

TAMALE ECCLISIATICAL PROVINCE PASTORAL CONFERENCE 2019

TALK GIVEN BY REV. FR. DANIEL FUSEINI SAAKA

THEME: RESPONDING TO AMORIS LAETITIA WITH LOVE, FAITH AND HOPE: THE ROLE OF COUPLES, CLERGY, RELIGIOUS AND LAITY

INTRODUCTION

Mr Chairman, Your Grace, My Lord Bishops, Executive Members of TEPPCON, Vicar Generals, priests and religious here present, Diocesan Representatives, representatives of Church groups and societies, distinguished invited guests, the media, ladies and gentlemen.

The theme for this talk: **“Responding to *Amoris Laetitia* with Love, Faith and Hope: the Role of Couples, Clergy, Religious and Laity”** captures perfectly the right attitude that Pope Francis advocates in *Amoris Laetitia*. May I congratulate you the executives and organizers of this Conference for responding to the call made by Pope Francis to all Christ’s faithful to give attention to his Post-Synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. I also wish to thank you, Mr Chairman, Your Grace and My Lord Bishops, for the invitation extended to me to speak to you on this theme just mentioned above. I am deeply humbled and pray not to disappoint you.

MARRIAGE IN GOD’S PLAN

Mr Chairman, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, marriage has a central place in God’s Plan of creation. It is not for nothing that Sacred Scripture begins with the story of the creation of man and woman (Adam and Eve) in the image and likeness of God in Genesis 1.26, and concludes with a vision of the wedding-feast of the Lamb in Revelation 19.9. The same Sacred Scripture speaks of the mystery of marriage, its institution and the meaning God has given it. It also speaks about its origin, its end, and its various realizations throughout the history of salvation. We also find in Sacred Scripture the failure of man to keep to the original plan of God for marriage. And in the New Testament, the evangelists speak about the renewal of marriage in the New Covenant of Christ and the Church (cf. CCC 1602-1620). All these point to the fact that marriage has a place in God’s plan of salvation; it has the purpose of leading man and woman to sanctity.

As an institution, marriage brings man and woman together in a partnership of life. In the teaching of the Church, marriage is also defined as a vocation of love, and as a vocation, it is written into the very nature of human beings by God himself. Again, Christ himself raised it to the dignity of a Sacrament which reflects the relationship between Christ and his Church. As a Sacrament, marriage sanctifies a relationship and unites the parties as *gifts* to one another with the profundity of a divine union. In marriage the mutual consent of the couple is anchored in a promise of God's covenant with humanity.

Marriage therefore is for the good of the couple and the community. Right from the beginning of Creation, God introduced equality of husband and wife in the institution of marriage. By creating both man and woman in his image, God has made man and woman equal partners in marriage. The expression **man and woman he created them** (Gen. 1.27) points directly to this **original equality** which God himself had ordained. However, this original design of God was deeply wounded and hurt by the sin of Adam and Eve. Therefore, Mr Chairman, right from the beginning of creation, disorder was introduced into marriage by the sin of Adam and Eve (cf. Gen. 3. 6, 9-13). The selfish desire of human beings - to be free from God and do things without any responsibility - was introduced into this noble institution. This selfishness, however, breaks the man and the woman's relations with God and with his fellow human beings. Relationship between man and woman then became disharmonious, with recrimination, accusation, mistrust, domination, infidelity, violence, separation, among others. Today, these issues have assumed a disturbing reality in marriage and families, thereby frustrating the purpose of marriage, and bringing untold hardship and suffering to couples.

To ensure that we do not lose sight of the original plan of God for marriage, the Church through the centuries has relentlessly proposed new ways, in line with the teaching of Our Lord Jesus Christ, to address the many challenges that threaten the existence of marriages as an institution. In the light of this, the Church has given more and deliberate attention to marriage and particularly the condition of couples. This is evident with the numerous Church documents on marriage and family life that are available to us. It is important to note that the conditions in which families live today point to a disturbing reality of suffering and abuse leading to serious crisis in some Christian families.

Also many marriages and families suffer because of the inability of the couples to show love to one another. There is also the lack of faith and trust in the grace of God to sustain marriage on the part of married couples. As a result, some of them get themselves involved in practices that later caused them pain and regret in their married lives. Where the situation becomes unbearable these marriages end in separation.

Therefore, in *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis gives us the real picture of the situations of families and invited all of us (couples, priests, religious and laity) to be more involved in the Church's mission toward married couples and their families. This call by the Holy Father must be religiously adhered to by all. Therefore, I wish to share with you some proposals made by Pope Francis in *Amoris Laetitia* as a way of encouraging all of us to play our roles toward strengthening (especially) Christian families.

AMORIS LAETITIA

The Post-Synodal Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, is the fruit of the deliberation of two Synods of Bishops that were held to respond to the new challenges of the family in the world today. Mr Chairman, you would recall that Pope Francis announced on 8th October 2013 that there was going to be an Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops which was scheduled to take place in October 2014. This was followed by another Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2015. These two Synods discussed contemporary issues on the family and its role in evangelization. These two Synods examined and analysed the information and recommendations received from dioceses all over the world.

From their discussions, two things must be noticed. **First**, it was clear to the Fathers of the Synods that the Church has the best doctrine on marriage and family, yet most of her children are living in some form of marriages and family life that go contrary to the doctrines on marriage. **Second**, some of the children of the Church felt excluded from the Christian communities due to their particular situations. It was noted with concern that many families were victims of the law that was meant to protect them. In most cases, the laws are applied equally to all situations without proper discernment of the particularity of each situation. Pope Francis observed that, “general rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded or neglected, but in their formulation they cannot provide absolutely for all particular situations” (AL, n 304). Related to both issues was the clear

lack of patience and understanding for couples by some pastors of the Church who instead of journeying with these people, were rather busy judging them. The Synod Fathers also found out that most of those who were in what the Pope called irregular or imperfect union suffered abuses and exclusion from laity as well as the clergy and the religious.

According to the Synod Fathers, when dealing with those who have difficulties in living God's law to the full, the invitation to pursue the *via caritatis* must be clearly heard. Fraternal charity is the first law of Christians (AL, n 306). In this way we should be like Jesus "who set forth a demanding ideal yet never failed to show compassion and closeness to the frailty of individuals like the Samaritan woman or the woman caught in adultery" (AL, n 38).

This is exactly where Pope Francis wants us to remain – **the way of love**. It is for this reason that he proposed the fourth and fifth chapters for our consideration. These two chapters which address the issue of love in marriage are central to this document, according to Pope Francis. For Pope Francis, love is the most important ingredient in any relationship and for the stability of marriage and the family. Therefore, he has invited all to read chapters four and five of *Amoris Laetitia*. These two chapters concern *love* as the core of this document. There is great joy in total self-giving sacrifice of love, the lack of which leads to sadness and bitterness. So my talk will focus on this because love acquires and sustains faith and hope in a strong bond that can stand the test of time, for love is divine. According to the Pope, the purpose of *Amoris Laetitia* is to offer help and encouragement to families in their daily commitments and challenges to know that the Church cares about them (cf. AL, n 4) and to urge all of us to play our respective roles.

After discussing the many challenges and crisis in families, the Pope also proposed some pastoral guidelines for accompanying those in these difficult situations. He advocates strongly a change of heart that would enable us with mercy to accompany couples amid life's challenges and crisis. In view of this, the Holy Father has offered "an invitation to mercy and the pastoral discernment of those situations that fall short of what the Lord demands of us" (AL, n 6). The Pope is of the view that, with true spiritual discernment, we can find concrete solutions to the many difficulties and innumerable challenges confronting families today.

THE SITUATIONS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAMILIES IN THE WORLD TODAY

Amoris Laetitia takes special interest in the challenges facing the families and calls on all pastors to listen to the reality of the family today in all its complexities, both joys and sorrows, to look by fixing their gaze on Christ to ponder, with renewed freshness and enthusiasm, what revelation says about the beauty, the role and the dignity of the family; and finally to confronting the situation – not the persons - with an eye on the Lord Jesus, to discern the ways in which we can renew our commitment to the family (cf. *Relatio Synodi*, n 4). According to Pope Francis, despite the problems and challenges, every family can always grow where love is (cf. AL, n 53).

In the second chapter of *Amoris Laetitia*, we find the experiences many families go through in the world today. The Pope is worried because the current problems and challenges have pushed some marriages to the collapse (cf AL, n 31). Mr Chairman, some of the currents challenges and problems in marriages today are a result of the lifestyle and ideological choices we make. Due to certain lifestyles, the idea of life-long commitment appears to be inconvenient or tiresome for many of our Christians (cf AL, n 34). In situations like this the sanctity of marriage and family life is traded for some contemporary ideologies about marriage and the family. In our own society, some families are collapsing because of our lifestyles.

Another situation the Pope mentioned is the “the culture of throwaway”. This is one of the contemporary ideologies that Pope Francis is very concern about. Not only that this culture denies the poor and the hungry food to eat, but that it has also found its way into the relationship between man and woman. This culture is simply to use what you want as much as you want and thrown away when you do not have use of it, whether it is still useful or not. Then you go and get another one. We are very much aware of many young men and women who easily jump into a relationship today and reject the next day, simply because they found another one. The more worrying is women are treated as material objects to be used and disposed at will. This attitude is not based on love but greed and selfishness. Relationships today, Mr Chairman are treated as material objects just in the same way we treat the environment with the mentality that “everything is disposable; everyone uses and throws away, takes and breaks, exploits and squeezes to the last drop. Then, goodbye” (AL, n 39).

We do not need to go far in order to find examples of this unfortunate mentality that **everything is disposable**. The numbers of broken relationships that have been recorded within our province alone, and the number of people who have left their matrimonial homes and are comfortably making the proverbial “gardens” on lands that they have not acquired, are clear examples of this. When this happens, the faithful partner has to endure the pain of seeing her husband being taken away by another woman. The feeling of being used and dumped is more excruciating than a nail passed through your flesh.

Mr Chairman, Your Grace, My Lord Bishops, the fear expressed by Pope Paul VI in his *humanae vitae* (Paul VI, 1968 - On the Regulation of Birth) of the destruction that artificial contraceptives and birth controls would bring, has unfortunately caught up with us. But the most worrying is the adverse effects the use of these artificial things have the health of pregnancies and child health. Today, Your Grace and My Lord Bishops, a number of your daughters are like slaves in their matrimonial homes because of the absence of the fruit of the womb. The long use of such programmes, coupled with the contemporary lifestyle has tempered the fertile wombs of some of our ladies. The virtue of abstinence and chastity needs proclaimed again and forcefully.

Related to these artificial programmes is the increasing exploitation of the bodies of young ladies for profits or for pleasure and only to be thrown away after use. This same culture has also led many to terminate the lives of innocent babies through abortions. The question is often asked whether a pregnancy is wanted or not and then disposed of. This attitude deepens this throwaway culture.

Mr Chairman, another factor which brings suffering to families is the irresponsibility of some fathers. The father has an important role in the family. According to the Pope, with “with regard to the protection and support of their wives and children... Many men are conscious of the importance of their role in the family and live their masculinity accordingly. The absence of a father gravely affects family life and the upbringing of children and their integration into society. This absence, which may be physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual, deprives children of a suitable father figure” (AL, n 55). This irresponsibility is fast growing among some of our young married men who find nothing wrong to leave their wives and children at home and go out drinking and coming home late, or others who easy beat their wives in the presence of their children. This attitude affects the growth and emotional maturity of the children. Mr Chairman, Your Grace, My

Lord Bishops, this has a long effect on vocation and the emotional quality of our priest and religious.

I also wish to state that inability to enter into interpersonal relationships, unforgiveness, and mutual lack of understanding between couples is the most serious factors causing divorce and separations. These can unfortunately lead to the often irreparable breakdown of valid marriages.

Another issue is the financial demands that parents have to meet. Many families are in distress because of the lack of jobs, poverty, unemployment, stress of work, societal pressure, single parenting, the effects of death on the family, problems associated with child upbringing among others. Many parents are weighed down with the responsibilities of work which keeps them away from home and reduced the quality of time they spend with their children (AL, n 44). Another related factor is the expensive weddings that our society has gain notoriety for. Many young people take loans to organise their weddings and some spend some years struggling to pay back. Their first year of marriage then turns to be a worry over a debt to be paid instead a period to enjoy their love. This is also creating poverty and bad feeling of each other in the first years of the marriage.

Mr Chairman, the attitude of some pastors and other laity is also a factor affecting marriage and family life. Some pastors, instead of proposing new ways of finding true happiness for couples in distress, they waste their pastoral energy condemning couples (AL, n 38). Pope Francis says we the pastors need a a healthy dose of self-criticism. We need to be humble and acknowledge that our style of handling people, the way we present our doctrines and treat other people has helped contribute to the problems of today. He said: “At times we have also proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families. This excessive idealization, especially when we have failed to inspire trust in God’s grace, has not helped to make marriage more desirable and attractive, but quite the opposite” (AL, n 36). In his view, the doctrines are often emphasised without the show of mercy and compassion for the situation of the person.

Related to this is the practice of annulment of marriages. Most of our people are still bitter even after their marriages have been rightly annulled. In situations like this, it is important that those who are entrusted with the responsibility of establishing the “non-existence” in the first place of the marriage, must not overlook the issue of justice. In some of these annulled marriages, there

still remain issues of justice with regards to property, and the question of the legitimacy or otherwise with regard to children. When these issues of justice are not properly resolved, the parties will continue to live in bitterness and acrimony against each other even after the marriage is annulled. Therefore, in our duty to protect the laws of the Church that safeguard the sanctity of marriage, let us not be seen to be perpetuating injustice. In such cases is it possible to delay granting the annulment until matters of justice are settled.

It is worthy of noting that many of our women still suffer a lot of abuses in their homes coupled with some unacceptable practices against women. The Pope observed that most of our women are still being subjected to shameful ill-treatment, domestic violence (verbal, physical and sexual violence) and various forms of enslavement obviously contradict the very nature of the conjugal union.

RESPONDING WITH LOVE, FAITH AND HOPE: OUR ROLE

The Role of Couples

A lot of the stability of marriages and the joy associated with marriage depend on the man and woman who have given themselves to each other. The sacrament of marriage confers a special grace which consists of a specific participation in Christ's life. This grace is sufficient enough to sustain marriages for life. This special grace is intended to make perfect the couple's love and to strengthen their indissoluble unity. By this grace, husband and wife help one another to attain holiness because Christ himself is the source of this grace and just as of old God encountered his people with a covenant of love and fidelity, "so our Savior, the spouse of the Church, now encounters Christian spouses through the sacrament of Matrimony. Christ dwells with them, gives them the strength to take up their crosses and so follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another's burdens, to be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ, and to love one another with supernatural, tender, and fruitful love. In the joys of their love and family life he gives them here on earth a foretaste of the wedding feast of the Lamb" (CCC 1642).

Couples must demonstrate faith in the grace of Christ who joined them together in holy matrimony. Pope Francis is advising couples to make the Word of God the essential in lives because it is the most beautiful, most excellent, most appealing and at the same time most necessary. "Indeed,

nothing is more solid, profound, secure, meaningful and wise than that message. In effect, ‘all Christian formation consists of entering more deeply into the kerygma’ (AL, n 53). For Pope Francis, the love of God which always accompanies our human journey heals and transforms us through his grace. Couples should have faith and trust in the teaching of the Church. He said the doctrine of the indissolubility of marriage should not be viewed as a “yoke” to be imposed on humanity, but as a “gift” granted to those who are joined in marriage (AL, n 62).

Couples should also be ready to forgive one another because unforgiveness breaks the home. Couples must understand that to love is to forgive. Couples should allow ill feeling to take root in their hearts, because it can lead to unforgiveness and revenge. According to Pope Francis, the opposite of resentment is forgiveness, which is rooted in a positive attitude that seeks to understand other people’s weaknesses and to excuse them (AL, n 105). Sometimes the fear that the hurt we forgive will be repeated makes us hold back forgiveness. He calls for unconditional forgiveness (AL, n 108).

Couples must also be gentle with each other because love is gentle. We should be patient with one another but this does not mean letting ourselves be constantly mistreated, tolerating physical aggression or allowing other people to use us (AL, n 92). According to Pope Francis, couples should not use the weakness of the other to treat that person with contempt. It is possible that in a family some will be mature than others, but the mature should not become unbearably arrogant and rude towards those that are less knowledgeable about the faith. Quoting from St. Paul’s hymn of love he said love is not rude or impolite and it is not harsh. Indeed, love abhors making others suffer (AL, n 99). When there is love in a family, all members feel happy despite their weaknesses because love embraces the other as he or she is. It does not rejoice over the weakness of the other. So couples must be gentle with each other. According to Pope Francis, our first reaction when we are annoyed should be one of heartfelt blessing, asking God to bless, free and heal that person (cf. AL, n 104).

Couples also need to make some sacrifices for the other because sacrifice preserves family communion. This requires a generous openness of each and all to understanding, to forbearance, to pardon, to reconciliation. Couple should not also dwell too much on the past mistakes of each other, rather they should help the other to overcome their past mistakes. The Pope also asked us to pray over our own limitations and past histories that we may accept ourselves, learn how to live

with others and even to forgive ourselves, in order to have this same attitude towards others. The inability of couples to leave behind their past can lead to difficulties in their current relationship. Couples should be open and discuss everything relating to their marriage and themselves.

It is important that couples learn to keep faith and hope that their present difficulties and challenges are short-lived. It is this hope that would keep them attached to each other even in moments of unbearable weight of problems.

They should also have the well fare of their children at heart and contribute their individual parts towards the upbringing of the children. Parents should teach their children the faith that is entrusted to them.

Couples should learn to ask for forgiveness, ask for permission before doing something and be polite when they speak to each other. Finally they have to learn to say “let us pray” over every issue.

Clergy, Religious and the faithful

Amoris Laetitia calls on priests and religious to accompany couples and individuals facing challenges in life so they can draw closer to Christ and experience his love and mercy. According to Pope Francis, priests and religious must have a compassionate pastoral approach to the married, the single, divorced and divorced and remarried. Most of these people are struggling to face their issues in life and the teaching of the Church on marriage. In the heart of such people is the desire to reconcile but they do not know where to start from. Priests and religious need to go closer to such people, listen to their stories with the genuine desire to assist. Here the Pope calls for a compassionate accompaniment for all those in difficult situation in order to assist them come to Christ, the source of joy.

Priests and religious should also use *Amoris Laetitia* to guide them in the preparation and working with married couples. The document has given some pastoral guidelines for this. When we reflect on the pastoral implications of *Amoris Laetitia*, we should bear in mind that the Pope is not changing the teaching of the Church. The understanding that the Pope has change the stance of the Church on irregular unions can affect our ability to appreciate the pastoral approach of the Holy Father. It is important for us priests and religious to understand that the *Amoris Laetitia* (though

we may disagree with some things) does not change the teaching of Church on marriage. What Pope Francis has done in this document is rather to place a greater emphasis on the role of the individual conscience in appropriating those moral norms in the actual situations of persons. We are to be reminded that our role in marriage and family life is that of complete fidelity with the teaching of the Church and to help form the conscience and not to replace it. Pope Francis' joy is to see that we approach each of these situations with a compassionate and merciful heart, after the example of Jesus Christ.

Using the story of the woman caught in adultery in the Gospel of John (8.1ff), the Pope noted that Jesus did not abolish the Jewish law on marriage, rather he recognized the sinful human condition of the woman and avoided condemning her. Therefore, as priests and religious, we are to act in like manner and recognize the mercy of God at work in each human life. This does not absolve any one from the law but that we recognize that each person needs to be helped so we can continue to journey towards Christ.

Priests, religious and other lay faithful involved in the preparation of young couples for marriage must take this task serious. Our role is to ensure that young couples are prepared adequately. According to the Holy Father "The complexity of today's society and the challenges faced by the family require a greater effort on the part of the whole Christian community in preparing those who are about to be married (AL, n 206). According to the Synod Fathers, "we need to help young people discover the dignity and beauty of marriage. They should be helped to perceive the attraction of a complete union that elevates and perfects the social dimension of existence, gives sexuality its deepest meaning, and benefits children by offering them the best context for their growth and development" (AL, n 205).

Laity

The Laity are also encouraged by Pope Francis, to avoid judging and condemning those living in irregular situations. They should be more concern about helping such people to feel part of the Christian community. They are to mobilise resources and other needs to support these people in their communities.

They laity who live with these people in their communities should show interest in whatever happens to them. They are also to bring the problems of these people to the pastors of the parish for redress.

Most of the laity whose marriages are examples for others should be more involved in the counselling sessions of couples. They should be relentless in praying for those brothers and sisters of the parish who are not able to keep to the demand of the law of Christ.

Conclusion: Marriage and Family Celebration

Mr Chairman, Your Grace, My Lord Bishops, in conclusion I wish to stress that *Amoris Laetitia* would remain only a document if we do nothing to put into practice what is suggested. I therefore wish to suggest to you, Your Grace and My Lord bishops a proposal to draw up a weeklong of activities focused on marriage and family life to be celebrated in all parishes leading to its climax on the Feast of the Holy Family. This would be an opportunity for each parish to get more information about the conditions in which most of their people live, and to help them with a renewed pastoral effort to address their challenges that marriages and families face. When this is given a diocesan character, the fruits would be enormous. This will also afford the Church the opportunity to study in detail and come out with solutions with regards to payment of dowries and the unfortunate over expensive weddings we are witnessing today.

I wish to commit all of you here present to the intercession of the Holy Family.

Thank you for your attention.