

## Introduction

The recent Church document, the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* confirms the Church's teaching that happy, strong and stable families are the foundations of a healthy society and of the Church itself. *Amoris Laetitia* brings together the results of the two synods on the family convoked by Pope Francis in 2014 and 2015, after a huge consultation among Catholics all over the world. In this document the pope often cites the synods' final reports as well as documents and teachings of his predecessors, especially *Gaudium et Spes* of Vatican II, *Humanae Vitae* of Paul VI, and *Familiaris Consortio* of John Paul II. In particular *Amoris Laetitia* focuses on the need for wise and responsible pastoral discernment based on the diagnosis of families all over the world and originality of the family as well as Church teaching. The pope realistically considers the present situation of families and their everyday experiences. According to him, contemporary families face many, diversified challenges: migration, globalization, individualization, poverty, pornography, addictions, inadequate attention towards persons with disabilities, lack of respect for the elderly, the ideological denial of differences between the sexes and the impact of biotechnology in the field of procreation. At the same time he warns against idealizing family life, urging faithful to care for families, which have been facing many difficulties and crises in the postmodern society: "we do well to focus on concrete realities, since 'the call and the demands of the Spirit resound in the events of history,' and through

these ‘the Church can also be guided to a more profound understanding of the inexhaustible mystery of marriage and the family’” (AL 31). The pope notes that the growing individualism and egocentrism makes it more difficult for a person to give oneself generously to another and the same time: “the fear of loneliness and the desire for stability and fidelity exist side by side with a growing fear of entrapment in a relationship that could hamper the achievement of one’s personal goals” (AL 34). His teaching also includes the “wounded families” for whom it is especially “necessary to recall this general principle: ‘Pastors must know that, for the sake of truth, they are obliged to exercise careful discernment of situations’ (*Familiaris Consortio* 84). The degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases and factors may exist which limit the ability to make a decision. Therefore, while clearly stating the Church’s teaching, pastors are to avoid judgements that do not take into account the complexity of various situations, and they are to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience and endure distress because of their condition” (AL 79). He also underlines strongly the fact that conjugal love by its very nature defines the partners in a richly encompassing and lasting union (AL 123).

The pope also presents various pastoral perspectives based on Church teaching regarding marriage and family that are aimed at forming solid families according to God’s plan: the preparation of engaged couples for marriage; the accompaniment of couples in the various stages of their married life, responsible parenthood and wise upbringing, and many complex situations especially abandoned, separated or divorced persons.

The apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* sets out the complexity of a topic in urgent need of study, so authors of this book whilst trying to avoid a juxtaposition between demands for change and the application of Church teaching, still aim at accompanying families and strengthening them in various stages of their life. Following *Amoris Laetitia* directions for “personal and pastoral discernment” for individuals and families and their need for the help, support and accompaniment, authors of the book *Strengthening families* try to find out what is the meaning of family, what are the challenges faced by marriages and families, what makes Christian families happy and strong. They refer to a number of significant studies on family life in Western, Central and Eastern Europe which provide insights into the complex and evolving nature of families. While sociologists study

the dynamics of family over time, psychologists the relationships among family members, pedagogues the process of upbringing within the family, pastoral theologians try to see what kind of support and services families need from ecclesial communities in order to follow God's plan. The authors of *Strengthening families* attempt to address the needs of diverse types of families and to present meaningful pedagogical, psychological, therapeutic, sociological, theological, canonical, catechetical, spiritual and practical supports to them in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I am very grateful to all authors and experts representing various disciplines from Ireland, Lithuania, Malta, Slovakia, Slovenia, the UK, the USA and Poland, who have made their generous contributions to the book: *Strengthening families* published by the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow. I do hope that the reader will find in this book theoretical, interdisciplinary studies and practical concerns that both deepen his/her reflections on marriage and family, and enrich lives of many families including their own.