

MAGISTERIUM

Marriage is not an ideal. Leo XIV 'corrects' Francis

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The Holy Father's address to pilgrims for the [Jubilee of Families, Grandparents and the Elderly](#) was rich in content and can not be fully covered in one article alone. We encourage readers to consult the text directly, but it is worth highlighting a concise yet profound passage that substantially corrects the theological and pastoral assumptions of *Amoris Laetitia* (AL). While an address cannot formally cancel an Apostolic

Exhortation, substantively and strictly theologically, this one has done so. This gives hope for more authentically magisterial steps to follow. The brief speech is as follows: "For this reason, with a heart full of gratitude and hope, I say to you, spouses, that marriage is not an ideal, but the norm of true love between a man and a woman: a love that is total, faithful and fruitful (cf. St Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae*, 9)."

'Marriage is not an ideal', yet when *Amoris Laetitia* addresses so-called 'irregular' situations, such as cohabitation outside of marriage or following divorce, it views them as situations of inadequacy in relation to the fullness of what Christ offers us. Not as something contrary and incompatible, but as something inadequate due to human frailty or life circumstances. Inadequacy is not evil, to be condemned or avoided; it is still positive, albeit not completely, and should be nurtured and improved. We are all on the right path; some are just further ahead than others.

At the beginning of the Exhortation, for example, Francis says, 'I will therefore focus on an invitation to mercy and pastoral discernment in situations that do not fully correspond to what the Lord proposes to us'. According to *Amoris Laetitia*, sin is not a wrong response, but a response that does not fully correspond. Regarding the Gospel episode of the Samaritan woman, the text of *Amoris Laetitia* says, '... and then alone with Jesus, who does not condemn her and invites her to a more dignified life', which suggests that even adultery has some dignified aspects.

One of the most disruptive aspects of the Exhortation is expressed in paragraph 303, which states that conscience can recognise 'with sincerity and honesty' that this irregular situation is 'the gift that God himself is asking for in the midst of the concrete complexity of limitations, even though it is not yet fully the objective ideal'.

The word 'ideal' is a key term in *Amoris laetitia*, but it was strongly opposed at the time by the old guard of the John Paul II Institute, who have since been criticised by Pope Francis for their opposition to it. Cardinal Caffarra observed, with tears in his eyes and a hint of irony, that 'indissolubility, and Christian marriage more generally, is not an ideal, a sort of goal to be achieved and striven for'. I would like to see the reaction of a wife whose husband said to her: "Look, fidelity to you is an ideal towards which I strive, but which I do not yet possess."

When irregular situations are presented as positive steps towards marriage, the idea is put forward that it is possible to live as husband and wife without actually being married. During the painful debate ten years ago, Cardinal Velasio de Paolis wrote: 'What is not admissible under moral and divine law is precisely that two people who are

not spouses live as such... It would mean the total destruction of the marital relationship and the family, and the whole moral law on sexuality would collapse”.

This brief passage from Leo XIV's speech therefore restores the truth on a very important point. Its inclusion implies a reappraisal of the entire Apostolic Exhortation on which it was based and implicitly responds to the **Cardinals' Dubia**. At the same time, it is also a return to John Paul II's Veritatis Splendor. If divine morality presents only an 'ideal' and not a 'prescription', then divine laws that are always valid for everyone cannot be given. However, Veritatis Splendor condemns moral positions that 'believe it is impossible to formulate an absolute prohibition of certain behaviours that would be contrary to those values in every circumstance and culture' (n. 75). Certain behaviours cannot be evaluated as unjust or wrong while also evaluating the will of the person who chooses them as right and good. The tendency towards the will of the acting person is certainly important, but this is realised when the good content of human action is realised.

If the principle of divine moral law as an 'ideal' is rejected and we return to Veritatis Splendor, the doctrine of intrinsically evil actions (intrinsic mala, and on the political level, non-negotiable principles) can also be revived. Hopefully, we can then return to speaking of 'nature' and natural moral law, the existence of which had been forgotten.