

Agnieszka Anna Ukleja

KU Leuven, Belgium

Francis makes place for young cohabiting couples in the Church

Over the years the World Youth Days (WYD) have become a worldwide celebration focused on young people and their experience of faith. First initiated by Pope John Paul II in 1985, they have been faithfully continued during the papacy of Benedict XVI. The experiences, sensitivity of faith, the doubts and questions of the young people seem to be particularly important for the present Pope Francis. On different occasions he has welcomed, blessed and conversed with them. The WYD in Krakow, in 2016, was one among many other occasions during which he emphasised the value of the voice of the younger generation in ecclesiastical discussions. Francis announced this under the theme of the Merciful Jesus: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (Mt 5:7). This fact is not only to be interpreted as a tribute of Francis to John Paul II’s Divine Mercy devotion, but it goes far beyond the doors of the WYD event. It perfectly reflects Francis’ specific vision of the Church, which is to be a ‘field hospital’, to meet people where they are and to consider the complexities of their daily lives.

The Pope’s determination is to serve people in their personal, social and cultural contexts, especially those who live in the peripheries of the

Church. This paper draws particular attention to the situation of cohabiting couples in the Church. In particular, based on the analysis of the pastorally-sensitive approach proposed by Pope Francis, it suggests a new direction of dealing with couples who live in unmarried cohabitation in the context of pastoral praxis.

1. Catholic couples also live in cohabitation

Young Catholic couples are not magically protected from the many changes occurring in secular society. Just as in the general population, they differ from each other in terms of lifestyles, moral choices and expectations. One of the most significant manifestations of this pluralism, among other examples, is the rapid increase in the number of couples who have lived in cohabitation in the past fifty years. More than half of all the marriages in the United States today, which are also Catholic marriages, are preceded by cohabitation. In Europe, cohabitation precedes first marriages in 40% to 80% of all cases.¹ The most recent sociological research confirms that in countries with traditionally low levels of cohabitation, e.g. in Poland (with the small yield of proportion from between 1.4 to 4.5% of all unions)² certain changes in the attitudes and behaviours have already come about.³

¹ Cf. A. J. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today*, New York 2010, p. 98; M. Kalmijn, *Explaining Cross-National Differences in Marriage, Cohabitation, and Divorce in Europe, 1990–2000*, "Population Studies" 61 (2007) No. 3, pp. 243–263.

² According to several Polish sociologists, Poland is not as resistant to the spread of cohabitation as it is commonly assumed, and official statistics point out only the tip of the iceberg. For more on the "iceberg theory" see: K. Slany, M. Ślusarczyk, *O wspólnym mieszkaniu przed ślubem [About Living Together Before Marriage]*, "Teofil" 2 (2007) No. 26, pp. 137–148, http://www.teofil.dominikanie.pl/addons/default/modules/wydanie/uploads/pdf/article_240_1349875820.pdf (30.11. 2017); A. Matysiak, *Is Poland Really Immune to the Spread of Cohabitation*, "Demographic Research" 21 (2009) No. 8, pp. 215–234, <https://www.demographic-research.org/volumes/vol21/8/21-8.pdf> (30.11. 2017), p. 215.

³ A summary of the available quantitative and qualitative research on the phenomenon of cohabitation in Poland is offered in: A. Ukleja, *The New Reality of Cohabitation in Poland: Empirical, Theological and Pastoral Perspectives*, Unpublished PhD thesis,

The recent reports of German and Swiss Catholic Bishops Conference confirm considerable differences between the Church teaching on marriage and sexuality, and the personal beliefs of practicing Catholics.⁴ Both reports say Catholics in Germany and Switzerland accept the Church's vision of marriage as a life-long union of a man and a woman, open to having children and hope to realise this vision in their own family. On the other hand, e.g. German dioceses report that 'pre-marital unions' are not only a relevant pastoral reality, but one which is almost universal, because between 90% and 100% of couples who ask for a Catholic wedding are already living together.

The picture that emerges from the empirical data is that the life of a substantial number of young Catholics is categorized by the Church as irregular and deficient, and in fact, very few can meet the category of regular and adequate.

2. The impasse between magisterial teaching and cohabitation

Until recently, magisterial authority rather rarely raised its voice on the current cultural developments. When it did, it usually operated using the negative language of prohibition and restriction to warn against the abusive aspects rather than elevating its positive attributes, especially in the area of human sexuality. Situated under the section of condemnation⁵

Faculteit Godgeleerdheid, KU Leuven, Belgium, promotor: prof. T. Knieps-Port le Roi, Leuven, 2017.

- 4 German and Swiss Catholic Bishops Conferences published analyses of the Vatican questionnaire, which was sent to dioceses around the world in preparation for the III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2014. To read the German report in English see: Pressemitteilungen der deutschen Bischofskonferenz, "Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelisation", February 3, 2014, https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/presse_2014/2014-012b-ENG-Fragebogen-Die-patoralen-Herausforderungen-der-Familie.pdf (30.11.2017). The Swiss report is available on: Schweizer Bischofskonferenz, "Umfrage zur Partnerschafts-, Ehe Und Familienpastoral der katholischen Kirche – Ergebnisse", February 4, 2014, <http://www.bischoefe.ch/dokumente/communiqués/umfrage-zur-familienpastoral-ergebnisse> (30.11.2017).
- 5 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2353: "Fornication is carnal union between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman. It is gravely contrary to the dignity of persons and

and compared in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to adultery, incest, polygamy or sexual abuse, cohabitation is interpreted as one of the most serious offences against the dignity of marriage and unanimously considered to be morally wrong. All types of cohabitation are associated in *Familiaris Consortio* with great pastoral problems and never as a pastoral potential: “[...] both religious and moral (the loss of the religious sense of marriage seen in the light of the covenant of God with his people; deprivation of the grace of the sacrament; grave scandal) and also social consequences (the destruction of the concept of the family; the weakening of the sense of fidelity, also toward society; possible psychological damage to the children; the strengthening of selfishness)”.⁶ Commitment, exclusivity, fidelity, receptiveness to children and institutional character are described in the Church documents as constitutive elements that differentiate the institution of marriage from other kinds of unions. Supposed absence of these elements among cohabiting couples is the precise reason for why cohabitation, as a general phenomenon, is thoroughly criticised. Cohabitants are pictured as a homogenous group of people who lack self-restraint, nurture anti-marital attitudes, and their unions are assumed to be **based on free love and exclude commitment and fidelity**, have a **transitory nature**, include **premarital sex** and stand **the against institutional character** of marriage.⁷ This view, as the vast and solid theoretical body of scientific work with regard to unmarried cohabitation evidences,⁸ is un-

of human sexuality which is naturally ordered to the good of spouses and the generation and education of children. Moreover, it is a grave scandal when there is corruption of the young.”

⁶ *Familiaris Consortio*, 81.

⁷ Although, so far, no separate document on the phenomenon of cohabitation has been proclaimed by the Magisterium, more detailed critical evaluation of cohabitation can be found in several Church documents of universal scope: Cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 80–81; *Family, Marriage and “De Facto” Unions* 1; as well as in documents from a local bishops’ conference, e.g.: Cf. USCCB, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan, A Pastoral Letter*, Washington, D.C. 2009, pp. 26–28, <http://www.usccb.org/upload/marriage-love-life-divine-plan-2009.pdf> (30.11.2017).

⁸ There have been many accusations against cohabitation, used by the Church or the traditional Catholic circles in the academic discussions and pastoral activities. We discuss two examples in order to unmask un-nuanced perceptions or half-truths about cohabitation still prevailing in the Church’s official discourse: a) Since cohabitation is an arrangement of a rather private nature, the cohabitants are presumed to create an open

differentiated and distorted and leads to severe consequences: a) all the cohabiting unions, including those who live in a committed relationship and are strongly marriage-oriented, are deprived of the access to the sacramental grace; b) it affects the kind of treatment the cohabiting couples receive during their pastoral encounters with the clergy.

3. Is there theology for cohabitants?

Many couples feel helpless when faced with the piles of theological formulations regarding the Church's teaching authority about marriage. Purely normative ethics monotonously insists on a certain ideal, and at the same time, draws a thick line for those who do not meet its criteria. It is, without doubt, well-intended, but it does not seem to reach its 'target' anymore, namely the everyday life of young couples living in a world full of

threat to the institution of marriage and family and to the value of permanent commitment. Thorough analysis of the work of Scott Stanley and his colleagues shows that many of those involved in cohabitation have made a serious commitment to one another, and have entrusted themselves not only to each other but also to the future, which for them includes commitment to marriage. See for example: S. M. Stanley, G. K. Rhoades, and H. J. Markman, *Sliding Versus Deciding: Inertia and the Premarital Cohabitation Effect*, "Family Relations" 55 (2006), pp. 499–509; G. K. Rhoades, S. M. Stanley, H. J. Markman, *Should I Stay or Should I Go? Predicting Dating Relationship Stability From Four Aspects of Commitment*, "Journal of Family Psychology" 24 (2010) No. 5, pp. 543–50; b) Because it has been statistically proven that there is a positive association between the experience of cohabitation and a higher risk of marital instability and divorce, all the cohabitants are believed to be exposed to the so-called 'cohabitation effect'. A substantial number of scientific studies, verified by diverse methodologies and samples, shows that cohabitants and their relationships are not of the same quality, and do not stand the same chance to live in a happy, stable relationship. Commitment to the future together, towards a common life together, turns out to be the distinguishing determinant in success in a relationship, whether that relationship be cohabitation or marriage. The research shows that although 'cohabitation effect' might affect some cohabiting couples, it does not affect those who have clarified a mutual commitment towards marriage by taking further steps such as cohabitation, as compared to those who just "happened" to live together because of external reasons. In other words, those cohabitants who have entered cohabitation with an intention to marry (who have expressed the commitment to take up what was initially chosen) are most likely to marry and marry happily. See for example: S. M. Stanley, *The Power of Commitment, A Guide to Active Lifelong Guide*, San Francisco 2005, p. 152.

constraints and trivialities.⁹ Lack of focus on the experiences of the young generation has unavoidably led to the situation that some young people have passed out of the reach of the Church. Many others who stayed, stopped listening, among them, those who feel patronised or unsupported by the experience of living in the Church.

Do cohabitants have a moral right at all to seek out any pastoral guidance? At first glance, this proposal might seem inappropriate, given that the official position of the Church towards couples who live in cohabitation is clearly negative. On the other hand, commanding young cohabitants to adhere to the magisterial teaching and hoping that they will do so straight away is, at least, naïve. In the very definition of the Church, presented by the Vatican Council II, we find an affirmative response, namely that it is the Church's task to be heedful of the needs of its people, to support them in the various circumstances in life and to proclaim and demonstrate that God's salvation belongs to all people.¹⁰ This vision is unambiguous and straightforward as it mobilises the Church, as well as her flock, to look for different ways of building a bridge between theology and its people, including those who somewhat do not (yet or entirely) fit the profile of Christian marriage.

4. The pivot of Francis' papacy

On the September 14, 2014 Francis presided over the marriage of 20 couples at the Vatican, including some who were cohabiting, in the first papal marriage ceremony of its kind since 2000. This symbolic event foreshadowed the forthcoming pastoral shift in treating cohabitants. In the following years, while continuously confirming the centrality of Christian marriage and the official stand on cohabitation, Francis has attempted to break the existing impasse between the magisterial teaching and the ex-

⁹ An interesting article, in which the author analyses why the present theological concepts of marriage lose their meaning for many contemporary people, is proposed by: T. Knieps-Port le Roi, *Christian Symbolism of Marriage and its Usefulness Today*, "INTAMS review" 15 (2009), pp. 12–22.

¹⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, 1.

periences of people by putting forward an entirely different model of pastoral thinking and practice. It is rooted in Francis' vision of the Church which wants to meet people in their real life context, and which has guidance and help for everyone, especially for those living in "irregular situations", as its primary aim. Most clearly, it is pronounced in his recent apostolic exhortation of *Amoris Laetitia*,¹¹ which, to a great extent is his post-synodal reflection on the family synod documents *Relatio Synodi* and *Relatio Finalis*.¹² With regard to couples who live in cohabitation it is to be considered as promising in at least four different ways:

4.1. A change of focus

Pope Francis and the synods of bishops, in their respective documents, using insights on the family from around the world, affirmed the Church teaching on marriage and family life. So, in this sense, Francis in *Amoris Laetitia*, and the synodal fathers in the 'relatios', propose no doctrinal revolution and no new regulations nor restrictions. Francis writes: "In order to avoid all misunderstanding, I would point out that in no way must the Church desist from proposing the full ideal of marriage, God's plan in all its grandeur..."¹³ At the same time the Pope chooses to accentuate the positive aspects of marital and family life: "Nowadays we are grateful too for the witness of marriages that have not only proved lasting, but also fruitful and loving. All these factors can inspire a positive and welcoming pastoral approach capable of helping couples to grow in appreciation of the demands of the Gospel. Yet we have often been on the defen-

¹¹ Cf. *Amoris Laetitia*.

¹² The publication of the 'relatios' was preceded by a process that lasted for more than three years. It started with a worldwide questionnaire on family issues that was sent out by the Vatican to bishops with the purpose of getting data from the experts and the laity. Next, the synod of bishops took place in October 2014, which was followed by another questionnaire and another synod on family in October 2015. See: Synod of Bishops, *Relatio Synodi* (18 October 2014), III Extraordinary General Assembly, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20141018_relatio-synodi-familia_en.html (30.11.2017); Synod of Bishops, *Relatio Finalis* (24 October 2015), XIV Ordinary General Assembly, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20151026_relazione-finale-xiv-assemblea_en.html (30.11.2017).

¹³ *Amoris Laetitia*, 307.

sive, wasting pastoral energy on denouncing a decadent world without being proactive in proposing ways of finding true happiness”.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, on the other hand, he thinks that the Church doctrine has been taught with the emphasis on the wrong accents: “Many people feel that the Church’s message on marriage and the family does not clearly reflect the preaching and attitudes of 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”.¹⁵ In this sense, there is a certain sense of novelty, a new pastoral mindset, particularly apparent in *Amoris Laetitia*, which asks for a revisitation of the doctrine. It is to be applied in a way that it reaches people living in diverse life situations and makes them feel welcome in the Church. The Pope argues that the Church needs to stop applying moral laws, as if they were, as he phrases vividly, “stones to throw at a person’s life”¹⁶, and strongly emphasises the role of conscience and pastoral discernment: “to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience distress because of their condition”¹⁷ and to guide them patiently and discreetly.¹⁸

4.2. The importance of *sensus fidelium* in the moral evaluation of cohabitation

Francis, throughout his papacy, consistently exhorts to do theology which is rooted in, and which contemplates the concrete pastoral praxis. The best example for it is the fact that he decided to back up the organisation of extraordinary and ordinary assemblies of the family synod with broad consultation processes among the faithful in the local churches, including the cohabitants. By doing so, he gave a clear signal that the *sensus fidelium* should be treated as a proper source of moral knowledge, and he acknowledged that neither a new pronouncement of the Magisterium nor an in-depth scholarly theological reflection alone, nor both, can do

¹⁴ *Amoris Laetitia*, 307.

¹⁵ *Amoris Laetitia*, 38.

¹⁶ *Amoris Laetitia*, 305.

¹⁷ *Amoris Laetitia*, 305; *Relatio Finalis*, 51.

¹⁸ *Relatio Synodi*, 43.

justice to the emerging problems, with the current teaching on the issue of marriage and family life.¹⁹ This approach should not be interpreted as revolutionary in the Church since Francis enlivens the teaching that has already been introduced by the Vatican II Council fathers²⁰, and later on confirmed by John Paul II.²¹

4.3. Empirical data as a basis for an adequate pastoral discernment

Following the results of the interviews on family issues which were organised in preparation for the family synods – which by and large reflect and confirm what scientific data have shown about cohabitation – the Pope directs his attention to the diversity of the types of cohabitation in the world: people who live together *ad experimentum*, in unions that have not been religiously or civilly recognised,²² including couples who “distrust marriage and live together, putting off indefinitely the commitment to marriage”,²³ but also “those who, after having lived together for a long period, request the celebration of marriage in Church”.²⁴ Francis clearly affirms the ‘nuptial’ character of some cohabiting couples, who enter and experience cohabitation in close connection with marriage. The motives for moving in are also thoroughly examined. There is a recognition that the choice of cohabitation is frequently motivated by “cultural and contingent situations” and not by prejudice or resistance. This choice can be “based on a general attitude opposed to anything institutional or de-

19 Cf. T. Knieps-Port le Roi, *Church Teaching on Marriage and Family: A Matter of Sensus Fidelium?*, in: *Authentic Voices, Discerning Hearts. New Resources for the Church on Marriage and Family*, ed. T. Knieps-Port le Roi, A. Brenninkmeijer-Werhahn, Münster 2016, p. 169. (INTAMS Studies, 1).

20 *Gaudium et Spes*, 44: “It is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word, so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and set forth to greater advantage”.

21 *Familiaris Consortio*, 3: “The Church values sociological and statistical research when it proves helpful in understanding the historical context in which pastoral action has to be developed and when it leads to a better understanding of the truth”.

22 *Amoris Laetitia*, 293.

23 *Amoris Laetitia*, 293.

24 *Amoris Laetitia*, 294.

finitive; it can also be done while awaiting more security in life (a steady job and income)".²⁵ Francis goes on: "in some countries [...] celebrating a marriage is considered too expensive in the social circumstances" and as a result "material poverty drives people into *de facto* unions".²⁶ By integrating empirical research which includes the recognition of diversity in social circumstances, as well as of the different attitudes towards marriage among cohabitants, Francis opens up the possibility of a moral re-assessment of cohabitation based on the personal context of a couple. That is a *novum* in the treatment of cohabitation in an ecclesiastical context, which as practice shows, until now has been, at best reluctant and at worst, dismissive, with regard to cohabiting couples.

4.4. "The seeds of good" and the opportunity of growth

In chapter 8, under the heading *Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating Weakness*, cohabiting but also divorced or re-married couples are no longer defined as 'living in sin' but framed here as 'irregular situations'. The label of "fornication" ascribed to cohabitation in *Familiaris Consortio*, still underscored in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, disappears in *Amoris Laetitia*. Francis repeats, after the synod fathers, that the Church "does not disregard the constructive elements in those situations which do not yet or no longer correspond to her teaching on marriage".²⁷ He does so at the expense of a presentation of the sinful nature of fornication among *de facto unions*, which frequently dominated the treatment of cohabitation in the previous magisterial documents.

Several different passages of *Amoris Laetitia* emphasise that the role of pastoral discernment is to identify those positive or constructive elements in "those signs of love which in some way reflect God's own love".²⁸ This implies two positive developments. Firstly, that unions, especially those which "attain a particular stability, legally recognised" and "are

²⁵ *Amoris Laetitia*, 294.

²⁶ *Amoris Laetitia*, 294.

²⁷ *Amoris Laetitia*, 294. The idea was first introduced in *Relatio Synodi*, 41, 43 and later confirmed in *Relatio Finalis*, 70.

²⁸ *Relatio Finalis*, 71.

characterised by deep affection and responsibility for their offspring, and demonstrate an ability to overcome trials”,²⁹ are already, in some sense, an authentic union. Secondly, that the fullness of Christian marriage can be reached through **the process of growth**, which starts with the commitment made to the partner and to the relationship in cohabitation. According to the magisterial teaching, the immorality of cohabitation and sexual intercourse before marriage is wrong because it fails to reach God’s ideal of marriage. Francis emphasises in *Amoris Laetitia* that there is a range of relationships which at least in “a partial and analogous way”³⁰ realises this ideal already, and among them, are cohabiting couples who aspire to marriage and eventually marry. The seeds of goodness are also recognised among those who do not yet, or can no longer, correspond to the teaching of the Church on marriage. Whatever the situation, he concludes that the processes of pastoral discernment should aim at searching for the positive elements which can be transformed into **opportunities for growth** in the direction of the full reality of marriage in conformity with the Gospel. This process of growth is to be encouraged patiently, discreetly, and attentively to the nuances of the concrete situation. Francis’ analysis stops at the general recognition of the presence of positive elements in cohabiting unions and the possibility of their growth. A more precise elaboration is proposed by the synodal fathers in *Relatio Finalis 2015*. They see that “the decision to live together is a sign of a relationship which wants, in reality, to lead to a stable union in the future. This intention, which translates into a lasting, reliable bond, open to life, can be considered a commitment on which to base a path to the Sacrament of Marriage, discovered as God’s plan in one’s life”.³¹ In other words, the synodal fathers give positive recognition to the fact that the commitment, which couples make to marriage, has its beginning at the earlier relationship stage, in the case of some cohabitants. Also, they affirm that this final marital commitment can be attained through the process of growth. This path of growth is to be encouraged by “recognising the traces of a gener-

²⁹ *Relatio Finalis*, 27.

³⁰ *Relatio Finalis*, 221.

³¹ *Relatio Finalis*, 71.

ous and enduring love, namely, the desire of a couple to seek the good of others before their own; the experience of forgiveness requested and given; and the aspiration to form a family not for itself but open to the good of the ecclesial community and all of society. While pursuing these goals, value can also be given to those signs of love which properly correspond to the reflection of God's love in an authentic conjugal plan".³²

5. How to deal with cohabiting cohabitants in the pastoral context?

As cohabitation is in contradiction with, and therefore indicates a departure from, the magisterial teaching, pastors might feel troubled when coming across couples who live in cohabitation. In consequence, different pastoral strategies might be applied towards cohabiting couples, especially in the context of marriage preparation courses. Some pastors might choose to concentrate on the objective moral lapse of cohabitation and give little attention to the preparation to the sacrament of marriage. Some others might choose to concentrate on the couple's approach to the sacramental ideal of marriage exclusively and ignore the concrete life situation of the cohabiting couple. Also, some might choose to instruct the couple why they should not be cohabiting in the first place and encourage them to separate temporarily until the wedding ceremony, while some others might rather focus on the couple's attitude towards marriage.³³ Research shows that neither a lack of any pastoral guidance nor a negative, and highly moralising, attitude are pastorally effective.³⁴

Francis addressed these pastoral matters on the February 25, 2017 during his audience with parish priests who were in Rome attending a course on marriage preparation. The Pope does not ask them to admonish cohabiting couples for living in grave sin nor does he ask them

³² *Relatio Finalis*, 71.

³³ F. Gavin, *Pastoral Care in Marriage Preparation (Can. 1063): History, Analysis of the Norm and Its Implementation by Some Particular Churches*, Rome 2004, p. 179.

³⁴ B. Markey, *Cohabitation: Response Over Reaction*, <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=3298> (30.11. 2017).

to work for their conversion and repentance. Instead he encourages the ministers to look upon cohabiting couples with “tenderness and compassion” which are “an essential part of [...] work in promoting and defending the sacrament of marriage”.³⁵ These require that measures other than ignoring, no reaction or a punitive approach should be applied during the pastoral encounters of cohabiting couples, with the Church’s representatives both clergy and lay pastoral workers, especially during the marriage preparation program.

The Pope’s strong pastoral orientation offers new pastoral strategies in this regard. Francis, rather than proposing concrete ‘solutions’ that would fit everybody’s moral difficulties, suggests the pastoral process to be understood as a journey. For every person this journey begins with an evaluation and interpretation of his/her present state of affairs and which, through careful and attentive discernment and the “law of graduality”, can lead towards growth in moral behaviour. Crucial in this process is the role of a “pastoral accompaniment” which “teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5). The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life”.³⁶ Pastoral ministers are advised by him not to act according to the attitude: “this is the way it has always been”³⁷ and make judgements “which do not take into account the complexity of various situations”,³⁸ but rather asks to “be merciful, take responsibility for the people and accompany them like the good Samaritan, who washes, cleans and raises up his neighbour. This is pure Gospel. God is greater than sin”.³⁹ This approach of pastoral praxis does not measure the value of a relationship in terms of how far it deviates from the ide-

35 J. Bentz, *Francis Urges Priests to “Welcome” Cohabiting Couples in the “Style of the Gospel”*, February 27, 2017, <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/francis-urges-priests-to-welcome-cohabiting-couples-in-the-style-of-the-g> (30.11.2017).

36 *Evangelii Gaudium*, 169.

37 *Evangelii Gaudium*, 37.

38 *Amoris Laetitia*, 296.

39 A. Spadaro, *Wake Up to the World: Conversation with Pope Francis About Religious Life*, “La Civiltà Cattolica” I (2014), pp. 3–17. English translation of the original text in Italian by D. Maldari.

al of marriage, but rather starts from the particular context and experience. Concentration on the internal qualities of a couple, without making too much stress on the lacking element of (marital) form can have concrete, positive implications in pastoral work with cohabitants because it treats the reality of these couples and their beliefs with sensitivity, respect and realism.

Amoris Laetitia has been the subject of varied reception and interpretation. While many archdioceses and dioceses in the world have quickly followed up on the document with specific and practical guidelines for its implementation,⁴⁰ some others, including Polish bishops,⁴¹ have not yet offered any official guideline for its application. Certainly these might provide a significant opportunity to advance the pastoral renewal called for by the Pope. Assisting and equipping the dioceses and parishes with concrete pastoral tools is strategically crucial since it is the parish priests who are responsible for the application of the teachings in the local, social realities as well as the complexities of individuals. In particular, an introduction of a more personalised, moral and pastoral assessment of couples who live in cohabitation, especially through the adaptation of marriage preparation programs to the relational situation and needs of the cohabiting couples should be encouraged. Such programs would be pastorally welcoming, empirically based, have a strong theological foundation, be methodologically prepared to help the cohabitants deal efficiently and adequately with their individual situation.

40 Cf. De Bisschoppenconferentie van België, *Bisschoppen schrijven pastorale brief over huwelijkspastoraal*, May 24, 2017, <https://www.kerknet.be/pastoralebriefamorislaetitia> (30.11.2017); Archdiocese of Portland, "*Pastoral Guidelines for Implementing 'Amoris Laetitia'*", https://gallery.mailchimp.com/6a9ef14783441a71bffc1aa94/files/1eb532d5-2bd7-414f-9c26-1273348fb09a/AL_Guidelines_with_Letter_050417.pdf (30.11.2017); Archdiocese of Malta, *Criteria for the Application of Chapter VIII of 'Amoris Laetitia'*, <http://ms.maltadiocese.org/WEBSITE/2017/PRESS%20RELEASES/Norms%20for%20the%20Application%20of%20Chapter%20VIII%20of%20AL.pdf> (30.11.2017).

41 Polish Bishops' Conference, *Polish Bishops See Continuity between Amoris Laetitia, Familiaris Consortio*, June 10, 2017, <http://episkopat.pl/polish-bishops-see-continuity-between-amoris-laetitia-familiaris-consortio/> (30.11.2017).

6. Hope for cohabiting couples

It is widely acknowledged that cohabitation has become a steady part of the panorama of relationship formation in the west (or is gradually becoming in countries like Poland). Despite much criticism by the Magisterium against this type of living arrangement, it will continue to serve many people as a stage on the way to marriage. It will also provide a framework of certain intimacy and support required in intimate relationships to those who are economically unprepared or unable to commit to the level that the institution of marriage requires. Many among these couples ask for a Church that does not treat them simply as objects of pastoral concern, but as subjects of their faith and which respects their differing life situations and supports them in their ways of life. Francis has opened the new chapter for a pastorally open and merciful Church in dealing with couples who have not yet reached the fullness of Christian marriage. In this chapter, there is a place for cohabiting couples which offers them hope and the opportunity of growth. This chapter also equips ministers with a concrete vision and attitude of openness which does not denounce the practices that, at first glance, seem to be wrong. Rather, this is a vision which is able to discover and enhance the positive qualities in them and to exhort to high ideals of commitment. For many couples, this close attention given to pastoral particularities by Francis, has been a source of inspiration and hope for a more inclusive Church. Much depends now on how this message will be received and applied in daily pastoral practices with cohabitants all over the world.

Bibliography

- Archdiocese of Malta, *Criteria for the Application of Chapter VIII of Amoris Laetitia*, <http://ms.maltadiocese.org/WEBSITE/2017/PRESS%20RELEASES/Norms%20for%20the%20Application%20of%20Chapter%20VIII%20of%20AL.pdf> (30.11.2017).
- Archdiocese of Portland, *Pastoral Guidelines for Implementing Amoris Laetitia*, <https://gallery.mailchimp.com/6a9ef14783441a71bffc1aa94/files/1eb532d5->

- 2bd7-414f-9c26-1273348fb09a/AL_Guidelines_with_Letter_050417.pdf (30.11.2017).
- Bentz J., *Francis Urges Priests to 'Welcome' Cohabiting Couples in the 'Style of the Gospel'*, February 27, 2017, <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/francis-urges-priests-to-welcome-cohabiting-couples-in-the-style-of-the-g> (30.11.2017).
- Cherlin A. J., *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today*, New York 2010.
- De Bisschoppenconferentie van België, "Bisschoppen schrijven pastorale brief over huwelijkspastoraal", May 24, 2017, <https://www.kerknet.be/pastoralebriefa-morislaetitia> (30.11.2017).
- Gavin F., *Pastoral Care in Marriage Preparation (Can. 1063): History, Analysis of the Norm and Its Implementation by Some Particular Churches*, Rome 2004.
- Kalmijn M., *Explaining Cross-National Differences in Marriage, Cohabitation, and Divorce in Europe, 1990-2000*, "Population Studies" 61 (2007) No. 3, pp. 243-263.
- Knieps-Port le Roi T., *Church Teaching on Marriage and Family: A Matter of Sensus Fidelium?*, in: *Authentic Voices, Discerning Hearts. New Resources for the Church on Marriage and Family*, ed. T. Knieps-Port le Roi, A. Brenninkmeijer-Werhahn, Münster 2016, pp. 185-194 (INTAMS Studies, 1).
- Knieps-Port le Roi T., *Christian Symbolism of Marriage and its Usefulness Today*, "INTAMS Review" 15 (2009), pp. 12-22.
- Markey B., *Cohabitation: Response Over Reaction*, <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=3298> (30.11.2017).
- Matysiak A., *Is Poland Really Immune to the Spread of Cohabitation*, "Demographic Research" 21 (2009) No. 8, pp. 215-234, <https://www.demographic-research.org/volumes/vol21/8/21-8.pdf> (30.11.2017).
- Polish Bishops' Conference, *Polish Bishops See Continuity between Amoris Laetitia, Familiaris Consortio*, June 10, 2017, <http://episkopat.pl/polish-bishops-see-continuity-between-amoris-laetitia-familiaris-consortio/> (30.11.2017).
- Pressemitteilungen der deutschen Bischofskonferenz, *Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelisation*, February 3, 2014, https://www.dbk.de/fil-admin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/presse_2014/2014-012b-ENG-Fragebogen-Die-patoralen-Herausforderungen-der-Familie.pdf (30.11.2017).
- Rhoades G. K., Stanley S. M., Markman H. J., *Should I Stay or Should I Go? Predicting Dating Relationship Stability From Four Aspects of Commitment*, "Journal of Family Psychology" 24 (2010) No. 5, pp. 543-550.
- Schweizer Bischofskonferenz, *Umfrage zur Partnerschafts-, Ehe Und Familienpastoral der katholischen Kirche - Ergebnisse*, February 4, 2014, <http://www.bischoefe.ch/dokumente/communiqués/umfrage-zur-familienpastoral-ergebnisse> (30.11.2017).
- Slany K., Ślusarczyk M., *O wspólnym mieszkaniu przed ślubem [About Living Together Before Marriage]*, "Teofil" 2 (2007) No. 26, pp. 137-148, <http://www.teo->

- fil.dominikanie.pl/ addons/default/modules/wydanie/uploads/pdf/article_240_1349875820.pdf (30.11.2017).
- Spadaro A., *Wake Up to the World: Conversation with Pope Francis About Religious Life*, "La Civiltà Cattolica" I (2014), pp. 3-17. English translation of the original text in Italian by D. Maldari.
- Stanley S. M., *The Power of Commitment, A Guide to Active Lifelong Guide*, San Francisco 2005.
- Stanley S. M., Rhoades G. K., Markman H. J., *Sliding Versus Deciding: Inertia and the Premarital Cohabitation Effect*, "Family Relations" 55 (2006), pp. 499-509.
- Synod of Bishops, *Relatio Synodi* (18 October 2014), III Extraordinary General Assembly, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20141018_relatio-synodi-familia_en.html (30.11.2017).
- Synod of Bishops, *Relation Finalis* (24 October 2015), XIV Ordinary General Assembly, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20151026_relazione-finale-xiv-assemblea_en.html (30.11.2017).
- Ukleja A., *The New Reality of Cohabitation in Poland: Empirical, Theological and Pastoral Perspectives*, Unpublished PhD thesis, Faculteit Godgeleerdheid, KU Leuven, Belgium, Leuven 2017.
- The Pontifical Council for the Family, *Family, Marriage and „De Facto“ Unions* (July 26, 2000), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_20001109_de-facto-unions_en.html (30.11.2017).
- USCCB, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan, A Pastoral Letter*, Washington, D.C. 2009, <http://www.usccb.org/upload/marriage-love-life-divine-plan-2009.pdf> (30.11.2017).

