

Pope's letter to Argentine bishops on 'Amoris Laetitia' part of official record

VATICAN CITY — Describing them as “authentic magisterium,” Pope Francis ordered the official publication of his letter to a group of Argentine bishops and their guidelines for the interpretation of “Amoris Laetitia,” his apostolic exhortation on the family.

According to a brief note by Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, Pope Francis wanted his letter and the bishops' document to be published on the Vatican website and in the “Acta Apostolicae Sedis,” the official record of Vatican documents and acts.

The papal letter, dated Sept. 5, 2016, was written in response to guidelines published by the bishops in the Catholic Church's Buenos Aires region. Pope Francis said the bishops' document “explains precisely the meaning of Chapter VIII of ‘Amoris Laetitia.’ There are no other interpretations.”

The letter is found on the Vatican website under letters written by the pope in 2016, and was published in the October 2016 edition of the “Acta Apostolicae Sedis,” which also is available online: <https://www.vatican.va/archive/aas/documents/2016/acta-ottobre2016.pdf>.

Cardinal Francesco Coccopalmerio, president of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, told Catholic News Service Dec. 5, “The fact that the pope requested that his letter and the interpretations of the Buenos Aires bishops be published in the AAS means that His Holiness has given these documents a particular qualification that elevates them to the level of being official teachings of the church.

“While the content of the pope's letter itself does not contain teachings on faith and

morals, it does point toward the interpretations of the Argentine bishops and confirms them as authentically reflecting his own mind," the cardinal said. "Thus together the two documents became the Holy Father's authentic magisterium for the whole church."

Bishop Juan Ignacio Arrieta, secretary of the pontifical council and a prelate of the Apostolic Penitentiary, a Vatican court handling matters of conscience, told CNS that already in August, Pope Francis had ordered the Vatican newspaper to publish the Buenos Aires' bishops' guidelines and his response, which was "a clear manifestation of the pope's judgment that their interpretation was clear and correct."

The publication of both in the Holy See's official gazette even more strongly "indicates the thinking of the Holy Father and does so collegially: A group of bishops says something, and the pope associates himself with it."

While it is up to theologians to discuss the full meaning of "authentic magisterium," Bishop Arrieta said, for a canon lawyer like himself "this sets precedence for the whole church."

The history of the church's application of the Code of Canon Law, which provides general norms, is that specific applications of that law are refined through "precedence and analogy," he said.

Bishop Arrieta also noted that the Buenos Aires bishops' guidelines "carefully avoid one extreme and another." They do not say all Catholics are welcome to receive Communion no matter what their marital situation is, nor do they say no Catholic in a second marriage may access the sacraments.

The eighth chapter of "Amoris Laetitia" is titled, "Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating Weakness," and is the most debated chapter of the document. It urges pastors to assist those whose marriages have faltered and help them feel part of the church community. It also outlines a process that could lead divorced and civilly remarried Catholics back to the sacraments.

Some church leaders and theologians have insisted reception of the sacraments is

impossible for such couples unless they receive an annulment of their sacramental marriage or abstain from sexual relations with their new partner.

The Buenos Aires document said the path of discernment proposed by Pope Francis “does not necessarily end in the sacraments,” but should, first of all, help the couple recognize their situation, understand church teaching on the permanence of marriage and take steps toward living a more Christian life.

“When feasible,” the guidelines said, divorced and civilly remarried couples should be encouraged to abstain from sexual relations, which would allow them to receive the sacrament of reconciliation and the Eucharist.

While there is no such thing as “unrestricted access to the sacraments,” the bishops said, in some situations, after a thorough process of discernment and examination of the culpability of the individual in the failure of the sacramental marriage, the pope’s exhortation “opens the possibility” to reception of the sacraments.

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