

Reading Guide for Amoris Laetitia

In his previous Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis wrote that, after two thousand years, Jesus has once again become a stranger in so many countries, even in the West. For this reason, “we need to be realistic and not assume that our audience understands the full background to what we are saying, or is capable of relating what we say to the very heart of the Gospel which gives it meaning, beauty and attractiveness” (EG 34).

Hence, the style of Pope Francis encourages not just a “renewal” but even more, a real “conversion” of **language**. The aim is clear: to ensure that the proclamation of the Gospel is meaningful and reaches everyone. The Gospel must not be merely theoretical, not detached from people’s real lives. To talk about the family and to families, the challenge is not to change doctrine but to inculcate the general principles in ways that they can be understood and practiced. Our language should encourage and reassure every positive step taken by every real family.

Accordingly, Pope Francis wants to express himself in language that truly reaches the audience – and this implies **discernment and dialogue**.

Discernment avoids taking truths and choices for granted; it has us examine and consciously adopt our formulations of truths and the choices we make.

Like his predecessors, Pope Francis asks that as pastors we discern amongst the various situations experienced by our faithful and by all people, the families, the individuals. Such discernment is necessary constantly, not only in exceptional cases. **Discernment** is a constant process of being open to the Word of God to illuminate the concrete reality of every life; it leads us to be docile to the Spirit; it encourages each of us to act with all the love possible in concrete situations. Discernment thus encourages us to grow from good to better. One of the characteristics of discernment, according to St Ignatius of Loyola, is the insistence not only on taking the objective truth into account, but also on expressing this truth with a good, a constructive spirit. Discernment is the dialogue of the shepherds with the Good Shepherd in order to always seek the salvation of the sheep.

The mentality of Pope Francis is one of **dialogue**. He values thought that he calls “incomplete” and holds it to be eminently dialogical, that is to say not self-centered, not abstract, not a monologue. **Dialogue** means that we must not to take what we ourselves think for granted, nor what the other thinks. Francis

shows us two types of persons for whom dialogue is not possible because both "boil down" or reduce to themselves. Some reduce their own being to what they know or feel (he calls this "gnosticism"); the others reduce their own being to their strengths (he calls this "neopelagianism"). Dialogue involves belief in our essence as social beings and in our individual incompleteness – and this is basically positive, because it prevents us from closing in on ourselves and opens us to the love from which we come.

For the culture of dialogue, the **inclusion** of everyone is essential. But to say that we are all subjects does not mean a mere sum of all individuals; rather it means that the sum of all is understood as a people. The Pope suggests that we explicitly dwell on this way of understanding the Church, as the faithful people of God. The Pope's vision of *society* is inclusive. Such inclusion involves the effort to accept diversity, to dialogue with those who think differently, to encourage the participation of those with different abilities.

Dialogue and **discernment** are intertwined, as the Pope said in his audience with the *Civiltà Cattolica*: "Spiritual discernment seeks to recognize the presence of God's Spirit in our human and cultural reality; the seed of his presence already sown in events, in attitudes, in desires and in the profound struggles in our hearts and in social, cultural and spiritual contexts" (14.06.2013). This means that pastors have the obligation to discern situations well (cfr *Familiaris Consortio* n. 84 and *Sacramentum Caritatis* 29).

Therefore, **pastoral concern** should not be interpreted as opposed to law. On the contrary: love for the truth is the basic point of encounter between the law and pastoral care. Truth is not abstract; it integrates itself into the human and Christian journey of each believer. Pastoral care is also not a merely contingent practical application of theology. We are not meant to fit pastoral care to doctrine, but to preserve the original, constitutive pastoral seal of doctrine.

The language of **mercy** embodies the truth in life. The Pope's concern is therefore to re-contextualize doctrine at the service of the pastoral mission of the Church. Doctrine should be interpreted in relation to the heart of the Christian *kerygma* and in the light of the pastoral context in which it will be applied, always remembering that the *suprema lex* should be the *salus animarum*, as expressed in the final canon of the *Code of Canon Law*: "...and the salvation of souls, which must always be the supreme law in the Church, is to be kept before one's eyes" (Canon 1752).