



The objectives of pastoral accompaniment for married couples in the first years of married life in the light of the documents *Amoris Laetitia* and *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life*



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One of the rapidly growing subfields in contemporary pastoral theology is the pastoral care of families. Besides numerous documents published during the pontificate of John Paul II, known as the Pope of the Family, particularly valuable responses from the Church to the current marriage crisis are Francis's exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* and the document by the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life, highlighting the urgent need for thorough formation of engaged and newly married couples during their first years of marriage. In this context, aside from the more frequently investigated topic of marriage preparation, a key question arises: What does the pathway of catechumenal initiation and pastoral accompaniment for newly married couples consist of? This study aims to present the main objectives of pastoral accompaniment for newlyweds from a theological perspective, drawing on research in family psychology. To address the problem thus formulated, we applied the deductive method – the primary approach in theology – along with its specific techniques; we also employed pastoral theology analysis, which enables the integration of insights from psychology and other disciplines into theology. As a result, the study not only clarifies the essence of mystagogical accompaniment for newly married couples but also identifies six specific objectives, which are discussed along with their selected forms and implementation methods.

Contribution: Because of interdisciplinary cooperation, theology provides social sciences with an in-depth perspective not only on marriage itself but also on marital love, the experience of sexuality within marriage and approaches to marital crises. Through the achievements of family theology, practical theology remains true to its human focus, maintains pastoral realism and relevance and contributes to the greater effectiveness of ministry.

Keywords: Catholic marriage; pastoral accompaniment; catechumenal initiation; mystagogy; pastoral care of families.

Introduction

God created humans in his image and likeness, calling them to love (John Paul II 1981: no. 11). Created in God's image (cf. Gen 1:26–28), man and woman are called to form a communion of persons in the image of the Holy Trinity (Francis 2016: nos. 29, 161); for many of them, though not for all, this means a vocation to marriage. Jesus Christ elevated the covenant between spouses to the dignity of a sacrament (Council of Trent 1563: Can 1; cf. Code of Canon Law 1983: Can. 1055 §1) and granted them the graces they need, thereby confirming the human capacity for profound unity – the two shall become 'one flesh' (cf. Matt 19:5). At the same time, entering into a sacramental marriage demands that the man and the woman faithfully cooperate with God's grace in strengthening their bond of marital love, as marriage requires constant commitment (cf. Francis 2016: nos. 217–218). This task facing married couples also implies a challenge for the community of the Church to provide them with appropriate pastoral support.

The issue of pastoral accompaniment for families was first clearly addressed in the apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, where John Paul II pointed out that:

[T]he Church's pastoral action must be progressive [...] in the sense that it must follow the family, accompanying it step by step in the different stages of its formation and development. (John Paul II 1981: no. 65)

The Documents of the Magisterium discussed in the present article continue to highlight this theme and underscore the need for the Church to offer ongoing formation and support for spouses after marriage as a continuous form of pastoral care of married life (cf. Francis 2016: no. 218; The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 74). It should be noted, however, that more recent theological perspectives on pastoral care focus less on the Church's activities and action-driven approach and more on helping the baptised discover their identity as children of God (cf. Pérez-Soba 2013:145). Therefore, the term 'pastoral accompaniment for married couples' in the title of this article should not be understood only as broadly defined pastoral care of families – the Church's salvific activity targeted at engaged couples, married couples and families (see Przygoda 2018:171–186) and carried out by pastors and lay specialists, with little input from spouses (cf. John Paul II 1981: nos. 72–73). In the current revised perspective, Pope Francis placed the main emphasis on accompaniment, which should be understood as imitating Christ the Good Shepherd (cf. Goleń 2017:16), being with someone and walking alongside them (Liddell et al. 1996:52). The focus of pastoral care is now on the involvement of two entities: sacramentally married couples and parishes, where accompaniment for engaged and married couples should primarily take place (cf. Francis 2016: nos. 200, 202; The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 86). The process of pastoral accompaniment discussed here primarily refers to mystagogy (initiation). From a transcendental (existential) perspective, mystagogy is the introduction of individuals into the mystery that they are in their relationship with Transcendence (cf. Zulehner 1980:10). This means that the process of pastoral accompaniment aims to guide a person instructively towards a deeper understanding and recognition of their direct connection to the mystery of God's action (Haslinger 1991:60; cf. Polak 2018:243–244). Mystagogical pastoral care:

[C]onsists in introducing a person into the mystery of salvation, namely in showing them the living Christ who gives people the light of God's truth and true freedom. Thus understood, pastoral mystagogy supports each person in achieving a *direct experience of God* as someone who is close, whom one can talk to, and who embraces a human being with love when they surrender to Him unconditionally. (Hajduk 2011:177, [Author's own translation])

In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis discusses accompaniment from a spiritual perspective as discovering God together in life and in patiently walking the path of maturation and growth – particularly spiritual growth – with both individuals and couples (cf. Francis 2013: nos. 169–173). It is also worth noting that in the theology of spirituality, 'spiritual accompaniment' specifically means supporting individuals in their spiritual growth and engaging in spiritual discernment together with them (see Louf 1994:59–72).

In his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis observed that 'pastoral initiatives aimed at helping married couples to grow in love and in the Gospel of the family also

help their children' (Francis 2016: no. 208). He also stressed that the pastoral care of married couples should, above all, be the pastoral care of the bond – 'a pedagogy of love', supporting spouses in both developing mature love and overcoming difficult moments. It will then also serve the purpose of preventing marriage breakups (cf. Francis 2016: nos. 211, 307). The pope's idea was further developed in the guidelines of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life (2022). In both documents, pastoral emphasis is placed on accompanying newly married couples during the first (two or three) years after marriage (Francis 2016: no. 217; cf. The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: nos. 24, 74). The latter document strongly underscores the catechumenal dimension and states that accompaniment for married couples should be a continuation of the catechumenal pathway for engaged couples (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 76). Because the two documents present a consistent message, it is worth discussing them together to identify and highlight the essential elements of this valuable conception set out in the latest Magisterium of the Church.

This article aims to outline the key objectives of pastoral accompaniment for married couples in the early years of married life, implied in Francis's *Amoris Laetitia* and expanded and refined in the document by the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life. The synthetic presentation may be helpful not only for understanding and interpreting what is innovative in the message of the two documents addressing the issues of pastoral accompaniment for married couples but also for practically implementing their assumptions and pastoral recommendations in particular Churches (dioceses), where church activity models and programmes focused on married couples and families are developed and applied. Based on the analysed documents of the Church's Magisterium, it is possible to identify six objectives of pastoral accompaniment for married couples in the first years of marriage (cf. The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 85), the achievement of which will be discussed below.

Offering a mystagogical catechesis on the Sacrament of Marriage

The primary pastoral objective stemming from the nature and mission of the Church, focused on fulfilling the marital vocation, is to preach God's plan for marriage and the family. It becomes particularly important today, in the context of contemporary challenges to lasting monogamous marriage according to God's will and the moral obligations it involves (cf. John Paul II 2003: no. 90). Therefore, what is needed is special support for spouses in discerning and fulfilling God's plan. Pope Francis highlighted this need, stating that married couples were grateful to their pastors for their help in boldly choosing a love that is strong, enduring and capable of overcoming all difficulties (cf. Francis 2016: no. 200).

In this situation, preaching God's design for marriage while also trying to consider the backgrounds of engaged and married couples and their expectations regarding formation,

the Church proposes a renewed pastoral approach, focused less on the transmission of moral norms and more on underscoring the need to discover God's work and grace in married life (cf. Francis 2016: no. 37). The Dicastery highlights this aspect, reminding the faithful that:

[T]he grace contained in the sacrament is not automatically actuated, but rather requires the spouses to cooperate with it by responsibly taking on the tasks and challenges that married life presents. (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 75; cf. Francis 2016: no. 218)

Consequently, the fundamental assumption that the formation of married couples must work on is the dynamic work of grace in the Sacrament of Marriage – namely, its operation throughout the married life that spouses share. This dynamism largely depends on spouses' cooperation. On the one hand, they create a theological space conducive to the dynamic operation of the grace of the Sacrament of Marriage through prayer and by receiving the sacraments of the Eucharist and Penance (cf. Francis 2016: nos. 38, 227, 242, 318; John Paul II 1981: nos. 57–59); on the other hand, they create that space by building their relationship and strengthening the bond of marital love (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 77). On the one hand, 'Christ is present in their midst as spouses: He nourishes their relationship daily' (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 77), which means He inspires and supports them in strengthening their mutual love. On the other hand, the mutual expressions or gestures of love and personal self-giving, which gradually build the bond of conjugal love, become expressions of God's love (cf. Wojaczek 2001:57–62).

In the light of the Dicastery's document, what spouses need during the first years of marriage is, above all, to deepen their understanding of the work of God and the grace of the Sacrament of Marriage in their life (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: nos. 24, 74–75). This is the purpose that mystagogical marriage catechesis is meant to serve (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 85). This term simultaneously draws on two well-known interpretations of mystagogy: liturgical catechetical and transcendental (Polak 2018:243). The former is focused on introducing spouses into the mystery by helping them understand the ritual and symbolism of the Sacrament of Marriage, explaining the spiritual meaning of each element of the ritual as well as the spiritual and existential consequences of the sacrament (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: nos. 19, 77; cf. Benedict XVI 2007: no. 64). The latter (transcendental, existential), by contrast, is more concerned with the fundamental experience of God in life and with discovering and interpreting God's presence and love in the spouses' personal lives and mutual love (see Hajduk 2019:39–52; Polak 2012:96–148, 174–178). The document in question combines the two interpretations of mystagogy and underscores that, in mystagogical marriage catechesis, 'spouses should be helped to feel the presence of Christ in the Sacrament of Marriage itself, not only in the other sacraments' (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life

2022: no. 77). It emphasises the need to help spouses discern the signs of Christ's presence and the grace of the sacrament at work in their union, their reciprocal love and the concrete reality of their life (Francis 2016: no. 74; The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022).

The formative meetings proposed as a continuation of the catechumenal pathway can greatly assist newlyweds in deepening their friendship and welcoming God's grace. Organisationally, these can be cyclic meetings (e.g. monthly or more frequent, depending on the preferences and availability of the accompaniment team and the participating couples), held in parishes or decanates and supplemented with community workshops and individual couple sessions. It should be remembered that the appropriate setting for mystagogical catechesis is the parish, and it is primarily within the parish that accompaniment pathways should be offered to couples (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: nos. 76–77; cf. Polak 2018:244).

Helping spouses build their mutual relationship and strengthen the bond of marital love

Studies indicate that Christian faith influences marital relations, particularly daily spousal interactions (cf. Goodman et al. 2013; Kaleta & Jaśkiewicz 2024:1764–1788). However, it is also necessary for spouses to care for the quality of their mutual relationship, creating a theological space that the work of the grace received through the Sacrament of Marriage in their life depends on. Unfortunately, as Pope Francis observed, married couples soon experience the extraordinary fragility of their love and face misunderstandings (Francis 2016: no. 217). Moreover, they relatively quickly give up working on the quality of their relationship and forget about God's presence in their love. This is why they need pastoral support 'to find time to deepen their friendship and welcome God's grace' (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 77). An important factor in this task is the accompaniment provided to the spouses in the early years of their married life in order to complete the process that was not fully accomplished during engagement (Francis 2016: no. 217; cf. Rocchetta 2014:71–76). External factors, such as employment issues, infertility, violence, political unrest and social conflicts, can impact the quality of the bond of love as well, but also in that case pastoral accompaniment may prove to be indispensable assistance.

The task of helping newlyweds in building their relationship is not essentially linked to marital crises, which are a separate challenge. In this case, the aim is to provide support allowing the spouses to live their marital relationship in peace (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 78) and accumulate positive experiences of coping and problem solving as valuable 'resources' that strengthen their bond for the future (cf. Algoe & Chandler 2024; Roth et al. 2024; Webb 2020). The reason is that, according to the sources analysed, newlyweds face many new issues they must become aware of and address. These

include the need to accept the other person's individuality and abandon unrealistic expectations about married life. It is necessary to take a healthy perspective on married life as a path of growth, acquire conflict management skills and become aware of the different stages every love relationship goes through. For the above reasons, it is important to develop communication skills, such as talking to each other, and especially listening to each other and understanding each other's needs, which will help balance personal needs with those of the relationship and the family. These skills can also be useful in tackling broader social problems. Additionally, spouses need to mature together and develop healthy everyday habits than benefit the newly formed marriage. For this purpose, spouses must also foster healthy relationships with their families of origin (cf. Francis 2016: nos. 17–18, 106, 163, 210, 218, 220–221, 232–234, 240; Rubin, Manevich & Yehene 2024).

Spouses should therefore strive to defend and strengthen the bond of marital love even in the early stage of married life – for their own good and for the good of the children they may bring into the world (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 81). Pope Francis's valuable point that the pastoral care of married couples should focus on the bond and assist couples in nurturing their love (Francis 2016: no. 211) is directly relevant here, as this is the kind of pastoral assistance that married couples need from the very beginning of building their bond of love (cf. Granados, Kampowski & Pérez-Soba 2016:62–69). On the one hand, pastoral accompaniment meetings aim to recall and reinforce spouses' belief in the sacred nature of conjugal love – the communion of marital love inhabited by the Trinity of Divine Persons (cf. Francis 2016: nos. 11, 63, 314; see Sak 2018). On the other hand, these meetings should offer the closeness of and testimony from seasoned married couples, who – based on their own experience – understand the spiritual and psychological benefits of nurturing the relationship (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 80; cf. Goleń 2018a:252–258). What is particularly valuable in striving to strengthen the bond of marital love is various types of specialised assistance, including not only conferences, workshop meetings and communication training sessions but also conversations between spouses and professionals at marriage counselling centres and pastoral discussions with appropriately trained home missionaries (Francis 2016: no. 229; see Pyżlak 2017:141–146). Psychological research has also confirmed the effectiveness of regular specialist 'marriage checkups' as a method of strengthening the relationship (Leth-Nissen, Fentz & Stadler 2023).

Exploring in-depth the themes of sexuality and the fulfilment of its aims in married life

Mystagogical pastoral care of married couples also includes guiding them to discover Christ's presence in the gift of sexual intimacy between a man and a woman. It is important to acknowledge the realism of the Dicastery's statement that

'[t]he Church's teaching on this theme offers spouses a treasure trove of wisdom which, when presented properly, is greatly appreciated and welcomed by spouses' (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 79). It is especially worthwhile to reach into this treasure trove when discussing the issues of human sexuality in married life, which are extensively and positively expounded in the post-conciliar Magisterium (see Goleń 2022:4–7). What seems to be the most profound and valuable statement concerning these issues in the Church's teaching in recent decades is that the moments of sexual intimacy in the love of sacramentally married couples create a theological space 'in which to experience the hidden presence of the risen Lord' and that they 'can be experienced as a sharing in the full life of the resurrection' (Francis 2016: no. 317). Moreover, the pope underscores the importance of spouses' sexual intimacy, stating that '[s]exual union, lovingly experienced and sanctified by the sacrament, is [...] a path of growth in the life of grace for the couple' (Francis 2016: no. 74). It should be remembered that sexual giving is exclusive to conjugal love, as it is:

[R]ealized in a truly human way only if it is an integral part of the love by which a man and a woman commit themselves totally to one another until death. (John Paul II 1981: no. 11; The Pontifical Council 1995: no. 14)

In this regard, a clear evolution towards a positive approach to sexual intimacy and pleasure is visible in the Church's teaching. In the spirit of this positive perspective, drawing on the rich teachings of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, Pope Francis presents human sexuality as an interpersonal language, in which the other person should be treated as a sacred and inviolable value. He emphasises the positive aspects of eroticism and passion in experiencing marital love. He observes that '[a] healthy sexual desire, albeit closely joined to a pursuit of pleasure, always involves a sense of wonder, and for that very reason can humanise the impulses' (Francis 2016: nos. 151). The erotic dimension of love should by no means be seen as 'a permissible evil or a burden to be tolerated for the good of the family' but as a gift from God that beautifies the encounter of the spouses. Passion has its place in marriage alongside unconditional respect and admiration for the other person's dignity and love understood as the mutual gift of self (Francis 2016: nos. 148, 151–152).

The emphasis on the role of passion and eroticism in love stems from the right hierarchy of the aims of marriage. Marriage is primarily meant to be a union (communion) of persons – its main goal is for the mutual love of spouses, properly expressed, to grow and mature. Marriage was not instituted solely for the procreation of children, as was emphasised for centuries. The conjugal union, based on friendship and fully involving a man and a woman, should be exclusive, faithful and open to children, and spouses' sexual intimacy requires mutual respect (Francis 2016: no. 125). All forms of sexual submission should, naturally, be rejected, including those that stem from misinterpretations of the Pauline text exhorting wives to be subject to their husbands (Eph 5:22) (Francis 2016: no. 156). Moreover, as a fundamental

gift given to humans, sexuality should not be viewed through the lens of warped ideas or practices in this domain; even less should this gift be despised or ignored because of them (cf. Francis 2016: no. 153). On the contrary, it should be particularly well remembered that in healthy conjugal love it is important not only to do what is good for the other person but also to find personal satisfaction and to welcome physical expressions of love from the other person (cf. Francis 2016: no. 157; Benedict XVI 2005: no. 7). Psychological research shows that the frequency of and satisfaction with sexual activity influence relationship satisfaction (Bilal & Rasool 2020; McNulty, Wenner & Fisher 2016).

In this positive context, it is essential to understand and explain to newly married couples the basic aims of human sexuality and marriage: the union of persons in love and procreation (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 79). In the explanation, it is worth remembering the point made by Pope John Paul II that the meaning and significance of human sexuality (masculinity and femininity) are revealed in love, which consists in self-giving and accepting the other person's gift of self (John Paul II 1981: no. 37). The human body has an inherent:

[S]pousal character, that is, it has the power to express the love by which the human person becomes a gift, thus fulfilling the deep meaning of his or her being and existence. (John Paul II 2006:257)

This gift, through which a person achieves fulfilment as a man or a woman, should be understood broadly and integrally, as an irrevocable gift of spousal communion and as a gift of love expressed in parenthood. The Pope of the Family wrote that:

[S]exuality, by means of which man and woman give themselves to one another through the acts which are proper and exclusive to spouses, [...] concerns the innermost being of the human person as such. It is realised in a truly human way only if it is an integral part of the love by which a man and a woman commit themselves totally to one another until death. (John Paul II 1981: no. 11)

Further, he affirmed that '[f]ecundity is the fruit and the sign of conjugal love, as well as living testimony of the full reciprocal self-giving of the spouses' (John Paul II 1981: no. 28). According to Pope Francis, love is open to fruitfulness, which 'draws it beyond itself' (Francis 2016: no. 80). In its latest teaching, the Pontifical Biblical Commission (2019: no. 157) phrases this point succinctly, stating that the purpose of the distinction between man and woman is to build a conjugal covenant – a union ('one flesh' – Gen 2:24) that is a source of new life. These statements make it legitimate to believe that the aims of marriage should be explained to married couples integrally, as fruitful love (cf. Kobak 2022a:36–37).

In the contemporary socio-cultural context, it is particularly worthwhile and advisable to stress that the human being, created as man and woman, with the complementarity of the sexes, is an image of God, who decided that, like their Creator, humans should be sources of life. The Church

teaches that, when creating man and woman, God called them to the noble task of fecundity and transmitting life. As spouses and parents, they are supposed to complement each other in the realisation of this task and cooperate with their Creator (Catechism 1992: nos. 1607; The Pontifical Council 2006: no. 14). It would be a mistake to reduce the woman's role to biological procreation. However, in the face of the spread of cultural models negating the woman's fecundity as an integral dimension of her vocation, the Church reminds today's engaged and married couples that the body itself calls upon men and women to fulfil their fundamental vocation to fruitfulness (cf. Sacred Congregation 1982: nos. 22–24; Di Nicola & Danese 2010:30). The domain of human procreation is not governed by the laws of instinct and, consequently, is free from coercion. It is guided by rational human action and by responsibility for oneself and others (cf. Smykowski 2018:78–81). Therefore, responsible conduct in this domain requires respecting the strict relationship of human sexuality with love and fecundity (cf. Sacred Congregation 1982: no. 32). Married couples should respect the teaching of the Magisterium and, in accordance with it, make decisions concerning their mutual love and procreation in their consciences. An urgent task for the pastoral care of married couples in this regard is to form consciences rather than replace them (cf. Francis 2016: no. 37).

The fecundity of marital love bears fruit in the form of integral procreation, which consists in both transmitting life and maintaining as well as bringing up children (The Pontifical Council 2006: no. 18). This is because fruitful marital love is open to the other person not only in the form of physical parenthood but also in the form of 'giving spiritual birth' through the formation of souls and upbringing (cf. Wojtyła 2010:232–233). According to John Paul II, the fruitfulness of conjugal love:

[I]s enlarged and enriched by all those fruits of moral, spiritual and supernatural life which the father and mother are called to hand on to their children, and through the children to the Church and to the world. (1981: no. 28; cf. John Paul II 1994: no. 10)

Moreover, the spiritual fecundity of spouses can bear fruit also in the apostolic, charitable and social dimensions (Semen 2004:138). Examples of this kind of expanded fecundity include adoption, offering support to juvenile mothers or abandoned children, caring for older adults and building a culture of encounter (Francis 2016: nos. 179, 183, 197).

Pope Francis underscores the need to preach God's plan to contemporary married couples in its integrity. He states that, while marriage characterised by exclusivity, indissolubility and openness to life is being destroyed by various whims people give in to and may seem to be an outdated option, Christians must not cease to propose it and present its underlying motivation in order not to deprive the world of the values that they can and should bring to it (Francis 2016: nos. 34–35, 53). The pope's clearly mystagogical pastoral approach is perceptible in his appeal:

[P]astoral care for families 'needs to make it clear that the Gospel of the family responds to the deepest expectations of the human person: a response to each one's dignity and fulfilment in reciprocity, communion and fruitfulness'. (Francis 2016: no. 201)

What is valuable also in this area of pastoral interventions is closeness, testimony, specific suggestions offered by experienced married couples and professional support from specialists and family counsellors, as well as ethicists and theologians familiar with moral and bioethical issues (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: nos. 79–80).

Providing help in understanding and overcoming marital crises

Today, many families feel lonely and experience various crises for numerous external and internal reasons (cf. Landwójtowicz 2017:374–378). The crises often concern the bond of conjugal love early on or emerge in subsequent stages of married life (cf. Francis 2016: no. 232–237). Additionally, as Pope Francis observes, the majority of believing married couples do not seek pastoral assistance in difficult or critical situations because they do not feel that such assistance is comprehensive, sympathetic and realistic (Francis 2016: no. 234). For the reasons mentioned earlier, in an effort to meet these challenges, the document by the Dicastery for the Laity, the Family and Life (2022: no. 85) stresses the urgent need 'to instill in couples the firm will to defend their marriage bond in any crisis situation that may arise' and underscores the need to introduce special pastoral care in parishes or other communities, consisting in accompaniment for married couples in crisis, where the accompaniment team would include not only pastors but also couples with an experience of overcoming a crisis (The Dicastery for the Laity, the Family and Life 2022: nos. 81, 87–88).

It should be noted that there are certain special situations in marriages, involving violence, great injustice, chronic lack of respect or excessive demands placed on the other person. These circumstances can make separation unavoidable, and in some cases, the protection of a person's legitimate rights may even require divorce. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, divorce is not a moral transgression in such situations, though it should be treated as a last resort (Francis 2016: no. 241; cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church 1992: no. 2383). However, the discussion here concerns less complex cases. The relatively widespread belief, held by psychologists (cf. Landwójtowicz 2017:374) and supported by pastoral observations, is that crises need not and should not lead to marriage breakup. Instead, they should be seen as an opportunity for a couple to make a 'quantum leap' and achieve a new depth and authenticity in their bond of love (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 81). The results of research in the psychology of religion have confirmed the positive effect of religion on solving marital and family crises (cf. Mahoney & Tarakeshwar 2005). What can also be found here is a reference to purification and

spiritual transformation, profoundly explored in Christian spirituality, especially by Carmelite masters such as St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila (cf. Stinissen 2016:86–94). For this reason, various difficult situations are referred to in the pastoral care of families as 'the grace of weakness' (cf. Pérez-Soba 2014:30–32). Various crises are, therefore, a task and an opportunity to grow, mature, gain experience and strengthen the unity and intensity of the mutual relationship; they are also a chance to learn to be happy in a new way (Francis 2016: nos. 232, 234, 238; cf. Suminta & Ghufuron 2022). For this to happen, spouses should work to strengthen their intention to defend their marriage, as well as their patience, fortitude and prudence – characteristics indispensable in overcoming difficult moments. By doing so, couples can mature in love, and their relationship may grow stronger during the crisis (cf. The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 81).

What undoubtedly strengthens the intention to defend the marriage bond and helps married couples cope with crises is their already mentioned awareness of deep spiritual communion, *communio personarum* and *communio amoris* (see Bukalski & Falewicz 2022). The realisation of this communion requires tools, such as spouses' communication skills and marital dialogue, which serve to maintain and reinforce the bond (cf. Landwójtowicz 2017:381–383). The Dicastery (cf. 2022: nos. 89, 93) appreciates the role of specialist assistance, especially psychological assistance for married couples experiencing crises. However, from the perspective of mystagogical pastoral care, psychological accompaniment is not enough: what is also necessary is spiritual accompaniment. This is because the strongest factor motivating believers to overcome crises is the recognition of the closeness of Christ present in married life, particularly in the crises that spouses go through (cf. The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 90). As Pope Francis stated, God constantly accompanies people in their pilgrimage, 'heals and transforms hardened hearts, leading them back to the beginning through the way of the cross' (Francis 2016: no. 62). For this reason, the Dicastery underscores the need for spouses to remain in the Lord's love (cf. John 15:9) and especially the need to introduce them to the art of discernment, 'so that in times of suffering they know how to recognise the dangerous pitfalls to avoid and the immaturities or wounds to overcome' (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 90). It is because of pastoral accompaniment – both psychological and, above all, spiritual – that the crises married couples go through can be transformed into opportunities for reconciliation and forgiveness, because of God's grace continually working in the sacramental bond (cf. The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 89–90).

As an inspiration for mystagogically discovering the presence of Jesus Christ in the lives of specific individuals and couples and for submitting to His spiritual guidance and healing work, the Dicastery proposes a formative project to be implemented by local Churches, parishes and

other communities – the catechumenal pathway of accompaniment for married couples in crisis, based on Jesus's journey with the disciples to Emmaus (cf. Luke 24:13–35). This pathway is presented in detail in the Dicastery's document, where not only its aims but also the methods and forms of activity for each stage of accompaniment are discussed. The pathway assumes that:

[W]hen couples fill their hearts with silence, invoke the name of Jesus Christ, and listen to His voice, they help create the conditions for God to nurture their relationship, rescue them in difficulty, and stop to drink with them from the cup of suffering, as He stands by their side like the Wayfarer with the disciples of Emmaus (cf. Luke 24:13). (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: nos. 90–91)

It offers an excellent opportunity for deeper personal and conjugal prayer inspired by the word of God, aimed at opening to the Lord's grace and trusting his guidance; it is also a chance to experience healing and a transformation of one's heart as well as forgiveness and reconciliation between spouses. It involves the Christian community, making it possible to experience human and spiritual closeness, to deepen the faith and to engage in meetings, prayer, listening, sharing and celebrating (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 92).

Providing pastoral support in living a marital spirituality

A special and privileged way of mystagogically discovering Christ's presence in marriage consists in developing and living a marital spirituality. This spirituality has been presented in the teaching of the Church in recent decades, especially by Popes John Paul II and Francis (cf. Kobak 2022b:147–157). As a special type of lay spirituality, it unfolds in accordance with the relational dynamics of family life and is 'a spirituality of the bond, in which divine love dwells' (Francis 2016: nos. 313, 315). Married couples need to develop a marital spirituality that nurtures and sustains their journey to holiness (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 83). Therefore, engaged and newly married couples need pastoral support that consists both in showing this unique spirituality to them and in accompanying them in its fruitful realisation in everyday family life (cf. Goleń 2018b:111–112).

When discussing the uniqueness of marital spirituality, it is worth citing the thought of John Paul II, who wrote that genuine and deep marital and family spirituality drew inspiration from the themes of creation, covenant, the cross and resurrection. Because of the sacrament, Christian spouses are 'able to live in their married and family lives the very love of God for people and that of the Lord Jesus for the Church, His bride' (John Paul II 1981: no. 56). In the Sacrament of Marriage, the family is called and obliged by Christ the Lord to engage in dialogue with God through sacramental life, the offering of one's life and prayer (John Paul II 1981: no. 55). However, in the case of marital spirituality, one must not forget about the order of creation, namely the work of God in

the humanity of man and woman and in their mutual relationship of love. It seems important to simultaneously consider two interpenetrating dimensions: firstly, the Holy Trinity is intimately present in the communion of marital love, which praises God (Francis 2016: nos. 314, 316); secondly, the work of the grace given in the Sacrament of Marriage has a dynamic character and is renewed because of a theological space being created – namely, as a result of the spouses living a sacramental life, praying, strengthening their mutual friendship and building a communion of persons in love.

Considering the renewal of the work of the grace given in the Sacrament of Marriage, the Dicastery underscores the urgent need to propose an encounter with Christ to newly married couples as the centre of their journey together, as it is absolutely necessary for a married couple to meet with Christ constantly and feed on his presence. Living in contact with Jesus in the sacraments of the Eucharist and Penance represents an extraordinary chance to become more like him and an opportunity for the identity of Christian spouses to mature:

[T]he Eucharist offers spouses the grace to overcome their own closures and selfishness. The Sacrament of Reconciliation offers spouses the infinite richness of God's mercy, who in His Son always forgives us. In this way, they learn to be patient and merciful with each other, because forgiveness received becomes forgiveness given. (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 82)

Similarly, conjugal prayer contributes to strengthening their unity, because 'the family that prays together stays together' (Francis 2016: no. 227). The topic of care for strengthening the bond of marital love and the role of spousal sexuality as conditions for the work of the grace of the Sacrament of Marriage has already been discussed earlier. What should be stressed here is their profoundly spiritual dimension.

It is also worth mentioning other characteristic features (aspects) of marriage discussed by Pope Francis, indicating Christ's presence and work in marriage, such as: the paschal nature of conjugal communion, a spirituality of love that is exclusive and at the same time free from submission because of the relationship of persons with the only Lord and a spirituality of mutual care based on seeing Christ in the spouse and imitating Christ (cf. Francis 2016: nos. 317–324). These should constitute the everyday 'matter' of love in marital and family life, which makes it worthwhile to show them to newly married couples and discover their profound mystagogical meaning together with the newlyweds.

Moving on to present the methods of spiritual accompaniment for married couples in the fruitful realisation of marital spirituality, it is first necessary to stress the subjectivity of the spouses themselves – as individuals and as a couple – in maturing, a process in which no one from the outside can possibly substitute for them or do what is to be done for them. Just like individual spiritual accompaniment, though very helpful in personal growth, cannot replace a personal

relationship with God, pastoral accompaniment for married couples is only a proposal of a journey together – a proposal of walking with them and providing various kinds of support. From the point of view of spiritual growth, what deserves attention is the above-mentioned path of accompaniment for married couples in crises (cf. The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: nos. 90–92). It can be a valuable inspiration for accompanying couples, not only in crises but also in ordinary situations, as a path of spiritual growth. Moreover, the document specifically mentions a number of suggestions and formative tools:

[L]istening to the Word of God, especially through *lectio divina*; meetings to reflect on issues relevant to marital and family life; involvement of couples in liturgical celebrations especially designed for them; periodic spiritual retreats for spouses; Eucharistic Adoration organised with meditations taken from the biographies of saintly spouses; spiritual conversations and accompaniment; participation in family groups to promote conversations with other families; and, involvement in charitable and missionary activities. (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 83)

The document also encourages communal, liturgical celebration of wedding anniversaries with a special blessing for married couples, and on major anniversaries (e.g. every 5 years), it is recommended that the celebrating couples renew their marriage vows (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022). It is also recommended that married couples keep a ‘marriage diary’, in which they could write down everything that constitutes the concrete reality of married life. This would be a kind of ‘holy writing’ for the spouses, serving to preserve the memory of important moments of life permeated with the work of the Holy Spirit, which could become a tool for passing faith within the family to future generations (cf. The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 78).

Guiding married couples to the fulfilment of their mission

The final objective of pastoral accompaniment for married couples is to help them discover closeness with Christ in their mission in order to guide them towards the fulfilment of that mission. Reinforcing their ‘marital identity’, the formation of spouses can at the same time develop a sense of mission resulting from the Sacrament of Marriage (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 84). This mission has two aspects: *ad intra*, meaning the apostolate within the family, and *ad extra*, meaning the apostolate directed outside, carried out in the social environment and in the community of the Church (cf. Śmigiel 2018:614–622). When the catechumenal pathway for married life comes to an end, it is worth inviting couples to engage in the pastoral care of families in their parishes or in the communities they are part of. Those married couples could gradually begin to contribute to the catechumenal preparation of engaged couples for marriage, take part in organising community life, engage in children and youth ministry or set up marital spirituality groups with support from family movements (cf. The Dicastery of Laity,

Family and Life 2022: no. 84). Because the catechumenal pathway for married couples following the celebration of marriage does not end after a few years but takes on a permanent character (The Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life 2022: no. 74), guiding spouses towards the fulfilment of their mission sometimes also requires more time and takes considerably longer in the case of some couples. However, the formative effort targeted at married couples during the catechumenal process can significantly contribute to marriages gradually becoming subjects of evangelisation and pastoral work (cf. Francis 2016: no. 200).

Conclusion

The attempt to present the key objectives of pastoral accompaniment for married couples in the first 2 years or 3 years of married life, based on Pope Francis’s exhortation and the document by the Dicastery for the Laity, the Family and Life (2022), has made it possible to identify these objectives and outline selected forms and methods of their realisation. The analyses have led to the following conclusions:

- The ‘pastoral accompaniment for married couples’ mentioned in the title is not the same as ‘pastoral care of families’ – a broader concept, well known in post-conciliar Catholic theology. The accompaniment discussed has a mystagogical and spiritual character and is a continuation of the catechumenal pathway for engaged couples. It should take place mainly in the parish and should involve sacramentally married couples as active participants.
- The first objective of accompaniment is to provide mystagogical catechesis on the Sacrament of Marriage. This catechesis encompasses two types of catechumenal initiation for newlyweds: (1) liturgical catechetical initiation into the understanding of liturgical signs and gestures related to the Sacrament of Marriage; and (2) transcendental (existential) initiation into the recognition of God’s presence and love as well as the work of the grace that comes with the Sacrament of Marriage in the concrete reality of married life and family life.
- The second objective of mystagogical accompaniment is to help spouses develop their mutual relationship and strengthen the bond of marital love. It plays a vital role in enhancing relationship quality and building the communion of marital love, because of discerning the presence of God within it. It also serves a preventive function, which is very important today, as a way to protect the relationship against major crises, conflicts or breakup.
- The third objective of pastoral accompaniment for newly married couples is to thoroughly explore the themes of sexuality and the fulfilment of its aims in married life. This objective is especially about discovering the presence of the Risen Christ in the gift of spouses’ sexual intimacy. The reason for this is that, when experienced in a sacramental marriage, sexual intimacy is a path of growth in living by grace and strengthening love. The aims of marriage – namely, the union of persons in love and the fecundity it leads to – must be presented to spouses integrally and in the proper order.

- What emerges as the fourth objective of mystagogical accompaniment is to support married couples in discovering Christ's presence in difficulties and in crises. From a spiritual point of view, crises can be seen as a 'grace of weakness'. Pastoral care should help married couples look at them as challenges, growth and maturation opportunities and chances not only to gain experience but also to strengthen the unity and intensity of their mutual relationship.
- The next objective consists of pastorally supporting couples in discovering Christ's presence by nurturing their daily practice of marital spirituality. It aims both to show spouses the unique spirituality specific to marriage and to accompany them in its fruitful realisation. Besides the spouses' sacramental life and prayer, and apart from their care for their mutual love, what is essential here is listening to and meditating on the word of God, participating in meetings of married couples, celebrations, retreats, Eucharistic adoration, spiritual accompaniment and other forms.
- The objective that emerges as the one crowning the entire process is to discover Christ working in spouses' mission. It is accomplished by gradually guiding married couples towards the fulfilment of their mission in the community of the Church. On the one hand, this is the result of the formation proposed; on the other hand, it is a manifestation of the constant work of the grace received in the Sacrament of Marriage.

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CRedit authorship contribution

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