

The Year of *Amoris laetitia*

**Interview with Gabriella Gambino,
Undersecretary of the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life**

The 'polycentric and widespread' format of the World Meeting of Families will allow for diocesan initiatives to take place simultaneously with those being held in Rome with the Pope. We spoke with Gabriella Gambino, undersecretary of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life, about this unprecedented element and others related to the upcoming 10th World Meeting of Families 2022, entitled: Family Love: A Vocation and a Path to Holiness.

A Local and Worldwide meeting

Undersecretary Gambino, the Tenth World Meeting of Families promises to be an original experience with a greater and more widespread participation of families. Is this true?

Yes, in fact, initially the pandemic disoriented us a lot, but the Holy Father's idea of a meeting which, for the first time, would take place in many different locations throughout the world is proving to be extraordinarily fruitful for many pastoral realities and families themselves. We well know that it will not be easy for pastors to thin how they can have a local, diocesan or parish event. It will undoubtedly be necessary for lay people and pastors to join forces to set up organizing and pastoral teams, to listen to proposals from families, and during that week to provide moments of celebration, sharing experiences and testimonies, reflections, and proclamations. However, for the first time, everyone will be able to follow the Meeting in Rome both in their diocese and via direct streaming.

It's really an opportunity for everyone to participate. To assist pastors, we sent to Episcopal Conferences some guidelines with concrete suggestions for organizing the event, together with the program. The pastoral congress themes are available in a pastoral kit together with liturgical suggestions. There has been an enormous amount of work behind all these initiatives which we hope will make the priests and bishops involved in this ecclesial proposal feel accompanied. But they will need the help of families, adults and children.

Can families help the Church to be more synodal?

The meeting takes place within the particular context of the synodal path undertaken by the Church and in view of the upcoming Synod of Bishops. It seems a very significant coincidence...?

I would say providential. *Amoris laetitia*, as the impetus for this world meeting, calls us to have a profound desire for discernment regarding the style and manner by which pastoral service is carried out. The Holy Father is inviting us, under the guidance of the Spirit, to graft this into the synodal journey of communion, participation and mission for all members of the People of God, including families. Thus we decided to include reflections on the contribution and the ecclesiological and pastoral significance of the family in the Church in the Meeting's program. Families today need not only to rediscover themselves as part of the Church but as *architects* of the Church in a spirit of true communion.

This communion arises from a sincere listening to families that is then followed by initiatives that are a fruit of what emerges from this listening. It is necessary to try to combine the process of ecclesial discernment with the Church-family relationship. We need to ask ourselves slightly different questions from those of the past. For example: *How can families help the Church to be more synodal? What can the Church learn from how discerning, listening and welcoming occurs in families? How can love enter into discernment as it does in family life? What can the Church learn from the way parents, children, siblings and relatives all seek to love one another despite frailties, vulnerabilities, conflicts and diverse points of view? How can this synodal process at the local level open up new paths for families in the Church's mission?* If we can see things from this perspective, a more fruitful dialogue can be generated in the Church.

Accompaniment in the early years of marriage

In anticipation of the world meeting, a forum on the pastoral application of Amoris laetitia took place last June in Rome. Did those who participated in the forum focus on a particular theme?

Among the central themes was marriage preparation and the accompaniment of couples in their first years of married life. It is a crucial theme today from the perspective of marriage *catechumenate* and is one of the points repeatedly emphasized by Pope Francis. He is insisting on the possibility for a robust program inspired by the path of Christian initiation which would allow engaged couples to enter into marriage with greater awareness and understanding. It is also necessary to already start such catechesis for young people in order to help them see marriage as a vocation. In the various stages of preparation for the sacrament, focus should be placed on conversion and personal discernment, also from the aspect of being a couple.

Accompaniment should not be neglected during the first years of marriage. As we know, this is one of the most difficult and delicate periods. There is also a need for more adequate formation of those involved in the pastoral care of families and the urgent issue of accompaniment for couples in crisis. Methodologically, greater communication between different ecclesial realities is also needed. For this reason, we are working on the creation of a platform for sharing of experiences and pastoral approaches. The hope is to establish an avenue for communion among Episcopal Conferences and international movements involved in the pastoral care of families.

Initiate processes of listening and dialogue with families

Pope Francis constantly speaks of the importance of a concrete understanding of every situation in order to accompany families. Will this next world meeting be an opportunity for growth in this sense?

We really hope so. There are many contexts in which such listening is still a challenge, but, as you also mentioned, this preparatory period has precisely this purpose: to initiate processes of listening and dialogue with families and of prayer. The Year for the Family has this specific objective: to bring about a renewal and give new momentum to the pastoral care of families, lay formation and to spouses in particular. In this way, they can gain needed skills in order to listen and accompany other families. Families can be living witnesses of beauty especially in those contexts where families are suffering the most.

A path to holiness?

"Family Love: A Vocation and a Path to Holiness". What is the significance of the two-parts of the meeting title: "vocation" and "path to holiness"? How will these themes be expressed and articulated during the Meeting?

Marriage, from which the family springs forth, is not a point of arrival. It is a vocation. It is a journey of holiness that embraces the whole life of persons. Marriage embraces not only

spouses but also those people inevitably and wonderfully drawn along by the reality of marriage through its outward force radiating grace around them. Believing in this grace, in the person of Christ who "dwells" in the family implies that there is an attempt to listen to the Holy Spirit in everyday life. It means learning to read and reflect on reality not according to ourselves but according to God. It is letting God speak. Many known and lesser-known holy spouses and families in the Church have walked their own paths of holiness.

In this upcoming Meeting, space will be given to reflections and testimonies on marriage preparation for young people so that they are able to better understand its true vocational nature. Like priesthood or consecrated life, it occurs after a thorough discernment and requires their response also as a couple. Too many Christian marriages end after a few years due in part to the lightness with which they were entered into. We will also talk about accompanying families through crises, the experience of broken marriages and how to continue living one's Christian vocation in these situations. During the world Meeting time will also be dedicated to understanding the discernment that must take place in family life that enables us to listen to God; the education of children in the face of current challenges including digital media use; living the mission of families which is to help and welcome those in need; accompanying children with sexual education so that they can understand the beauty of the human body and their own vocations; our universal call to holiness and more. We also believe it will be possible to focus on those themes in a way which will be most appropriate for each local reality at the diocesan level.

Mission of families: Bring the Gospel of Love made flesh to the world

In Amoris laetitia the Pope writes that "the Church is good for the family" and "the family is good for the Church." Can you comment especially on the second part of the phrase for which there is seemingly less awareness and sensitivity?

The ecclesiological perspective of the Second Vatican Council highlighted the Church's nature as People of God on a journey, as a *symphonic reality*, where each state of life has a mission according to its own grace. Marriage, alongside the sacrament of Holy Orders, directly serves to build and spread the People of God. Since marriage gives rise to the family, human life and vocations, it can truly be said that families are at the crossroad between the Church and today's world. God has given families the task of "making humanity a family" or to put it another way, of "domesticating the world" with the power of love that it generates (AL 183). For this reason, the Church is a "family of families" and every family becomes in every respect a 'good' for the Church.

It is especially important to understand that by becoming one flesh in Christ through marriage, spouses are consecrated to mission. Their identity is not only that of blessed couples called to holiness, but it is also an ecclesial one. Marriage is an ecclesial ministry in this sense. It brings the Gospel of love made flesh to the world!

But there is more: Spouses can also be a gift for pastors. Pastors can more fully understand the meaning of their own priestly vocation by looking at spouses' incarnation of the nuptial mystery. Certainly for us as spouses the mission of proclamation is not fulfilled by chance. We must desire to transmit the great gift we have received by bearing witnesses to the beauty of the gift of love. For many this task is still unknown and much work is needed at the pastoral level.