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DOI: 10.15290/rtk.2019.18.06

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Preparation for Marriage and Family Life in Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*

Pope Francis' teaching on preparation for marriage and family life in his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* reflects his concern for providing engaged couples with a holistic human and Christian formation that will preparing them to responsibly realize their vocation to marriage and family. This task is particularly important because families today are broken and the value of marriage is under attack. The environment in which engaged couples are immersed is very important in the process of preparing them for marriage and family life, since it is the place where the personality of the new family members is formed. For this reason, Pope Francis offers new pastoral initiatives that aim at increasing the effectiveness of marriage preparation by engaging missionary families and the families of the engaged couples as well as "a variety of pastoral resources." In his exhortation, Pope Francis shows the importance of freedom of choice, fidelity, and the indissolubility of the marriage bond. He also points out the importance of having the proper approach to the marriage celebration and wedding reception. Pope Francis encourages engaged couples to opt for modest and simple celebrations "in which love takes precedence over everything else" (AL 212) because love has the power to unite spouses if it is "strengthened and sanctified by grace [of the sacrament]."

Key words: remote preparation, proximate preparation, immediate preparation, missionary families, families of fiancés, pastoral resources, vocation, sacrament of marriage, assistance, signs of the rite, *Amoris Laetitia*.

Despite the prolonged public disputes that criticized Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* after its publication on April 8th, 2016, the entire document confirms past ecclesial teaching on

marriage and family. The document also takes into account ongoing social, cultural, and religious conditions and changes while simultaneously presenting new and often difficult pastoral tasks in the light of the Gospel and the Church's Tradition.¹ In his exhortation, Pope Francis confirms the Pontifical Council for the Family's teaching presented in the document *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage* that "preparation for marriage, for married and family life, is of great importance for the good of the Church."² Such preparation it is also significant for the Christian community to function properly. Pope Francis' emphasis on preparation for marriage and family life arises from the fact that "in the past, this preparation could count on the support of society which recognized the values and benefits of marriage" (1). While the Synodal fathers also pointed out that, despite many signs that a crisis in marriage is occurring, "the desire to marry and form a family remains vibrant, especially among young people."³ For this reason, it is necessary to thoroughly examine the current situation of married couples and families and take the necessary action to adjust accordingly the remote, proximate, and immediate preparation of couples for marriage and family life.

This article focuses on the validity of Pope Francis' teaching on the preparation of couples for marriage and family life as well as new initiatives that aim to improve the condition of contracted marriages.

Suggestions Concerning Remote Preparation

The first stage in preparing couples for marriage and family life is the remote stage. The Polish Episcopal Conference provides pastoral indications concerning the remote preparation in the *Dyrektorium Duszpasterstwa Rodzin* [*Directory for the Pastoral Care of Families*]. These indications suggest that "the process should begin in childhood and continue throughout further stages of education and catechesis."⁴ During this stage, the child should be helped to grow in maturity. The

¹ See A. Nadbrzeżny, "Sakramentologiczne implikacje adhortacji *Amoris laetitia*," in: *Towarzyszyć małżeństwu i rodzinie. Inspiracje adhortacji apostolskiej Amoris laetitia dla duszpasterstwa rodzin*, ed. J. Goleń, Lublin 2017, pg. 65.

² Pontifical Council for the Family, "Preparation for the sacrament of marriage," in: *Posoborowe dokumenty Kościoła katolickiego o małżeństwie i rodzinie*, vol. II, ed., K. Lubowicki, Cracow, no. 1, pg. 389. Abbreviated hereafter as PSM.

³ Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Relatio Synodi*, no. 2 (Accessed 10.18.2014).

⁴ Polish Episcopal Conference, *Dyrektorium Duszpasterstwa Rodzin*, Warsaw 2003, no. 19, pg. 23. Abbreviated hereafter as DDR.

remote stage is an important phase that each person must go through in order to become a fully mature spouse and parent (see AL 208).

Family is the first context and parents are the primary educators responsible for preparing children and young people for marriage and family life. During childhood, a child witnesses and receives the basic example of family life. However, according to *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis desires to involve not only the family of origin but also the missionary families, the families of the fiancés, and various “pastoral initiatives” in the process of the remote preparation (AL 208).

The vocation of family life is not separate from the missionary vocation. The family apostolate consists not only in being a witness to Christian life in one's place of residence but also to people in other lands. Missionary families play an important role in this regard. Pope John Paul II sent out the first families from the Neocatechumenal Way as missionaries in other countries on January 15, 1986. This missionary activity is a means for families to realize the aims of the Neocatechumenal Way. After reflecting deeply on the needs of the Church and discerning that there were no obstacles in their own families, these missionary families freely express their willingness to be sent out by their bishop who, in turn, commissions them to a place in need after they participating in a solemn celebration. Missionary families should serve as a model of the Christian family in responding to the challenge of secularization and atheism in many European countries. They should also be an example of what it is to respond to the call of the new evangelization on different continents. Missionary families settle in places where people do not know Christ or places where their presence is indispensable.⁵ A priest accompanies a missionary family, and the places to which they go are indicated in the personal invitations that they receive from their bishops. The families often settle in dangerous neighborhoods, find jobs to support the family, and try to establish relationships with their neighbors and the inhabitants of a given place. The Catholic Church's presence in this manner resembles the families who accompanied Saint Paul on his missions.⁶

Pope Francis also includes the families of engaged couples when mentioning other forms of help during the process of the remote

⁵ Neocatechumenal Way, “Families in mission,” in *Statute*, Definitively approved on May 11, 2008, Feast of Pentecost, Art. 33, § 1, § 2, and § 3. <http://www.rmmst-onto.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Statute-of-the-Neocatechumenal-Way.pdf>

⁶ J. Kociszewska. “Rodzina na misjach,” in: <https://kosciol.wiara.pl/doc/495094.Rodziny-na-misjach> (Accessed 11.04.2019).

preparation.⁷ In this regard, the Pope primarily means the families who have educated the engaged couple and spouses. These families are particularly important in this day and age because the family faces various crises. Therefore, it is important for the families to instill lasting values and be built upon mutual love and openness to life (children). Parents of families should also ensure that they understand and live out the sacrament of marriage, which is the basis of the family, the nation, and state.⁸

According to this understanding of marriage and family, the Church and parents should emphasize the communal practice of virtue in the spiritual life of the family. From a Christian point of view, spiritual life is connected with the realization of the vocation to holiness. The Second Vatican Council recalls that everyone in the Church is called to holiness (LG 39). Therefore, the married couples and families who make up “the domestic Church” are called to work out their own model of life with God.⁹ Parents play an important role in helping their children and young people grow in perfection by serving as role models through their behavior, their way of life, the manner in which they solve problems, as well as the standards and rules that they set for themselves and for others. In this way, remote preparation also further influences the culture of family life within the community.

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis points out pastoral resources that are important in the remote preparation of engaged couples for marriage and family life. In addition to the activity of missionary families and the help of the engaged couple’s families, these pastoral resources should include “example[s] and good advice” that will lead children and young people to mature married love (AL 208). The parents’ personal example of emotional closeness and shared life help form within the child the proper image of marriage and family. Children who observe its parents’ mutual relationship that is full of tenderness, understanding, respect, and love learn the proper behavior that they, in turn, can pass on to their own children when modeling marriage. In his Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II taught about pastoral accompaniment, highlighting that “the Church’s pastoral action must be progressive, also in the sense

⁷ See Polish Episcopal Conference, *Służyć prawdzie o małżeństwie i rodzinie*, Warsaw 2009, no. 101, pg. 22. Abbreviated hereafter as SPMR.

⁸ See A. Sarmiento, *Małżeństwo chrześcijańskie. Podręcznik teologii małżeństwa i rodziny*, trans. P. Rak, Cracow 2002, pgs. 113-117.

⁹ M. Brzeziński, “Życie duchowe rodziny,” in: *Rodzina jako Kościół domowy*, eds. A. Tomkiewicz, W. Wieczorek, Lublin 2010, pgs. 333-334.

that it must follow the family, accompanying it step by step in the different stages of its formation and development” (65).¹⁰

In remote preparation Pope Francis emphasizes that it is important for priests to organize conferences in which young people can voluntarily participate. The conferences should focus on “the primary objective [which] is to help each to learn how to love this very real person with whom he or she plans to share his or her whole life” (AL 208). The Pope also points out this issue because the modern world diminishes the value not only of human love between spouses but also of the main source of love: the family. For this reason, it is worthwhile to return to the basic anthropological truth that “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). God created man out of love and for love; therefore, love was inscribed into man’s fate and became the condition for human development.¹¹

Man should understand that self-acceptance and self-love are the basis for learning to love. People who are not able to form a proper relationship with themselves are often a burden to their families and friends and create medical, economic, and primarily interpersonal problems. Another reason why people should love themselves is the fact that love gives them the strength, hope, and endurance necessary to deal with and solve every problem and work on their character. The third reason why self-love is important is because it enables people to care for others, since a person cannot love someone else unless he loves himself in a mature way. The more a person learns to love himself in a mature way, the greater the chance that he will maturely love others.¹²

¹⁰ See G. Pyźlak, “Towarzystwo rodzinom po rozpadzie,” in: *Towarzystwo małżeństwu i rodzinie. Inspiracje adhortacji apostołskiej Amoris laetitia dla duszpasterstwa rodzin*, pgs. 392-397; Ibid, “Towarzystwo duszpasterskie małżonkom i rodzinom,” *Roczniki Teologiczne*, vol. LXV, 2018, fasc. 6, pgs. 123-136; A. Bajer vel Bojer, “Przygotowanie do małżeństwa w ujęciu Jana Pawła II i papieża Franciszka,” *Łódzkie Studia Teologiczne* 27 (2018) 2, pgs. 155-164.

¹¹ In his exhortation *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul II states the fact that “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it” (10).

¹² J. Szyran, “Ku miłości dojrzałej,” *Collectanea Theologica* 73:2003, no. 3, pg. 148; see A. Sawicka, *Przygotowanie do życia małżeńskiego i rodzinnego. Studium z duszpasterstwa rodzin na podstawie badań maturzystów archidiecezji lubelskiej*, Lublin 2019, pgs. 14-23 (typescript).

Suggestions Concerning Proximate Preparation

Proximate preparation is the next step in the process of preparing engaged couples for marriage and family life. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis highlights the importance of long-term assistance which, in conjunction with the elements of the proximate preparation, should convict future spouses to “not view the wedding ceremony as the end of the road, but instead embark upon marriage as a lifelong calling based on a firm and realistic decision to face all trials and difficult moments together” (AL 211). In light of Pope Francis’ words, it is difficult to determine when young people consciously prepare for their future marriage. In their family home they undergo preparation passively. Therefore, it is important to ensure that during proximate preparation young people who are preparing for the sacrament of marriage obtain the proper knowledge and skills necessary to live a conjugal and family life held in common.¹³ Within the Church in Poland, engaged couples receive advice from the *Directory for the Pastoral Care of Families*, which stresses certain issues that are discussed during the catechesis that the Church offers during proximate preparation. In addition to the theology of marriage and the family, the syllabus should include threats to family life and methods to save the family. The syllabus should also present ways to organize associations and participate in the groups that provide deeper formation. During proximate preparation, marriage preparation participants should be taught about Natural Family Planning within the context of the sanctity of human life as well as responsibility for the future of the state and of the Church. Retreats should also be organized in order to broaden married couples’ knowledge in the areas mentioned above (DDR 25).

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, the Pope mentions that it is important emphasize that marriage is a vocation. When marriage is understood as a vocation, then it is clear that it is meant for two people and, consequently, should be lived out by two mutually consenting persons. Marriage is the only sacrament in which two people are responsible for carrying out its obligations and ensuring its success.

When discussing the vocation to marriage, it is important to recall that God Himself gives life to man. The vocation to marriage aims at starting a family and it consists of two elements: a gift and a task. The gift is a calling for “communion”—that is for the stability of the covenant of marriage so that it will last until the death of one or both

¹³ E. Sujak, *Kontakt psychiczny w małżeństwie i rodzinie*, Wrocław 1983, pgs. 66-67.

of the spouses.¹⁴ The task is the response to call to the mission of the vocation, which is limited mainly to this life on earth. The vocation to marriage is first and foremost a vocation to love. The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Gaudium et Spes* teaches that marriage is a particular kind of love that aims at a particular and deep community of life and love (47, 48). Thanks to their love, the spouses help each other grow through their gift of self because love means both giving and receiving a gift. In its essence, this particular gift of self from one person to the other should be permanent and irrevocable. Furthermore, God calls the spouses to holiness. Through God's will all spouses are called to love—to sanctify their lives in marriage. Therefore, the essence of the Christian vocation is a dialogue of freedom between God and man—a dialogue that is carried out by man's free choice (see CCC 1603).¹⁵

Premarital pastoral care as well as the pastoral care of marriage help couples form and maintain the marriage bond through growth in mature love and by overcoming difficult moments in their marriage and family life (AL 211). Pastoral care, which is addressed in pastoral theology, can be divided into ordinary and extraordinary pastoral care. The pastoral care of families, which is considered ordinary pastoral care, is according to K. Wojaczek, “the activity of the Church, which fulfills its missionary role in relation to the family, encompasses all of the stages of the family's development and the entire content of family life with regard to the sacramental nature of marriage and the ecclesial dimension of marriage and the family.”¹⁶

The premarital courses that Pope Francis mentions in *Amoris Laetitia* are the main source of help for those who are preparing for marriage and family life. By participating in these lectures and workshops as

¹⁴ In Pope John Paul II's *Letter to Families*, the Catholic Church's teaching on the concept *communio personarum* (communion of persons) makes it possible to fully understand the intrinsic nature of marriage and the family (7). The concept *communio* sets forth the way that people mutually are and act in relation to each other—a way of being and acting through which they mutually confirm and affirm each other, thereby creating the most intimate community. *Communio personarum* is a community of unity, of which only those who truly love, meaning those who live and realize mature love, are capable. M. Sztaba, “Małżeństwo i rodzina jako ‘communio personarum,’” in: <https://www.niedziela.pl/arttykul/15180/Malzenstwo-i-rodzina-jako-communio> (Accessed 11.08.2019).

¹⁵ See G. Pyżlak, “Marriage as a vocation,” *Rocznik Teologii Katolickiej*, vol. XV/2 R 2016, pgs. 163-164.

¹⁶ K. Wojaczek, “Koncepcja duszpasterstwa rodzin w *Familiaris consortio*,” in: *Małżeństwo i rodzina w świetle nauki Kościoła i współczesnej teologii*, ed. A.L. Szafranski, Lublin 1985, pgs. 275-276.

well as doing their own individual work, engaged couples can deepen their knowledge of marriage and the family. Pastoral care of married couples can include gathering engaged couples who want to discover and experience the gift of the sacrament of marriage; perceive and understand its value, beauty, and holiness; and share the experience of their life together. It is important for married couples to discover the essence of marriage and of the Catholic family in the spirit of the Gospel and the teaching of the Church.¹⁷

Premarital pastoral care and the pastoral care of marriage should favor the pastoral care of the marriage bond. In order to understand how to build and strengthen this bond, it is first necessary to understand what the marriage bond is and how to establish it in marriage and family life. The marriage bond is the basic element that integrates marriage and the condition for the mental health and well-being of the spouses and for their ability to function in society and in the world. The essential elements of this bond are: the relationship between the spouses as well as their common passions, life goals, and their commitments arising from their efforts to meet their economic, social, psychological and professional needs.¹⁸ The marriage bond also plays a very important role in how a couple functions. It is particularly important that the correct bond be personal and strengthened by love, trust, care, responsibility, an attitude of giving, and mutual openness. Furthermore, mutual understanding and honesty are very important in the family bond. The most important feature of this bond is closeness, cordiality, directness, and intimacy, which should all lead to internal family cohesion as well as mutual help and cooperation.¹⁹ Priests who are responsible for proximate preparation have an important role to play, since they should determine when proximate preparation takes place and present it as a means of establishing a bond with Jesus Christ and building a relationship with Him and, through His grace, building the foundation for constancy in a sacramental marriage.²⁰

¹⁷ See *Kursy przedmażeńskie*, in: <http://duszpasterstwo rodzin.pl/dla-narzeczonych/kursy-przedmalzenskie/>; *Duszpasterstwo małżeństw*, in: http://bytom.jezuici.pl/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=53&Itemid=178 (Accessed 11.08.2019).

¹⁸ See M. Ryś, *Psychologia małżeństwa w zarysie*, Warsaw 1999, pg. 58.

¹⁹ M. Ryś, "Więź rodzinna," in: *Wychowanie do życia w rodzinie. Słownik pojęć*, ed. K. Ostrowska, Cracow, pg. 122.

²⁰ Priests have a particular role to play in supporting married couples who are in crisis. Through their spiritual help, the process of discernment, administering the sacraments, and awakening in the spouses an awareness of God's presence in their marriage, priests can help heal the marriage bond. Therefore, the tasks

Pope Francis highlights that, in addition to doctrinal beliefs, the spouses should be offered “practical programmes, sound advice, proven strategies and psychological guidance” as a source of support (AL 211). In this regard, counseling centers should be established in parishes, and the proper person, or, a married couple at best, should be chosen to lead the counseling center and to provide information campaign about the services that the center offers. One of the most important tasks (of many) of a counseling center is to provide support to married couples and families who face difficulties. When establishing such a counseling center, it is important to take into account a range of specific preventive measures that can support couples in properly developing their family life and help the spouses and parents to resolve the difficulties that they encounter.²¹ In his teaching, the Pope adds: “Marriage preparation should also provide couples with the names of places, people and services to which they can turn for help when problems arise” (AL 211).

However, while providing aid to spouses who face difficulties, “[i]t is also important to remind them of the availability of the sacrament of Reconciliation” (AL 211). The Polish Episcopal Conference’s document *Wskazania dla spowiedników w zakresie spowiedzi małżonków* [*Indications for Confessors Regarding the Confessions of Spouses*] indicates that, during sacramental confession, a priest should not only engage in pastoral conversation, friendly talk, or psychological counseling but he must also “be deeply aware and he should also inform the penitent that confession is a sacrament of the Church, the essence of which is a fruitful encounter with Christ and with His saving work. In this sacrament, both the penitent and the confessor enter into a

of priests include: a) Identifying married couples and families in the parish who are facing difficulties. This can be done, for example, during a pastoral visit, meetings at the parish office, visiting the sick, meetings to prepare children for the sacraments, etc.; b) Patiently and mercifully accompanying these married couples and families—establishing and developing a pastoral relationship with them—throughout the subsequent stages of their development. It is important for priests to try to heal the spouses’ wounded feelings and make up for the harm that they suffered while accompanying them; c) Showing them how to obtain the Church’s help in their difficult situations. In such cases, diocesan family counseling centers can provide specialized help. See the 5th Synod of Bishops of the Diocese of Tarnów: *Duszpasterstwo małżeństw i rodzin w diecezji tarnowskiej*, no. 60.

²¹ See Z. Narecki, *Duszpasterstwo zwyczajne w parafii a urzeczywistnianie się Kościoła*, Lublin 2001, pg. 390; see J. Goleń, “Poradnictwo małżeńsko-rodzinne,” in: *Duszpasterstwo rodzin. Refleksja naukowa i działalność pastoralna*, eds. R. Kamiński, G. Pyżlak, J. Goleń, Lublin 2013, pgs. 387-389.

supernatural sphere of [God's] action."²² Today, however, there is the danger for the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation to be reduced to mere therapy. Priests must not succumb to contemporary trends to offer penitents services that should be rendered by psychologists or pseudopsychologists instead. In his service within the confessional, the priest should remember that sacrament of Reconciliation is "God's action which is carried out through the ministry of the Church."²³ The sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation takes away sin and restores man to the state of grace if he has lost it. The sacrament also increases grace in the person who confesses only venial sins.²⁴

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis discusses the couples' preparation of the wedding ceremony. Fiancés and their families mainly tend to focus on the external preparations such as: the invitations, the proper clothing, the reception, and other details. Francis encourages engaged couples to take a different approach: "Don't let yourselves get swallowed up by a society of consumption and empty appearances. What is important is the love you share, strengthened and sanctified by grace" (AL 212). The Pope encourages couples to celebrate the wedding modestly and simply and to allow love to take precedence over everything else (see AL 212) because the love that is received in the sacrament of marriage results in a breakthrough in life on the couple's way to salvation. Before marriage, spouses strive for salvation alone; from the moment of their marriage onward, however, they accompany each other and share the responsibility for each other's salvation and the salvation of their children. This new dimension of their life requires the power of the sacrament of marriage, which is a special union with God in Christ, since this unity will bring the spouses all the grace and charisms that they will need.²⁵

²² Polish Episcopal Conference, *Wskazania dla spowiedników w zakresie spowiedzi małżonków [Indications for Confessors Regarding the Confessions of Spouses]* (01.26.1971), no. 3, in: https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WE/kep/kkbids/pokuta1_26011971.html (Access 11.08.2019).

²³ See A. F. Dziuba, *Spowiedź małżeńska. Życie małżeńskie a sakramentalna postęga pokuty i pojednania*, (Zagadnienia wybrane), Cracow 2002, pgs. 40; see J. Bazylak, "Psychoterapia a sakrament pokuty," *Ateneum Kapłańskie* 78:1986, pgs. 79-86.

²⁴ W. B. Skrzydlewski, *Chrześcijańska wizja miłości małżeństwa i rodziny*, Cracow 1982, pg. 124.

²⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 125.

Suggestions Concerning Immediate Preparation

Immediate preparation is also called short-term preparation for marriage. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* Pope Francis recalls that “the couple should be encouraged to make the liturgical celebration a profound personal experience and to appreciate the meaning of each of its signs” (AL 213). The Pope indicates that the power of the commitment “expressed by the words of consent and the bodily union that consummates the marriage can only be seen as signs of the covenantal love and union” (AL 213) of the future spouses which no human power can complete. The real consent, which arises from the internal will of the spouses, is indispensable in validly contracting marriage. However, the inner will is not enough; it must be expressed externally by means of words. And, if it is not possible to express it by words, then it can be expressed by means of signs.²⁶ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “[t]he Church holds the exchange of consent between the spouses to be the indispensable element that makes the marriage. If consent is lacking there is no marriage” (1626), while the *Code of Canon Law* states that: “The consent of the parties, legitimately manifested between persons qualified by law, makes marriage; no human power is able to supply this consent” (Can. 1057 §1). The spouses make their marriage vows in the presence of a presbyter or a deacon who assists them in contracting marriage as well as in the presence of witnesses (see CCC 1630). The priest accepts their consent in the name of the Church and he blesses their new conjugal union.

The consummation of the marriage complements the marriage vows and is necessary for the validity of the marriage. Through the conjugal act, the man and the woman unite with each other and become one flesh. The Polish Episcopal Conference's document *Służyć prawdzie o małżeństwie i rodzinie [In Service to the Truth about Marriage and the Family]* states that the conjugal act “is not reduced to merely satisfying the biological needs of the two individuals of the opposite sex and is expressed in the spouses' being one flesh, one heart, one spirit, and their common everyday life. At the same time such a conjugal act is the expression of religious content” (54). In the conjugal act, love directs human desires towards the other person and is a conscious and free act of the mutual union of the two spouses. The nakedness of the spouses, which is accompanied by natural human shame, is an important element of each conjugal act. The naked human body is a gift but only for the beloved. Shame protects the value of sex and the person from “being used.” Therefore, the conjugal act is an invitation

²⁶ See P. M. Gajda, *Prawo małżeńskie Kościoła katolickiego*, Tarnow 2005, pg. 129.

to God Who is the Giver of love, unity, and life and Who participates in it. The spouses participate in the sacred mystery of life which is a gift from God.²⁷

In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis indicates the issues that are a source of discussion on the ministry of the sacrament of marriage. According to Pope Francis, “The body, created with a God-given meaning, becomes the language of the ministers of the sacrament, aware that in the conjugal act there is expressed and realized the mystery that has its origin in God himself” (AL 213). In the Eastern Church, the spouses are not the ministers of the sacrament of marriage; rather, they are married to each other by Christ in the Church. Western Church Tradition emphasizes the baptismal nature of the spouses and their royal priesthood. Through their mutual consent arising from their free will, the spouses participate in sacramental grace of marriage. They are the ministers and the subjects of the sacrament. Marriage is realized through their consent. Therefore, the spouses are the ministers of the sacramental act contracted by them; however, the sacrament comes through the action of Christ and of the Church.²⁸ This reasoning should help the spouses to understand “the theological and spiritual import of the words of consent, which illuminate the meaning of all the signs that follow” (AL 214). It shows the meaning of freedom of choice, fidelity, and the indissolubility of the contracted marriage. Through marriage, the spouses give and receive rights and obligations which include love, conjugal unity, fidelity, indissolubility, openness to procreation, and raising children in the faith.²⁹ Pope Francis warns of “the damage caused, in our culture of global communication, by the escalation of unkept promises... Honouring one’s word, fidelity to one’s promises: these are things that cannot be bought and sold. They cannot be compelled by force or maintained without sacrifice” (AL 214).

In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis also highlights that people need to be encouraged to understand “the sacrament not as a single moment that then becomes a part of the past and its memories, but rather as a reality that permanently influences the whole of married life” (AL 215). Therefore, it is wrong to think of wedding as of the end of the road, since it is really the beginning of the newly married couple’s life

²⁷ J. Szyran, “Potrójne znaczenie aktu seksualnego,” in: <http://mateusz.pl/mt/jsz/09.htm> (Accessed 11.08.2019).

²⁸ See Cz. Rychlicki, “Problem osoby szafarza sakramentu małżeństwa,” *Ius Matrimoniale* 4:1999, pgs. 134, 137.

²⁹ G. Pyżlak, “Aktualność teologicznego ujęcia przysięgi małżeńskiej,” in: *Sakramentalna przysięga małżeńska w obliczu wyzwań współczesnego świata. Ujęcie interdyscyplinarne*, eds. P. Landwójtowicz, S. Pawiński, Opole 2017, pg. 61.

together. The sacrament is the spouses' life-long commitment until one or both of them dies. Through marriage, the spouses create "a little Church" which should do its best to fulfill its duties in the work of salvation. The sacrament of marriage increases the saving grace in the souls of the spouses.³⁰

Pope Francis further points out that engaged couples "can also meditate on the biblical readings and the meaningfulness of the rings they will exchange and the other signs that are part of the rite" (AL 216). Wedding rings, the shape of which symbolize completeness, have neither a beginning nor an end, so they refer to eternity and unity. The mutual gift of the wedding rings is, therefore, the expression to the newlyweds that their love will last forever. The gesture of holding right hands is also very important as it means contracting a legal act. At the same time it symbolizes openness, forgiveness, the mutual gift of self, and their mutual accompaniment on their way together. Among other gestures during the celebration of entering into the covenant of sacramental marriage is the significant moment when the joined right hands of the newlyweds are wrapped in the priest's stole. This gesture symbolizes the Greater Love (God) that entwines human love and gives it an eternal dimension. The wedding candle symbolizes how the spouses are rooted in the power of the Passover, the light that overcame the darkness and death in the world. These wedding gestures also include the blessing of the newlyweds. When the priest places his hands on the newlyweds, this gesture reminds them and those gathered of the reality that God's love permeates them and influences their love. The bouquet of flowers that the bride often places on the altar on behalf of both spouses expresses their gratitude for the gift of marriage and their act of entrusting themselves to God's care. The white gown and veil as well as the boutonniere are also very important because they symbolize the chastity with which the spouses enter into their marriage as well as of the purity and nobility of their intention to enter into this great sacrament. The marriage vows are the external sign of what takes place at the very moment they confer the sacrament of marriage upon each other. Making their vows, the newlyweds publicly commit to their life together—with God's help—until death separates them. Pope Francis emphasizes that, during the wedding ceremony, "frequently, the celebrant speaks to a congregation that includes people who seldom participate in the life of the Church

³⁰ Skrzydlewski, *Chrześcijańska wizja miłości małżeństwa i rodziny*, pgs. 133-134.

[...] The occasion thus provides a valuable opportunity to proclaim the Gospel of Christ” (AL 216).³¹

* * *

Pope Francis’ teaching on preparation for marriage and family life is based on research that has been conducted in various parts of the world. This teaching reveals the truth that marriage should not be perceived only as a social event but also as a sacrament for which engaged couples should properly prepare and consciously consent. While families themselves are called to give witness, the entire Christian community should be involved in helping contemporary families overcome the challenges that they face. Preparation for marriage and family life must be rooted in the basic sacraments of Christian initiation. In his teaching, Pope Francis seeks to enrich previously applicable and established ways to prepare engaged couples for marriage and family life with such elements as: assisting engaged couples by being present and witnessing to them with one’s life. The Pope also indicates the need to create within the Church a permanent catechumenate of married couples that includes: preparation for, the celebration of, and support during the first years of marriage.

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