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Pope Francis exudes joy.

He called his first formal message—known as an apostolic exhortation—*Evangelii Gaudium*, the “Joy of the Gospel.” It’s something the Church needed to hear because Catholics can look and act dour. Once he quipped, “often Christians look as if they are going to a funeral procession rather than going to praise God.”

Francis returns to the theme of joy in his second apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, the “Joy of Love.” Its opening sentence sets the tone: “The joy of love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church.”

The Pope’s teaching is the result of gatherings of Catholic bishops in 2014 and 2015. We know the issues that concerned the pope and the bishops all too well. Young people are not marrying as they had in the past. Many Catholic couples are separating, divorcing, and remarrying. New legislation is redefining marriage in countries like Canada to include “same-sex marriage” and adoption. Strains on family life often push it to dysfunction. There are new, unproven structures in child rearing. Blended families are now commonplace.

In response, the Church affirms the resiliency of family life. Speaking in the name of the bishops, the Pope extols the beauty of love. He advises young people to marry prudently but not to postpone the decision indefinitely.

Francis reflects on the words of St Paul that love is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful, arrogant or rude, never rejoicing in what is wrong,

but hoping and enduring all things (1 Corinthians 13.4–7). His graceful, almost poetic study of this passage is unlike anything we have seen before in papal documents. Combining insights from scripture scholars and psychologists, he writes of how sacrificial love finds its place in family life. It grows through many crises and challenges.

Francis sees love as a craft, something people have to work hard at, with care, insight, and perseverance. We should view love, he says, as a journey, in all true friendships and especially in family life.

His message is typical of this pope, with innovations in tone rather than in church policy. Francis praises love, marriage, and family life in terms that pastors will cite at weddings around the world.

The pope urges priests, above all, to be understanding and empathetic. They must meet people where they are on issues of sex, sexual orientation, divorce, and remarriage. He proposes no change to church teaching on birth control, nor does he say that divorced Catholics who remarried outside the church might receive Communion. He reaffirms that “same-sex” unions cannot be equated with real marriage.

*Amoris Laetitia* shows that the pope foresees a more compassionate church. However, he stops short of prescribing policy changes that might make it so.

Francis argues that the sacrament of marriage is not a social convention, an empty ritual, or merely the outward sign of commitment. Instead, he boldly calls it an icon of the relationship between God and his people. He stresses that marriage is a promise of “total self-giving, faithfulness and openness to new life.”

In his folksy style, the Holy Father says young people should learn home truths from their grandmothers. He writes, “Committing oneself exclusively and definitively to another person always involves a risk and a bold gamble.” He encourages them to take the chance.

At sixty thousand words, the Pope’s reflection is the longest such papal document. He says we should read it slowly, reflectively. My hope is that, if Catholics in Ottawa do so, the joy of our families will rise and overflow to others.