



Conference given by
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***“Amoris Laetitia
and the struggles of Catholic women today”***

INTRODUCTION

I bring you warm greetings from Quebec City, a land that has been blessed over the past four centuries with holy missionaries who evangelized and catechized families and built faith communities. Quebec is the cradle of Catholicism in Canada and for a good part of the United States of America. When the Diocese of Quebec was founded in 1674, it covered all of Canada and went as far south as Louisiana. At the time, it was the largest Diocese in the world.

Thank you very much for your invitation to share with you at this Ontario Convention of the Catholic Women’s League. I am honored and privileged to be

here with you and with my brother, Bishop Fred Colli, Bishop of the Diocese of Thunder Bay and your Provincial Spiritual Advisor, and with Archbishop Brendan O'Brien, Archbishop of Kingston.

This is my first visit to this part of our country and already I have discovered two very important facts. Thunder Bay is very far from home but as it is written on the road signs, it is **Superior** by nature!

PART ONE

I am pleased to share with you a few thoughts on a very interesting subject: **The Joy of Love and the struggles of Catholic women today.**

The Joy of Love is the English translation of the document published by Pope Francis last year, following the two Synods on the Family. In Latin, it is called **Amoris Laetitia**. The Holy Father invited me to participate in the Second Synod which was held in October of 2015. A very interesting experience to share with bishops, priests, consecrated men and women, lay faithful and couples from all over the world. I learned very much by listening, praying and sharing during the three weeks of the Synod.

Much has been said and written about the conclusions of this Synod on the Family. Many declarations and opinions have been expressed since the Apostolic Exhortation **Amoris Laetitia** was published. Let's dig in if you allow me the expression and explore some of the themes that I find to be very nourishing and encouraging.

This exhortation embraces many topics; it also embraces the reality of our lives. Pope Francis talks to us as if he had his arms around us. He speaks of the

beauty of love, reflecting on the words of St Paul that love is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful, arrogant or rude, never rejoicing in what is wrong, but hoping and enduring all things (Cf. 1Cor 13.4-7). He writes of how this love finds its place in family life and grows through many crises and difficulties.

Indeed, he speaks of love as a craft, something at which we have to work hard, with care, understanding and perseverance. Love is always a journey, in all true friendship and especially in family life.

As soon as **Amoris Laetitia** was published, I gave a copy to a young married couple of my Diocese who are at the beginning of their family life. They have two children. The wife and mother said, after reading this long exhortation: “I didn’t get the impression that Pope Francis was speaking **about** families when I read this. I felt he was talking **to** families and **to our** family.

I don’t know how much of this 325 paragraph Apostolic Exhortation you have read. But I highly recommend it. As Pope Francis writes in the Introduction and has said various times, do not rush in the reading of this Document. Take your time to ponder and reflect and see how this applies to you and your family life.

Most people commit the error of reading just a few paragraphs on the subjects that interest them. **Amoris Laetitia** deserves to be read thoroughly and discussed in small groups.

“Perhaps one reason **Amoris Laetitia** has been so widely and wholeheartedly embraced is because we recognize in it a loving openness to pastoral ministry attuned to the needs of an increasingly broken world and a statement of consensus that came out of the two synods of bishops in Rome.¹

¹ Cardinal Donald Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington, *Letter to the priests of the Archdiocese of Washington*, October 4, 2016.

I would like to present four very important words, or attitudes, that **Amoris Laetitia** brings to our attention and challenges us in our everyday life in our families, in our parishes, in our groups and movements and in our social life. They are key pastoral attitudes or ways of living our faith that can make a world of difference in the lives of families:

1. Welcoming and listening;

2. Accompanying;

3. Discerning;

4. Integrating

Let's briefly reflect on these four expressions. We are all aware of the frailty of many couples, marriages and families in our communities. Who does not have a couple that is going through struggles in his or her own family or close friends?

We all know the teaching of the Church and want to respect it. But how do we deal with all these difficult and often complex situations that we encounter?

The first thing that comes very clear in **Amoris Laetitia** is that we need to start by **welcoming and listening** to people. Not judging them or making them feel they are excluded from the community because of their situation. Pope Francis invites us to welcome and to listen... There is a lot we can learn by doing that. It is the starting point; the foundation of good pastoral dialogue. Life is not in black or white. If we want to be helpful and assist our brothers and sisters who are experiencing trials and difficulties, we need to make them feel welcomed and take the time to listen to them attentively and with respect. We need not have all the answers to do that.

Did you notice that in the Gospel often asks questions and does not give the answer? He gives people time to reflect, to look inside of themselves and find the good answer.

There aren't too many men in this hall. I can say this without fear. I am convinced that you ladies are much better at doing this than us men. You have a natural gift from God that allows you to listen. I've noticed this so often. Please use it wisely and generously. So many people need to share what they are living and have no one to listen to them. And this is true not only for people who are in crisis or difficulties. Couples and families who are growing and doing well also need to share and enjoy an attentive ear.

Secondly, Pope Francis in **Amoris Laetitia** tells us that we need to **accompany...** to take the time to walk with couples and families... all couples and all families. I remember in the Remarks given by Pope Francis at the conclusion of the Synod stating that in our Church, there is room for all families. That means we need to learn to accompany them, welcoming them where they are at, in the situation and circumstances that are theirs and start walking with them so that they can discover paths to **grow** in love.

Jesus was an expert at that. He knew how important it was to take time to walk with people. Remember the Disciples of Emmaus, on Easter afternoon, when he took the time to come close to the two discouraged disciples, walked with them, listened to them and then, and only then, shared the truth of the Word of God, the good news of his death and resurrection. He took time to sit down at table with them and broke bread. Then, their eyes opened and they recognized Jesus. It is a long process, a long journey.

Accompanying couples, families, is a life long journey and a very demanding one. The art of accompaniment is probably one of our weaker points in our pastoral life at this time of our history. We are so busy trying to cover all bases, with limited human resources, that we can forget how important it is to take the time to accompany, to walk with our people.

We are efficient, and sometimes too influenced by the corporate and economic worlds that are always pushing for faster and better results, with less people and less time. Life is not like that. People are not programmable like computers. We need time, sometimes a lot of time to decide, to integrate and to grow into healthy couples and healthy families. Couples not only need manuals and talks, and courses. They need mentors, witnesses, other people to walk with them as they grow, and struggle, and learn to love as God wants us to love.

There aren't too many men in this hall. I can say this without fear. I am convinced that you ladies are much better at doing this than us men. You are naturally gifted to accompany life, to foster it and to help it grow. Of course, we men are also capable of doing that, but you ladies are often more natural at accompanying life, from birth to natural death. God has granted you special gifts to accomplish this mission.

Thirdly, Pope Francis talks about **discerning**. That is a very Jesuit word, a spirituality that invites us to listen to God, but also to the reality that people are going through; a spirituality that invites us to listen to the Holy Spirit, but also to one another; a spirituality that invites us to listen to the Word of God and the teaching of the Church, but also to the circumstances and the situation a couple or a family is experiencing.

It is in this process that we are able to discover a pastoral discernment that will foster human and spiritual growth. We cannot offer ready-made answers to complex situations without discerning, without welcoming, listening and accompanying people. No easy recipes exist. Every person, every situation requires and deserves a good discernment process. And that takes time.

Now, I believe we must admit that we need to further our formation in this field, all of us, men and women, pastors and faithful. We need to grow and learn how to accompany people in the discernment of their personal situation. Pope

Francis puts it this way: “What we are speaking of is a process of accompaniment and discernment which guides the faithful to an awareness of their situation before God».²

And finally, a fourth expression. The Holy Father leads us in this process of welcoming and listening, accompanying and discerning so we can help people **integrate** the Christian community and find their place in this lifelong journey of love and commitment, and bear fruit.

I am always saddened when I hear people share with me their personal stories and how they were wounded by pastors or fellow parishioners or members of their family because of their personal situation; a divorce, an unmarried couple living together, or a civilly remarried couple after a divorce, feeling excluded from the Church and unwanted, judged by the “good Catholics”.

We need to discover all the ways possible to integrate couples, families into our Christian communities, and offer them the support and accompaniment for growth. The Church is not a select club of perfect people. We are a community of sinners, that God loves so much that He sent his only Son to reveal his Love to us and invite us to experience his Mercy and Love and enter into a profound friendship, a Covenant with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

We must not be surprised that in our Church, we find prostitutes, unwed couples, same sex couples, divorced men and women, sinners who have made bad decisions, hurting people who need the compassion, the love and the Joy of the Gospel to continue their life journey and find the Hope that Jesus brings. Pope Francis often refers to the Church as a field hospital. We are surely not lacking patients at this moment of history. Let’s not be scandalized by the men and women we share life in our communities. Like us, they are yearning for the same love and dignity we are working for.

² Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, No. 300.

Helping people find their place in our communities, making them feel welcomed and loved is a path for integrating them into a Christian way of living. This takes time and patience. We sure appreciate when people take the time with us when we are hurting. Let's be generous and do the same with our fellow brothers and sisters.

So, four words or four attitudes necessary today to help families grow in love: **welcoming and listening, accompanying, discerning and integrating**. All of us can decide to make this process part of our journey, take these four attitudes and use them in our relationships, in our families and communities, in our movements, to foster growth... and isn't that what life is all about? I invite you to take the time to reflect on these four expressions. Which one is the one you excel in? Which of these four expressions are you the weakest in your life?

PART TWO

Now let's take a look at some of the challenges that catholic women face today in this beautiful but sometimes crazy world we live in.

Pope Francis appoints all cardinals to a number of Congregations, Pontifical Councils or special missions. One of the workgroups in which he has appointed me to is the **Pontifical Council for Culture**. The first plenary session I participated in was precisely on this subject, in February of 2015: the challenges that women face today in the world.

At the end of our discussions, the Holy Father addressed our group in these words:

“The topic that you chose is very close to my heart, and on many previous occasions I have been able to touch on it and call for it to be examined more deeply. It entails studying criteria and new methods in or-

der that women may not feel like guests, but full participants in the various spheres of society and Church life. The Church is woman, she the Church, not he the Church. This challenge can no longer be deferred. I say this to Pastors of Christian communities, here representing the Universal Church, but also to lay women and men committed in different ways in culture, in education, in the economy, in politics, in the world of work, in families, in religious institutions”.³

Catholic women face a number of challenges today; some are cultural and others are spiritual: a **feminism** that makes them think that women achieve equality with men only when they erase, minimize, or reject their femininity and motherhood. The Church, of course, thinks differently: She celebrates femininity and motherhood, and insists that women have dignity and value, regardless of their looks, power, status or wealth.

Mary A. Peeters, member of the Pontifical Council for the Laity believes that another challenge is the **gender theory**, that is swiftly sweeping our western civilization. It is a complex theory that misleads us in thinking that:

“the feminine and masculine identity, the ontological structure of the woman as spouse, mother and educator, the anthropological complementarity of man and woman, fatherhood, heterosexuality, marriage and the traditional family would not exist per se, would not be good in themselves, but would be social constructs: sociological phenomena, social functions constructed over time, stereotypes to deconstruct by way of education and culture as they are deemed discriminatory and contrary to equality” [...] “Gender is not an isolated phenomenon deprived of a history. It is the fruit of a long secularization process that has progressively led to the cultural death of the father, the mother, the spouse and has substi-

³ Pope Francis, *Address to the Pontifical Council for Culture*, Rome, February 7, 2015.

tuted the person made out of love and for love by the secular and ‘autonomous’ ‘citizen-individual’ ”.⁴

Pope Francis adds:

“Yet another challenge is posed by the various forms of an ideology of gender that ‘denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family. This ideology leads to educational programs and legislative enactments that promote a personal identity and emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female. Consequently, human identity becomes the choice of the individual, one which can also change over time’ ”.⁵

Autonomy and independence are the common factor in each of these challenges and more and more women are joining them, trying to achieve the equality and freedom they long for. What the world is constantly repeating is that women are free and have the right to decide without anyone telling them what they have to do. They are the masters of their own lives. They need not have other references but themselves.

A big mistake not only for women, but for all of us. Mary Rice Hasson, a Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., directs the Catholic Women’s Forum, an initiative that responds to Pope Francis’ call for Catholic women to assume a higher profile within the Church and to think with the Church in addressing the problems of today says that:

“The Church’s message to women is first the good news of salvation, of being called into a relationship with God Himself. The Church says to women: “God loves you. Unconditionally, completely, and forever.” Se-

⁴ Mary A. Peeters, *Interview by Zenit Fr*, September 28, 2011.

⁵ Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, No. 56.

cond, the Church affirms that women and men are equal in dignity — made for ‘communion and collaboration,’ as Pope Francis says — but complementary in our difference. Modern gender theory goes awry because it sees sexual difference as ‘the problem’ instead of ‘the solution,’ and tries to ‘erase’ the difference. The Church, on the other hand, values women as we are, treasuring our ability to ‘see things with different eyes.’ Third, the Church wants women to know that God’s mercy is boundless. It flows from his love, and overflows. Women have suffered much from modern ‘autonomy,’ which leaves them alone and unsupported to face the unequal consequences of the sexual revolution. So the Church offers women a message of God’s mercy and healing. Finally, the Church urgently calls on women to collaborate in the work of evangelism, to build ‘a more human and welcoming world.’ The closing words of Vatican II are more relevant now than ever: ‘Women . . . you to whom life is entrusted at this grave moment in history, it is for you to save the peace of the world.’ Does that sound like a Church that ‘undervalues’ women?” [...]

Mrs Hasson believes that:

“Now more than ever, the “isms” (secular feminism, materialism, and individualism) have embedded themselves in the hearts of women — and men. But when women lose their way, their families and communities get lost too. So many of the damaging lies — about sex, children, the meaning of life — that permeate our culture are aimed at women. But Catholic women, who see people with the ‘eyes of the heart’, are uniquely poised to counter the lies, to bring truth and healing to our culture. In the same

vein, women’s sensitivity to the person — particularly the most vulnerable — goes to the core of the New Evangelization”.⁶

There are definite challenges, but we can face these challenges if we continue to reflect, discern and not let ourselves be submerged by the socially distorted and ideological tsunamis that come our way. Our best way to survive, and this goes for men as for women, is to embrace the Word of God, develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and learn to follow Him. He is “*the Way, the Truth and the Life*”.⁷ He will guide us and help us face the challenges of today’s world as authentic Christians.

Pope Francis calls us. from the first paragraphs of his Apostolic Exhortation on the **Joy of the Gospel** : “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since ‘no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord’. The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms”.⁸

Dear sisters in the faith, dear members of the Catholic Women’s League of Ontario, that is where we start becoming better Christians, better disciples and better missionary disciples of Jesus Christ: by coming closer to Jesus, by allowing Him to be the centre of our life.

Time for a brief pause. Let’s stand and listen to a meaningful song:

BE THE CENTRE – Words and Music: Michael Fry

⁶ Mary Rice Hasson, *Interview in the National Review*, May 11, 2015.

⁷ John 14 : 6.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, No. 3.

PART THREE

EVANGELIZATION... begins with the way we look at people...

In this second part of my talk, I would like to open the Gospel with you and see how Jesus dealt with the people he met that were experiencing difficult times in their life. How did he relate to them? How did he welcome them, listen to them, walk with them, help them discern and integrate the community?

There is so much we can learn by contemplating Jesus and sharing the Gospel. I would like to quickly visit a few beautiful pages of the Gospel and see how Jesus expressed God's love to all the hurting people he met. In every encounter we will look at, I will point out three lessons I discovered by watching and contemplating Jesus. I hope this will also be useful to you.

ZACCHAEUS – Luke 19: 1-10

“When Jesus reached the spot he looked up and spoke to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down. Hurry, because I am to stay at your house today’’. (v. 5)

“And Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a son of Abraham; for the Son of man has come to seek out and save what was lost’’. (v. 9-10)

- He addresses him with respect
- Sees more than his sin
- Today

ROMAN CENTURION – Matthew 8: 5-13

“When he went into Capernaum a centurion came up and pleaded with him. 'Sir,' he said, 'my servant is lying at home paralysed and in great pain’’. (v. 5-6)

“The centurion replied, 'Sir, I am not worthy to have you under my roof; just give the word and my servant will be cured’’. (v. 7)

- Welcomes the stranger
- Gives credibility to the other’s faith
- We are all children of God

JESUS ANOINTED BY A SINFUL WOMAN – Luke 7: 36-50

“Suddenly a woman came in, who had a bad name in the town. She had heard he was dining with the Pharisee and had brought with her an alabaster jar of ointment.

³⁸ She waited behind him at his feet, weeping, and her tears fell on his feet, and she wiped them away with her hair; then she covered his feet with kisses and anointed them with the ointment’’. (v. 37-38)

“For this reason I tell you that her sins, many as they are, have been forgiven her, because she has shown such great love. It is someone who is forgiven little who shows little love’’. (v. 47)

- Welcomes everyone
- Sees the love more than the sin
- Does not judge

DEMON-POSSESSED MAN OF GERASA – Luke 8: 26-39

« They came to land in the territory of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee .He was stepping ashore when a man from the city who was possessed by devils came towards him; for a long time the man had been living with no clothes on, not in a house, but in the tombs». (v. 26-27)

“Go back home and report all that God has done for you.’ So the man went off and proclaimed throughout the city all that Jesus had done for him”. (v. 39).

- The courage to go to the periphery
- Believe in the power of resurrection
- Send out to be a missionary

NICODEMUS – John 3, 1-21

“There was one of the Pharisees called Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, who came to Jesus by night and said, 'Rabbi, we know that you have come from God as a teacher; for no one could perform the signs that you do unless God were with him”. (v. 1-2)

“Jesus answered: In all truth I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above”. (v. 3)

- Available to welcome
- Believe in the sincerity of others
- Propose New Life

THE DISCIPLES OF EMMAUS – Luke 24 : 13-35

“And it happened that as they were talking together and discussing it, Jesus himself came up and walked by their side” (v. 15)

“Then, starting with Moses and going through all the prophets, he explained to them the passages throughout the scriptures that were about himself”. (v. 27)

²⁸ “When they drew near to the village to which they were going, he made as if to go on”. (v. 28)

“They set out that instant and returned to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven assembled together with their companions, who said to them, ‘The Lord has indeed risen and has appeared to Simon’.
(v. 33-34)

- Go where people are... walk with them...
- Proclaim the Word of God...
- Do not impose... propose...

CWL LOGO AND MISSION STATEMENT

- The Cross is at the center of your logo and at the heart of your life. The Cross represents the Paschal Mystery of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is our true North! Your Mission Statement invites you to live this in your everyday lives: *The Catholic Women's League of Canada is a national organization rooted in gospel values calling its members to holiness through service to the people of God.*

And to conclude, a thought I find particularly inspiring:

“God is like the sun who does not wait for the flower to open to warm it up. It is because He warms it up that the flower is able to open”. (Stan Rougier)