



TEN YEARS AFTER AMORIS LAETITIA

**CATHOLIC WOMEN'S VOICES,
WOUNDS AND EXPECTATIONS**



CATHOLIC WOMEN'S COUNCIL
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REFLECTION AND ACTION



In advance of the tenth anniversary of *Amoris Laetitia* and Pope Leo's 7-14 October meeting with heads of Episcopal Conferences, leaders of the Eastern Churches, families, and theological experts in Rome, the Catholic Women's Council offers the following contribution to the Church's ongoing discernment of the accompaniment of families today.

The Catholic Women's Council (CWC) is an international network of more than 60 Roman Catholic groups working for the full recognition of dignity and equality in the Church. Experts and leaders from every continent engaged in conversations and listening sessions with their members to produce this synthesis, which captures global themes and glaring lacunae.

We write this document in the inescapable context of the global rise of misogyny, renewed attacks on women's and LGBTQ rights, and growing violence against women, a reality that must guide any discernment on family life. We pray these voices may help ensure the Church can speak to this moment and truly serve all families in their complexity.

In many ways it is difficult to engage with the five thematic areas proposed by the Vatican in preparation for the upcoming meeting:

- Families today: reality, beauty and challenges
- Young people and the discovery of the vocation to marriage
- Married life. The first years of marriage: a decisive time
- In the difficulties of life: accompanying and supporting
- Christian families as subjects of the Church's mission

For women, the family is both a place of profound grace and of profound risk. Far beyond "challenges", the prevalence of violence and abuse, economic or legal dependency, cultural shaming, and uneven gender roles within the home can be traced back to patriarchal frameworks, practices, and language that the Church too often reinforces. **Instead, we ask the Church to take up the following 5 urgent realities for women in family life and as members of the Christian family:** (1) Androcentric frameworks; (2) The culture of abuse within the Christian Family; (3) Marriage and Canon Law; (4) Sexual Education; and (5) Diversity of Families.

1. ANDROCENTRIC FRAMEWORKS



Amoris Laetitia speaks from within an androcentric, patriarchal framework. **Magisterial writings on the family have historically been written by men who interpret women's needs and circumstances for them, and Amoris Laetitia continues this pattern.** The document consistently cites the exclusively male clerical hierarchy—the “Synod Fathers”—as the authorities on family life. It thus speaks about women in a way that structurally excludes them, even as it claims to describe the “reality” of families.

In the first chapter, “In the Light of the Word”, phrases such as “you and your wife” or “your children”, together with the use of Psalm 128 in the wedding liturgy, make clear that men are imagined as the primary audience of the text. Women appear mostly as those who relieve male loneliness (AL 12), fulfil his needs (AL 13) and care for his children (AL 15). **Women's own lived realities are pushed to the margins and, at times, are dismissed under the label of “gender ideology”.** While the text purports to affirm the “mutual dignity” of spouses (AL 221), its failure to employ gender-inclusive terms structurally denies women an equal identity within the body of the Church. Too often “women's dignity” is invoked in place of women's equality.

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Women are therefore calling:

- **For a decisive shift away from these androcentric interpretative patterns and from the binary anthropology and language that underpin them.**
- **We reject a theology that defines women primarily as complementary to men** within a fixed family order, and that assigns women relational roles shaped around male needs, male desire and male-defined forms of care.
- **We insist on a theological hermeneutic that begins from women's equal personhood**, in which their vocation and identity are not primarily defined through their relationship to men

2. CULTURE OF ABUSE WITHIN THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY



Women are dismayed by the lack of serious engagement with abuse in *Amoris Laetitia*, an enduring wound that scars the whole Church. Generations of Catholic women and families have suffered from a widespread culture of clergy abuse, systematic cover-up and an uneven commitment to survivor justice. In some regions, over 70 per cent of women experience sexual violence and abuse of power through priests or male parishioners.

We cannot deny that such a culture implicitly models and normalises abusive relationships and unhealthy power dynamics for the laity, inside and outside families, reinforced by patriarchal leadership and complementary theologies.

This reality continues to undermine the hierarchy's credibility and its capacity to speak convincingly about family life. Abuse is mentioned explicitly in only a few paragraphs. *Amoris Laetitia* describes the Church as a "family of families" and affirms that "The Church is good for the family, and the family is good for the Church" (AL 87), yet for those whose children or relatives were abused by clergy or religious, this has tragically not been true.

The text rightly condemns "the sexual exploitation of children" (AL 45) and calls on the wider family to "detect and report possible situations in which children suffer from violence and even

abuse" (AL 1915), but fails to mention that it is primarily women who suffer under these abusive structures and that the same abuses have been perpetrated, ignored and covered up within the Church's own structures. Survivors—women, children, lay people and religious—who report abuse still too often encounter disbelief, anger, denial and rejection rather than justice and care.

Therefore, women insist:

Any renewed engagement with *Amoris Laetitia* must acknowledge that church-related abuse shatters family cohesion, safety and trust, leaving lifelong trauma.

Secondly, the hierarchy must confess these grave sins, commit to reforming the structures and cultures that enable abuse, and clearly set out the concrete steps needed to ensure that those who minister in the Church do not further contribute to injustice and harm.

Thirdly, for regulations designed to protect against sexual violence, as well as prevention measures, to no longer view women as people in need of protection and assistance.

And lastly, women are calling for clear guidelines under canon law, as well as reporting and procedural obligations, to better combat abuse of women by priests and parish staff.

3. PROTECTION FROM VIOLENCE AND THE PRESERVATION OF SELF-DETERMINATION IN MARRIAGE AND CANON LAW



Women worldwide are highly affected by domestic and gender-based violence, particularly in contexts where religious and patriarchal norms privilege men as the head of the family. While the Vatican calls on states and governments to provide legal protection for families and women, its own ecclesiastical matrimonial law needs its own critical examination.

The Code of Canon Law stipulates in Canon 1151 a “right and duty” to preserve conjugal life. In many regions—especially where a binary anthropology and androcentric doctrine of marriage and sexuality prevail—this norm is interpreted as a claim to a spouse’s sexual availability and to marital intimacy on demand. In countless cases, this has meant that marital rape is not recognised as such. Regulations on separation also need to be re-read in the light of women’s rights and safety. The obligation to return to the marital union (Canon 1153 §2) and the duty placed on judges to use pastoral means to persuade spouses to resume cohabitation

(Canon 1695) often result in women being urged to forgive and return to marriages marked by violence, including the expectation that they continue to fulfil marital and sexual “duties”. **Such practices contradict women’s inherent dignity and their physical and sexual self-determination and must be rejected on both theological and ethical grounds.**

While Chapter 8 of *Amoris Laetitia* introduces an important pastoral model of individual discernment, its implementation is often undermined by a serious educational deficit within a clergy formed primarily in rigid legalism. Many pastors have not been adequately trained in the foundational Catholic moral principles of gradualness, mitigating factors (AL 301–302) and the primacy of a well-formed conscience. As a result, they tend to default to canon law as an automatic answer, rather than as a norm to be interpreted and applied in light of conscience, context and *Amoris Laetitia*’s own criteria.

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This has grave consequences for the most vulnerable—especially women escaping abusive marriages or navigating complex family dynamics. When pastors lack the tools to recognise and prioritise safety, or to engage seriously with conscience and context, they can passively exclude or actively re-traumatise those who seek help. **What was intended as a “field hospital” risks becoming, for many women, yet another site of harm.**

From these realities, women articulate clear expectations.

First, protection of sexual self-determination within marriage: there must be an unambiguous clarification that no right to sexual availability or to sexual acts against the will of the other spouse can ever be derived from marital rights and duties in canon law.

Second, recognition of violence as a grave ground in ecclesiastical matrimonial law: physical, psychological and sexualised violence—especially after marriage—should be explicitly recognized as a serious ground for separation and, where appropriate, for initiating nullity proceedings. Those affected must never be pressured into resuming a violent marital relationship, nor subjected to humiliating or retraumatising questioning by church officials.

Third, free and independent access to legal advice: access to the Church’s protection and legal procedures must not depend on the goodwill of individual bishops, judges or other authorities. In particular, those affected by domestic and family violence, coercion and dependency must be granted free, confidential, safe and independent access to qualified canonical and legal advice, regardless of their financial situation.

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- 1. Protection of sexual self-determination within marriage*
- 2. Recognition of violence as a grave ground in ecclesiastical matrimonial law*
- 3. Free and independent access to legal advice*

4. SEXUAL EDUCATION



Although *Amoris Laetitia* emphasises the importance of feelings, desires and emotional bonding between a man and a woman, the Catholic Church continues to uphold the ideals of virginity and sexual abstinence in its moral and sexual teaching. Such deficient sexual education impairs women's sexual and reproductive self-determination, particularly when they are linked to patriarchal gender norms and guilt-based interpretations. Studies by the WHO and UNICEF indicate that religious and traditional gender roles and moral concepts hinder women's access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, as well as their ability to make independent decisions.

In particular, notions that link female sexuality to purity, honour or moral worth, and attribute a special responsibility to women for sexual abstinence and "modesty", are problematic. The expectation that women are responsible for men's sexual desire or sexual integrity through their clothing and behaviour reproduces gender-specific asymmetries of responsibility and power.

From these experiences, women identify several necessary pathways.

First, overcoming the paradigm of virginity and gender-specific sexual norms: women demand that "virginity" be recognised as a social, cultural and religious construct and that it be

overcome as a tool for controlling and shaming girls and women. Concepts of purity, honour and "modesty" must not be used to restrict women's sexual self-determination or to attribute responsibility to them for men's sexual desire and behaviour.

Second, recognition of the sexual self-determination of girls and women: "virginity" is not a biological category. The Church should unequivocally condemn any violation of sexual self-determination—in particular virginity tests and female genital mutilation (FGM)—as a serious human rights violation, as called for in many international agreements.

Third, strengthening sexual and reproductive self-determination: women demand that the Church's sexual teaching and practice fully recognise their sexual autonomy and do not restrict it through restrictive norms, the attribution of blame or patriarchal gender stereotypes.

Finally, women call for fear-free, age-appropriate sex education rooted in scientific evidence and Christian values, centered on sexual self-determination, consent (the right to say "no") and bodily integrity, and strengthening equal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare.

A fear-free and self-determined sexuality is an essential prerequisite for equal and responsible relationships, marriage and family life.

5. DIVERSITY OF FAMILIES

Across the world, families today are a plural, changing reality in constant evolution. They are marked by crisis, precariousness, insecurity and conflict, yet also by extraordinary creativity and care. In some contexts, young people no longer wish to marry, build a family or have children; in others, family life is shaped by child or forced marriage, displacement, separation due to migration, gender-based violence, poverty and exclusion. Amid this complexity, is a genuine sign of hope that people continue to desire and construct “family projects” in such diverse ways.

Reducing the concept of family solely to the love between a man and a woman, as *Amoris Laetitia* often implies—for example in its assertion that “the clear and well-defined presence of both figures, female and male, creates the environment best suited to the growth of the child” (AL 175)—obscures both the multiplicity of families in which God’s love is made manifest.

In particular, *Amoris Laetitia* fails to engage with the topic of widows.

Widows, especially those widowed young with very small or posthumous children, face intense cultural stigma, economic insecurity, loss of inheritance for their children and exposure to sexual harassment and violence. A Church that takes seriously Scripture’s repeated concern for widows cannot ignore their reality in its principal contemporary text on family life.

Women are first calling for a culture of respect for widows, as was for the early days of Christianity.

Secondly, the discrimination and stigmatisation of widows must end.

Too often widows are accused of harming their communities by acting as witches. It is the responsibility of priests and bishops to use their authority to hold those who sow hatred and contempt to account without delay. The burden of shame must be reversed.

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The document also has little to say about single women, and when it does, they appear almost exclusively in the context of divorce or separation. Women urge the church to move beyond defining a "complete" family exclusively by the traditional **two-parent, heterosexual model**.

Parishes are often places where single mothers experience exclusion and discrimination. Women repeatedly report that they are entirely dependent on the goodwill of the local priest and that they are sometimes excluded from social projects, parish life and, at times, even from the Eucharist.

Women articulated a strong need for recognition that single-parent households should not be viewed as incomplete, broken, or lacking. Single mothers are complete parents who lead holy, sacrificial, and fully formed Catholic families.

Women are therefore calling for the end of discrimination and disparagement by priests and parishioners. Parishes should be places where single mothers are welcome and receive support and equal acceptance.

Likewise, women in our network challenge notions of "singleness" and "childless" as isolation, longing for a husband, or an incomplete family, and instead describe the rich relational realities of extended networks and communities, where a "single" or "childless" woman mothers in many ways can be an aunt, grandmother and caregiver within a wider village of relationships.

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CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Amoris Laetitia*, like other magisterial writings, reflects women's needs and circumstances as reflected by men. **The glaring omission of female scholarship, women's lived experiences, and the androcentric, universalised masculine pronouns renders women textually invisible and structurally voiceless within the highly intimate realities of marriage and family life.**

Reading the "signs of the times" requires a holistic understanding of women's inherent dignity and equality that does not depend on her maternal, marital, or vowed status. **Womanhood is rooted in being made in the image and likeness of God, not solely in marriage, children, or religious habits.**

At a time of rising misogyny, escalating violence against women, and renewed attacks on the rights and freedoms of women and LGBTQ persons, the cost of inaction is too grave. **If the Church fails to confront the patriarchal frameworks and ecclesial practices that enable abuse, silence survivors, and marginalise women's voices, it risks not only betraying the Gospel it proclaims, but also abandoning countless women, children, and families to further harm.**

The Church can only offer guidance and support in a comprehensive manner if women, too, experience it as a place that offers them a voice and opportunities to make decisions. While many point to the "synodal path" as an unfolding solution, synodality must be more than community dialogue. **Above all, a synodal church requires collective action that accepts all people in the realities of their lives and recognises the equal rights and dignity of all in liturgy, the congregation and society.**

We pray that the voices of women will persuade decision-makers within the Church to move towards ensuring, as a matter of urgency, that women have an equal place within the Church – a place free from injustice, oppression and violence.



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Thank you very much for
your tireless support and
dedication.