

Report on Reception and Implementation of *Amoris Laetitia* in the United States

September 2016

Introduction

At the request of His Eminence Lorenzo Cardinal Baldisseri, General Secretary of the Office of the Synod of Bishops, a survey was conducted of bishops and leaders of national Catholic organizations in the United States of America in order to determine how our Holy Father Pope Francis' Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* is being received and implemented throughout the country. By July-August 2016, responses were received from fifty-nine dioceses across the United States, as well as from eighteen national organizations. The results of the survey are summarized below and indicate significant energy and interest in the United States in advancing marriage and family life ministry in light of the Holy Father's rich, pastoral encouragement in *Amoris Laetitia*.

As a preface to the survey results below, it should be noted that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has engaged in a proactive reception of *Amoris Laetitia* since the occasion of its release. A special media event was held on the day of the release, including the participation of the USCCB President as well as the Chairman of the Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth and a lay expert. Various social media promotion accompanied and followed the release, including a 40-day-long promotion of chapter four, inviting married couples to reflect upon and live Pope Francis' encouraging and challenging words. *Amoris Laetitia* continues to be promoted and studied in many ways, including on the following USCCB websites: www.usccb.org, www.foryourmarriage.org, and www.marriageuniqueforareason.org. For the long-term implementation, the bishops of the United States will be voting in November 2016 to approve the next USCCB strategic plan for 2017-2020, which includes the development of a new pastoral plan for marriage and family life ministry and advocacy. The development of this pastoral plan is anticipated to be a key way to assist in advancing the implementation of *Amoris Laetitia* throughout the United States.

Reception

Responses to the survey indicated excitement about *Amoris Laetitia* and gratitude for its hopeful, positive tone about marriage. Many noted that the exhortation had been well received by Catholics in the United States and that the emphasis on accompanying marriages and families was particularly appreciated. Responses also affirmed the pastoral nature of *Amoris Laetitia*, its broad scope and its positive tone. It was noted that media reports and commentaries have tended at times to present a myopic view of *Amoris Laetitia*, with interest in only a few topics out of a broad range covered in the exhortation,

and that this has sometimes presented a challenge to the proper reception of the document.

A number of bishops and national Catholic leaders said that receiving *Amoris Laetitia* has inspired further attention to how Catholics in irregular marital situations can be welcomed, accompanied and integrated into the Church. Others reported that the exhortation has sparked discussion about how marriage preparation and marriage ministry ought to be renewed and strengthened in light of the exhortation, for example by using mentor couples and providing ongoing support for couples in their early years and beyond.

The reception of *Amoris Laetitia* has also stimulated discussion about what new forms of missionary activity can be explored and how clergy and other leaders can best respond to the needs of families today and accompany families, particularly those in serious difficulties. Bishops reported that their priests desire to educate their parishioners about *Amoris Laetitia*. Chapter six in particular was highlighted as providing helpful guidance and direction for those who minister to marriages and families.

Implementation

The bishops of the United States and national Catholic leaders indicated a number of ways in which (arch)dioceses and Catholic organizations are currently implementing or planning to implement the rich teaching found in *Amoris Laetitia*.

Slow and careful implementation

Several bishops spoke of forming planning committees to study *Amoris Laetitia*, ensuring that the Holy Father's guidance would be carefully and properly implemented. Such planning committees typically including both clergy and lay members, as well as those engaged in ministry to married couples and families.

Communicating with the Catholic faithful

A number of respondents shared ways in which their diocese or organization was communicating the message of *Amoris Laetitia* with the Catholic faithful. These included articles and bishops' columns about *Amoris Laetitia* in the diocesan newspaper or magazine, digital communications such as placing the document or a summary on the diocesan website, social media outreach, bulletin inserts with highlights from the exhortation, and Catholic radio. Several national organizations are planning an extended, four-part webinar with presentations about *Amoris Laetitia*, including by two bishops. Other notable communication methods include videos of bishops and an online "toolkit" and resource guide with supplementary material for the faithful and ministry leaders.

Education and formation of clergy

Another theme was direct communication with and formation of pastors, priests, deacons and religious regarding *Amoris Laetitia*. Many dioceses have provided or are planning to provide opportunities for clergy to study the document, such as at seminars, workshops on various topics raised, and study days. Some bishops have already provided their

priests with pastoral guidance on *Amoris Laetitia* and how it should be implemented. Many respondents indicated that the document would be given attention at deanery meetings or priest convocations in the near future. Present but less often mentioned was encouragement to preach on *Amoris Laetitia* and inclusion of its themes in seminary education.

Implementation by diocesan offices

A common theme in responses was the participation of various diocesan offices in implementing *Amoris Laetitia*. Most often mentioned was the diocesan marriage and family life office, which in various dioceses is engaged in studying *Amoris Laetitia* and recommending relevant changes to marriage and family life ministry. Other tasks of family life offices include providing training for marriage ministry volunteers and collaborating both with family life offices in other dioceses and with other diocesan offices. The Tribunal was also often mentioned as a key department in the implementation of *Amoris Laetitia*, particularly in providing education on the declaration of nullity process and fully implementing Pope Francis' changes to that process, such as eliminating fees and making the process more accessible. Other diocesan offices engaged in implementing the document are adult faith formation offices, which are providing educational opportunities for religious education teachers and the general Catholic public. Finally, a number of bishops reported proactive education of their diocesan staff on the teaching of *Amoris Laetitia* and re-evaluating or changing diocesan office structures in response to Pope Francis's emphasis on ministry to families, such as hiring full-time staff dedicated to pastoral care of marriages and families.

Special events

Many bishops and leaders listed special events as ways in which *Amoris Laetitia* is being implemented in their dioceses. Common among these were parish events that focus on or integrate *Amoris Laetitia*, such as guided discussions on the document, marriage enrichment events, and lectures. Other bishops reported giving presentations on *Amoris Laetitia* to various audiences. More major events include diocesan-wide conferences about the document and diocesan synod processes with a partial or total focus on *Amoris Laetitia*.

Reevaluation and strengthening of marriage-related ministries

A number of responses indicated ways in which marriage-related ministries would be impacted by *Amoris Laetitia*. Preeminent in this category was marriage preparation, which a large number of respondents indicated would receive a reevaluation to ensure that the themes of *Amoris Laetitia* are properly integrated. Several bishops highlighted new marriage preparation programs they will now use, as well as increased training for mentor couples and marriage preparation leaders. Many respondents also spoke of reevaluating marriage enrichment offerings to integrate the teachings of *Amoris Laetitia*, particularly chapter four. Emphasis was also given to enhancing accompaniment of newly married couples, couples experiencing difficulty in their relationships, and those who have separated or civilly divorced. Responses indicated increased and enhanced training for those who minister in these areas, as well as increased educational resources. Several bishops shared an increased attention to couples in remarriages, including pastoral care

for those who are seeking a declaration of nullity for their previous union. Other ministry fields that were mentioned in responses were Natural Family Planning and chastity, same-sex attraction and those in same-sex relationships, youth ministry, the elderly, Hispanics and Latinos, parents, and families with children who have special needs. All of these areas were highlighted as needing renewed attention based on Pope Francis' guidance in *Amoris Laetitia*.

Renewed models of ministry

A theme in many responses was that *Amoris Laetitia* gives a renewed approach to caring for marriages and families. Several spoke of the new “tone” provided by Pope Francis and the emphasis on accompaniment, mercy, highlighting the strengths of the family and the joy of love, and the importance of allowing *Amoris Laetitia* to inform all ministries. Others listed ways in which the local diocese was making structural and personnel changes to give concrete support to marriage and family life ministry.

Other Suggested Resources

In addition to the implementation plans already underway or envisioned, the bishops and national leaders identified some areas for which additional resources—some perhaps from the bishops' Conference—could be helpful. These include a Q&A brochure for all the faithful and the identification of best practices based on *Amoris Laetitia* for a variety of ministry areas: most particularly in marriage preparation (including remote and proximate), but also in the pastoral care of newlywed couples, parents, single parents, families in crisis or split by divorce or separation, second marriages, blended families, and persons who experience same-sex attraction. In addition, resources were requested on the topics of gender ideology, pornography, and convalidation.

Specifically for priests, it was noted that guidance on effective preaching on *Amoris Laetitia* could be helpful, as well as advice on how confessors can assist persons in irregular marital relationships.

A variety of resources was recommended to assist the Catholic faithful in receiving the teaching of *Amoris Laetitia* and implementing it in their lives. Most often suggested was a study or discussion guide on the document, suitable for parish use and utilizing understandable language. Other recommendations include short “snippets” of the exhortation for easy dissemination, a topical index of the document, articles for diocesan newspapers or magazines, bulletin inserts, videos about *Amoris Laetitia*, and social media content and graphics that could be used by various groups. It was noted that materials are needed in Spanish and other languages.

In-person resources that were recommended include retreats for married couples, talks or seminars on topics such as human sexuality and moral theology. In terms of further study, a few respondents asked for reports on how others are receiving *Amoris Laetitia* in the United States and worldwide.

Respondents indicated that further resources on the application of some aspects of *Amoris Laetitia*, such as those treating the internal forum and reception of the sacraments with regard to persons in irregular marital situations, would be helpful. The same was mentioned about some of the key terms and concepts such as discernment, integration, gradualness, conscience, and mercy.

The interest in additional resources shows the high level of eagerness toward charting a faithful and effective implementation of the Holy Father's exhortation across the United States.

Lastly, as a response to the survey, three dioceses shared examples of resources that have been developed for advancing the reception and implementation of *Amoris Laetitia*. These resources are available at <http://adw.org/amorislaetitia-toolkit/>, http://archphila.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/AOP_AL-guidelines.pdf, and http://www.la-archdiocese.org/about/amoris-laetitia/Documents/AE_studyguide.pdf.