

# “Amoris Laetitia: Five Principles of Pastoral Ministry”



A PASTORAL RESOURCE  
BY BISHOP PAUL J. BRADLEY



## INTRODUCTION

My brothers,

All of us, in our respective parishes and pastoral assignments, are keenly aware of the many difficulties and joys that are occasioned by being immersed in diverse communities. Being called to serve all of the individuals and families under our care, we cannot ignore some of the more pressing pastoral concerns that have arisen in our constantly changing modern culture; a culture that appears to be increasingly opposed to the teachings of Christ and His Church in the areas of marriage, family life, and human sexuality. Our Holy Father, Pope Francis, feels the weight of his responsibility to teach and shepherd the Church in our challenging times, and has most recently expressed his thoughts — and those of the Synod Fathers — in his post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*.

There are few Catholics who are unaware that Pope Francis has spoken on these matters, but there are, unfortunately, perhaps just as few — maybe even among us priests — who have taken the time to thoroughly consider this important document and read it according to the mind of the Church. We are not dealing with an abstract theological document; rather, the issues touched upon in this document are real, concrete, day-to-day pastoral realities that concern us most directly. Inspired by our responsibility to teach and shepherd the faithful under our care, we have an opportunity to guide the faithful in the beautiful teachings and Truths of the faith and not leave interpretation and understanding to other sources.

It is very important that we read and understand the teaching of the Church so beautifully and positively expressed in the Holy Father's exhortation. As a way to assist us in doing this, I offer this reflection on *Amoris Laetitia* by focusing on five pastoral principles. It is my hope not only that it will give each of us who is charged with teaching and guiding in our Diocese a handy reference and summary of principles to aid in our

pastoral work, but also that it will be an impetus toward a thorough reading of the document itself in its entirety, on the part of every priest, deacon and seminarian as teachers of the faith in the Diocese of Kalamazoo. I ask you to allow your sacramental ministry, preaching, pastoral counseling and personal discernment to be guided by principles indicated by our Holy Father in his exhortation, which is a reaffirmation of the Church's timeless and positive teaching on the love, truth, and mercy of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. May these principles always be reflected in our own ministry.

I am very grateful to our brother, Francis Marotti, who put his recently earned S.T.L. degree to good use in researching and assisting me greatly with this resource.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Paul J. Bradley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Paul J. Bradley  
Bishop of Kalamazoo

Feast of the Transfiguration  
August 6, 2016

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## SUMMARY OF PASTORAL PRINCIPLES IN *AMORIS LAETITIA*

### **General Theme** – *The Priest as Faithful and Pastoral Shepherd*

Before considering the particular aspects of this lengthy exhortation, it may be helpful to consider an “overarching theme,” that allows us to find common ground for the entire document. At the risk of over-simplification, the Holy Father’s aim seems to be to reconcile two previously-opposed pastoral approaches: the orthodox-rigorous approach and the pastoral-permissive approach. What does this mean? Sometimes there is a tendency to generalize according to labels. If one is labeled as “orthodox,” that individual, by that very fact, is assumed to be somewhat cold and unmerciful. On the other hand, one who is labeled as primarily “pastoral” is often presumed to be somewhat casual or free with regard to doctrine. Obviously, each of these is an inaccurate caricature, and this is, in part, the problem which the Holy Father wishes to overcome. He hopes to remove that which is false in each and bring together that which is good in both:

**A priest is to be at once both orthodox and pastoral, while being neither rigorous nor permissive.** A priest who faithfully proclaims the fullness of Christ’s teaching must also do so with great humility, mercy and charity, while the priest who rightly shows great compassion and mercy, must also do so within the context of the fullness of Christ’s saving truth as proclaimed by the Church. We are confirmed in this by the words of Pope Francis when he says that for true pastoral discernment to take place, “the following conditions must necessarily be present: humility, discretion, and love for the Church and her teaching, in a sincere search for God’s will and a desire to make a more perfect response to it.” (300) *To state this principle briefly:* Truth and fidelity to doctrine are pastoral, while mercy and love are the heart of Catholic doctrine.

With this in mind, let us now proceed to a deeper reflection of *Amoris Laetitia* by considering five important pastoral principles gleaned from this very important document.



## I. Challenges of Modern Culture

While there are many positive aspects about the culture in which we live, at the same time, it is filled with ideologies, lifestyles and commonly-held principles which are very antagonistic to authentic human development and Christian discipleship. These negative influences are a factor in the lives of all, whether they are conscious of them or not. The context in which Pope Francis speaks of these problems is their influence on the perceived importance of marital commitment, and generosity and selflessness in relationships in general.

- A. **“Culture of the Ephemeral”** — Pope Francis notes how many today believe, “along the lines of social networks, that love can be connected or disconnected at the whim of the consumer” and that we treat relationships “the way we treat material objects and the environment: everything is disposable.” (39). Such an attitude is apparent in the decline of the importance of chastity and marital fidelity in the minds even of Christians. Pornography and other such forms of sexual exploitation are particularly poisonous and should be considered among the greatest enemies of healthy marriages and families.
- B. **Narcissism and Individualism** — These increasingly widespread illnesses also contribute to the destruction of marital and family relationships since narcissism “makes people incapable of looking beyond themselves, beyond their own desires and needs” (40) while individualism “weakens family bonds and ends up considering each member of the family as an isolated unit, leading in some cases to the idea that one’s personality is shaped by his or her desires, which are considered absolute.” (33).
- C. **False Concept of Freedom** — It is noted that there is a tendency “to confuse genuine freedom with the idea that each individual can act arbitrarily, as if there were no truths, values and principles to provide guidance, and everything were possible and permissible.” (34)

“Freedom of choice makes it possible to plan our lives and to make the most of ourselves. Yet if this freedom lacks noble goals or personal discipline, it degenerates into an inability to give oneself generously to others.”(33). He also notes that “breakups often occur among older adults who seek a kind of ‘independence’ and reject the ideal of growing old together, looking after and supporting one another.” (40).

### **Pastoral Response:**

- A. While we must be aware of these obstacles, it is important not to focus merely on “decrying present-day evils, as if this could change things. Nor is it helpful to try to impose rules by sheer authority.” Rather, we need to call people to a greater generosity in their relationships, and make a serious effort “to present the reasons and motivations for choosing marriage and the family, and in this way to help men and women better to respond to the grace that God offers them.” (35).
- B. “We need to find the right language, arguments and forms of witness that can help us reach the hearts of young people, appealing to their capacity for generosity, commitment, love and even heroism, and in this way inviting them to take up the challenge of marriage with enthusiasm and courage.” (40).
- C. Along these lines, it is important, as pastors, to recognize and affirm those many examples of beautiful and faithful marriages in our parishes, holding them up as inspiring examples to be followed. This, however, ought to be done with pastoral sensitivity, so as not to seem to demean or marginalize those individuals who, through whatever circumstances, may have experienced a painful divorce or separation.
- D. We ought also to encourage a generous spirit of service in the parish and the wider community, as the virtues necessary for counteracting the above-mentioned problems can only ever be acquired through concrete acts of selflessness. It is our obligation, my brothers, as shepherds and spiritual leaders, to discern how to most effectively promote this practice of self-giving and generosity in our particular parish communities.

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**II. Primacy of Mercy and Charity**

Pope Francis is insistent that we always proclaim the truth with love and compassion, recognizing that we, too, are sinners in constant need of God’s mercy. He repeatedly mentions the need to “accompany” the people in our care, especially if they are in irregular situations calling for special pastoral attention.

- A. **Pastors like Christ: Accompany and Encourage** — Placing Christ the Good Shepherd and Teacher before us as our ultimate model, he notes how our Lord “looked upon the women and men whom he met with love and tenderness, accompanying their steps in truth, patience and mercy as he proclaimed the demands of the Kingdom of God” (62).
  
- B. **The Church as a Hospital** — Using a beautiful image, he says that the Church “must accompany with attention and care the weakest of her children, who show signs of a wounded and troubled love, by restoring in them hope and confidence, like the beacon of a lighthouse in a port or a torch carried among the people to enlighten those who have lost their way...Let us not forget that the Church’s task is often like that of a field hospital.” (291)

- C. **Gospel examples** — Using examples of Christ’s pastoral solicitude from the Gospels, such as His visit to St. Peter’s mother-in-law, His compassion on the widow of Nain, dining with sinners, and forgiving the adulteress, he notes that Christ hears them, accompanies them, and *heals and changes* their situation. (cf. 21)
- D. **Loving Admonition** — Christian love bears fruit in mercy and forgiveness. Confronted with the woman caught in adultery, we see from Christ “not *condemnation* but *admonition* to lead a more worthy life” (27). Far from leaving her as she was, He called her to turn from her sinful way of life toward holiness. The main point here is to bring Christ’s transformative love and mercy to His people. It is supernatural love and mercy, and precisely because of that, He is not willing to leave a sinner in his or her sin. Pope Francis refers to this as the “pedgagogy of love” (211).

**Pastoral Response:** We might ask ourselves the following questions in pastoral situations:

- A. Am I really listening to and loving the persons in front of me?  
Do I have compassion on them in their difficulty and/or sin?
- B. Do I love them enough to tell them the truth, even if it might not be what they want to hear? Do I consult the Church’s teaching and guidance on this issue?
- C. Am I merely looking for an easy solution so that I can get on with my day or be well-liked?
- D. Do I get angry, frustrated or judgmental?
- E. Do I make a daily examen of my own failings so as to be more compassionate when confronted with the failings of others?

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### III. Fidelity to Church Teaching

Among the things absolutely necessary for proper pastoral discernment, the Holy Father includes “love for the Church and her teaching, in a sincere search for God’s will and a desire to make a more perfect response to it.” (300). We might contrast this with an attitude of considering the Church’s doctrine as an obstacle to, rather than the foundation of, a proper pastoral approach. This attitude can manifest itself, in the worst case, by a refusal to follow the teaching of the Church or, in another way, by a merely grudging adherence to it.

- A. **Fullness of Truth** — Many have said Pope Francis paints Church teaching (on marriage and family in particular) as some kind of unattainable ideal which we should never expect to find in “real life.” This is a misinterpretation. While living our lives consistently according to the Gospel values and Jesus’ teachings is a life-long challenge, Jesus told us that the pursuit of that perfection and holiness is the definition of what being a true disciple is. In that same vein, Pope Francis repeatedly calls pastors to propose “the full ideal of the Gospel and the Church’s teaching” (308), after the example of Christ “who set forth a demanding ideal yet never failed to show compassion.” (38). In fact, he clearly states that the ideal can and should be realized, and it up to us as priests and deacons to encourage, challenge and accompany people in order to reach it. (Cf. 148, 200, 230, 303, 307)
- B. **Being Pastoral Without Truth: A Contradiction** — We must be convinced of this one all-important fact: the Church’s teaching, while a challenging “sign of contradiction” (200), must always form the foundation of our pastoral ministry. We cannot be truly merciful without being faithful to Christ’s teaching. If we deprive our spiritual brothers and sisters of the fullness of Christ’s saving truth, we show a lack of confidence in Christ’s assurance that the “truth will set you free.” (John 8:32)

## **Pastoral Response:**

- A. There are three errors that we can fall into when confronted with the realities of sin and complex family situations in our pastoral ministry which may require special attention:
1. We might simply rely on general norms and apply them without concerning ourselves with a prayerful discernment of the concrete reality before us or a personal engagement with those concerned. This can be due to a misguided belief that a priest/deacon is merely a judge, canonist or theologian; or to a misplaced desire for efficiency which finds such a procedure to be conveniently neat and quick.
  2. We might remain indifferent to the objective problem or sin and do nothing at all to address or correct it; we may even devise our own “solution” which goes outside of or against the Church’s pastoral guidance. Here I think of an ill-advised recourse to the so-called “internal forum solution” to take care of a situation without using proper discernment.
  3. We might assure the person that there really is no problem, that it is just a matter of “inconsequential canonical particulars”, or “outdated moral norms”, or that it is a matter of individual conscience which leaves the person to devise his or her own solution, if any, to the problem.
- B. The above responses are not rooted in truth, nor are they pastoral. A pastor must always honestly take into account the objective, specific reality before him and relate this to the sure and certain guidance of the Church’s teaching; furthermore, he must do so with great love, discernment, and compassion. The three errors just enumerated each fail in one or both of these respects. As Pope Francis notes, it is our duty to help correctly form the consciences of our brothers and sisters. This is done in our preaching, our example, and our personal/pastoral encounters with them. We do our sisters and brothers no favors when, finding them in ignorance of a particular truth of the Faith, we choose to leave them there rather than to teach them and enlighten their conscience in a spirit of loving accompaniment.

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**IV. Proper Understanding of Marriage**

A fundamental theme of the document is the proper understanding of marriage, especially as it reflects the inner life of the Blessed Trinity: “The word of God tells us that the family is entrusted to a man, a woman and their children, so that they may become a communion of persons in the image of the union of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Begetting and raising children, for its part, mirrors God’s creative work. The family is called to join in daily prayer, to read the word of God and to share in Eucharistic communion, and thus to grow in love and become ever more fully a temple in which the Spirit dwells.” (29) This is not to forget that families often fall short of this ideal, and often there is a “bitter truth found throughout sacred Scripture, that is, the presence of pain, evil and violence that break up families and their communion of life and love.” (19)

- A. **Trinitarian** — Marital love is a concrete sign of the fruitful self-giving of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Pope Francis reaffirms the basic truth that marriage necessarily consists in the interpersonal communion and complementarity of man and woman that normally bears fruit in new life. “Christ proposed as the distinctive sign of his disciples the law of love and the gift of self for others” (27). “The marital union is

evoked not only in its sexual and corporal dimension, but also in its voluntary self-giving in love. The result of this union is that the two ‘become one flesh’, both physically and in the union of their hearts and lives, and, eventually, in a child, who will share not only genetically but also spiritually in the ‘flesh’ of both parents.” (13)  
“The ability of human couples to beget life is the path along which the history of salvation progresses. Seen this way, the couple’s fruitful relationship becomes an image for understanding and describing the mystery of God himself, for in the Christian vision of the Trinity, God is contemplated as Father, Son and Spirit of love.” (11).

**B. Marriage Preparation** — It is very important that the priest/deacon take an active role in forming young couples seeking marriage, and cooperate with other staff in building a solid foundation for these future families. Marriage preparation materials should be reviewed, especially if they have not been updated in a long time. The most effective programs and materials should be sought, in order to ensure that our young people are receiving the fullness of the beautiful Catholic understanding of marriage. Among the themes that should be emphasized above all else are:

1. The unity and indissolubility of marriage
2. The unitive and procreative aspects of marital intimacy
3. Marriage as a vocation to holiness
4. The domestic church and importance of the practice of the faith in the home
5. Natural Family Planning in its most recent exposition
6. The importance of fatherhood and motherhood
7. The education of children in the faith

It is important to always be aware and take advantage of the support and many programs that the diocesan offices provide with regard to the domestic church, marriage preparation, catechesis, etc. I ask you to utilize these along with your own parish resources.

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## V. Pastoral Counseling and Discernment

- A. **Divorced and Remarried** — Those who are divorced and have remarried without having previously received a declaration of nullity are to be pastorally (and privately) instructed to refrain from receiving Holy Communion until their marital situation is regularized. In such situations, the persons in question are not to be harshly criticized or judged, but neither are we to compromise the very clear words of Christ on the issue of divorce and remarriage. It should be pointed out that the Church's instruction that they refrain from the sacraments until they can be validly married is nothing more than a faithful following of Christ's own teaching in the Gospels. There are, of course, couples that show themselves to be faithfully committed to living chastely as brother and sister until their situation is regularized, and for such people it seems possible to use a pastoral solution which still must avoid scandal. I think of the rare, but possible, case of a couple absolutely convinced of the invalidity of the previous marriage(s), faithfully living chastely as brother and sister (if, that is, the situation requires that they live together at all), and intensely desirous of receiving the sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion. Again, such a situation is rare and is not to be presumed in every case, especially because scandal is a very grave concern. If such a situation arises, the reception of Holy Communion should be done in such a way as to avoid the possibility of scandal.

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<sup>1</sup> It is very important to make sure that the faithful understand that mere divorce (without) being remarried civilly) does not present an obstacle tot the reception of Holy Communion.

- B. Persons in Homosexual Relationships** — Precisely because of the Trinitarian dimension of human love, Pope Francis reaffirms that “there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God’s plan for marriage and family.” (251). Those living in a publicly scandalous situation are to be instructed to refrain from receiving Holy Communion because of the objectively grave nature of the situation. This instruction must be done with great gentleness and prudence, and should include a sufficient explanation of the reasons for this prohibition. Such an explanation ought to touch on the fact that, while as persons they are loved no less by our Lord, an active homosexual lifestyle (as, in fact, any *heterosexual* activity outside of marriage), is such that it presents an obstacle to a worthy reception of Christ’s Body and Blood. This instruction must be made in advance privately to the persons in question, rather than *after* a public denial of Holy Communion, which would be contrary to pastoral prudence and charity. That being said, this in no way frees anyone from the obligation to love and accompany people who struggle with same-sex attraction, nor does it entitle anyone to judge such a person. On the contrary, we are to encourage them to strive after holiness, confident in God’s tender love for them, and to virtuously and joyfully live the kind of life that all Christians are called to — that of holy chastity.
- C. Degree of Culpability** — Pope Francis reminds us that objective sin and subjective culpability for the sin are two distinct realities. This helps us as pastors show greater compassion for those who find themselves in objectively problematic situations, since we can often presume that people today — many of whom were catechized poorly, if at all — are operating at least on some level under the burden of ignorance, and may not be gravely *culpable* even when we are dealing with grave *matter*. Nevertheless, the concern of scandal remains, and even if a pastor can determine that someone is burdened by ignorance, this does not mean that he should forego the usual pastoral instruction and admonition.

D. **Scandal** — While always wanting to show as much compassion as possible, we must also always be mindful that a person's individual situation does not have an effect *only* on that person. When dealing with issues that are public (in this case marriage), the pastor must not make allowances for the persons which can cause scandal to the rest of the faithful. I think, for instance, of inviting or allowing persons in irregular marital situations to be involved in ministerial functions in the liturgy. It is important to keep in mind that deepening the faithful's appreciation for the sanctity of marriage is impeded or even contradicted by actions or decisions on our part that seem to minimize the gravity of irregular situations. We should always exercise great prudence and caution when dealing with such marriage situations, and always ask ourselves: "Does this decision help the people of God appreciate the great sanctity of marriage and of the Eucharist? Or will it rather harm or weaken the faith of some?"

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## Conclusion

I truly hope, brothers, that this brief summary will help you navigate the increasingly-confusing waters of pastoral ministry, and be an encouragement to continue to serve the People of God with compassion, courage, mercy, love and truth. Know that as we tirelessly labor and collaborate with each other in the Lord's Vineyard, I am very appreciative of your valued assistance. Let us continue to pray for one another. May the joy of the Gospel and the teachings of the Church be our constant guides in our pastoral ministry.

Let us move forward, in our new pastoral assignments with renewed vigor, always faithful to the Lord's teachings, and clearly showing forth in our own ministries the saving Love of Jesus the Good Shepherd.

***“So that in all things God may be glorified.”***



## **Resources:**

Visit Vatican website, [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va) to download “Amoris Laetitia”

Visit Diocesan website, [www.diokzoo.org](http://www.diokzoo.org) for additional resources regarding marriage, family and the Domestic Church.

Visit United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB);  
[www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org); [www.foryourmarriage.org](http://www.foryourmarriage.org); [www.portumatrimonio.org](http://www.portumatrimonio.org)

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