with married couples and families in order to learn about their needs, challenges, desires, and hopes, especially in relation to their parish faith community.

- Collaboration with diocesan vocation offices to ensure solid vocational formation and discernment practices for encouraging the call to marriage and family life among youth and young adults.
- Instituting a family life minister or director for every parish – volunteer based or paid – to assist the clergy with the care of parish families, especially the most vulnerable families who need careful pastoral attention.
- Develop a means to “check in” with each other about the effectiveness of pastoral programming so that the leaders can have useful training and current resources.

The Church in the United States benefits greatly from lay ecclesial ministers who are lay professionals or volunteers assisting in dioceses and parishes. The level of education and formation varies greatly, with some lay ministers holding advance degrees in theology, canon law, Scripture, etc. If we are to engage these leaders in the support and strengthening of marriage and the family, an intentional effort should be made to engage them in the work of ministry at the parish or diocesan levels.

The collaboration of clergy, religious, and laity at the service of supporting married couples and families in our midst will ensure that the Church continues to recognize the fundamental importance of the domestic church for the wellbeing of the whole Body of Christ. Walking together in humility and love is key to finding ways to serve each other, support, learn, and grow in holiness together—like a true family in Christ!