

The background of the cover features a silhouette of a family—a man, a woman, and a child—walking away from the viewer towards a bright sunset. The sun is a large, glowing orb in the center, casting a warm, golden light. The silhouettes are dark against the bright sky. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

LOVE, JOY, *and* SEX

African Conversation  
on Pope Francis's *Amoris Laetitia*  
and the Gospel of Family in a Divided World

EDITED BY

STAN CHU ILO

FOREWORD BY Cardinal Anthony O. Okogie

STUDIES IN WORLD CATHOLICISM | Volume 6

# Love, Joy, and Sex

African Conversation on Pope Francis's *Amoris Laetitia*  
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EDITED BY  
*Stan Chu Ilo*

WITH A FOREWORD BY  
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## CONTRIBUTORS

Vincent E. Arisukwu  
Stan Chu Ilo  
Eunice Kamaara  
Leonida Katunge  
Emily Kerama  
MarySylvia Nwachukwu

Richard Rwiza  
Nicholaus Segeja  
Barnabas Shabayang  
Gabriel Tata  
Bonaventure Ugwu



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and the emphasis on the African context of the family is a key interpretive text in the first chapter of the exhortation. The exhortation is a key interpretive text in the first chapter of the exhortation. The exhortation is a key interpretive text in the first chapter of the exhortation.

# 1 Marriage and Family in the Light of the Word of God: Interpreting the First Chapter of *Amoris Laetitia*

MARYSYLVIA NWACHUKWU African Christian spirituality. Katanga proposes an interpretive approach to the many unresolved questions in Africa today on polygamy, dignity and rights of women, commitment, fidelity, divorce, and hospitality preparation for marriage, taboos in family, funeral rites, same-sex unions, and betrothals.

## Introduction

The title of the papal Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* (AL),<sup>1</sup> resounds and recalls the joy that love awakens in a couple. The vibrations of the heart, the focus on the object of love which accompany the neglect of other realities, the total gift of self and the joy of every new encounter with the loved one; all these describe the joy of love. In this exhortation, Ps 128 and Gen 1:26–28; 2:24 are singled out as key interpretive texts,<sup>2</sup> and with the leading idea that the husband and wife image God in many ways, Pope Francis invites couples in love to consider these joyful sentiments and expressions as invitations to enter into the heart of love, which is God's life.

The interpretation of this chapter is done here in five sections. After this introduction, section one explains the story line of the chapter.

1. Henceforth, *Amoris Laetitia* is represented with the acronym AL in the body of the text.
2. 1 Cor 13 will become a key interpretive text in the fourth chapter of the exhortation.

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## The Bible

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The second section is biblical-theological interpretation of the chapter through a broadened description of backgrounds of Ps 128 and of themes drawn from the story line of the chapter. A better appreciation of the strength and weakness of AL is shown in the third and fourth sections where this first chapter is read within the context of the entire exhortation and of previous papal documents on the theme of family. The last section concludes this essay with some proposals for pastoral action in Africa.

### The Biblical Foundation and the Story Line of the Chapter

The first chapter of AL titled "In the Light of the Word" exposes the biblical foundations on which Pope Francis proposes a way of life for families in the light of contemporary challenges. It is an interesting commentary on biblical texts that are given as foundational to marriage and to the family. Of all encyclicals and exhortations dedicated to marriage and family since *Casti Connubii* of Pius XI in 1930, AL is the only one that has a chapter dedicated to the biblical foundation of marriage and the family. More interesting is a handling that makes the entire Bible look like a book on marriage and the family. This depiction of the Bible strikes the reader immediately at the very first paragraph of the chapter (AL 8). According to Pope Francis, the Bible's first two chapters (Gen 1–2) usher in family stories of birth, love, and crises which fill the Bible, and the stories culminate in the presentation of the wedding feast of the bride and the Lamb (Rev 21). From this description, the family appears in the Bible as the first gospel and the first stage of God's plan of salvation.<sup>3</sup> By showing that family stories and images introduce and conclude the Bible, Pope Francis clearly underlines the vital place and importance of marriage and family in God's plan.<sup>4</sup> This presentation gave impetus to a reinterpretation of biblical texts in AL from the perspective of family.

Ps 128 provides the story line of the chapter. The thematic content of this psalm is used in AL to divide the chapter into different sections. The psalm develops five themes: the blessedness of a man (Ps 128:1, 4), which reverberates on four fundamental relationships: his relationship with the

3. See the first chapters of the Old and New Testaments (Gen 1–2; Matt 1:18–25; Luke 1–2).

4. In biblical interpretation and exegesis, this literary device is called enveloping. When a symbol, image or text is found at the beginning and end of a scriptural unit, it is important for the interpretation of the entire unit.



soil (Ps 128:2), his relationship with his wife (Ps 128:3a), his relationship with his children (Ps 128:3b, 6a), and his relationship with the society (Ps 128:5, 6b). Chapter 1 of AL reflects these themes in the thirteen paragraphs of its six sections (i) the liturgical setting for marriage in which the man is pronounced "Blessed" (AL 8), (ii) the man and his wife (AL 9–13), (iii) the couple and their children (AL 14–18), (iv) the dignity of human labor and family crises (AL 19–23), and (v) labor and societal development (AL 24–26). These five sections end with some concluding remarks on renewed call to discipleship (AL 27–30).

The second key interpretive biblical text is Gen 1:26–28 and 2:24, introduced with the principal idea that "the human couple" is the image of God. With this text, Pope Francis explains the various ways in which the relationship of the human couple provides the means for understanding and describing the mystery of God (AL 11).

### Biblical-Theological Interpretation of the Chapter

#### The Interlocutor

In presenting the biblical foundation, Pope Francis meant to dialogue with an interlocutor, a real, not an imaginary married couple, when he invited all "to enter one of those houses . . . to cross the threshold of this tranquil home . . ." (AL 8, 9). This dimension of the exhortation to dialogue with historical persons with specific identity is very necessary, given the different definitions of marriage today by diverse ideological movements in contemporary times. One of such definitions is explicitly mentioned in chapter 2 (AL 56): "Yet another challenge is posed by the various forms of an ideology of gender that "denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family."

Among other observations, Pope Francis could be making a strong but silent statement against the growing popularity of same-sex marriages being adopted by even nations with deeply Christian roots. Matt 19:4, which the pontiff cites at this stage, proves this point and reaffirms God's original plan that a married couple is necessarily composed of two persons of the opposite sex, male and female, united as one flesh (Gen 2:24). The couple in question is real, not imaginary, because they have a personal story of love that is historical. Their story makes them more

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I will note here that Pope Francis, rather than insisting on doctrine, concentrates on a pastoral message of encouragement, consolation and hope to all families, especially those that are undergoing suffering. As interlocutors and not listeners, the couple contributes in no small measure to the development of the discussion with their life experiences.<sup>5</sup> Here, one notes immediately the experiential dimension of this exhortation. Pope Francis is inviting the entire church to enter into the daily stories of modern families and allow these stories to open our eyes and senses to the presence of God in the daily realities of family, even in the brokenness we may find in these stories. The diversity and nature of these stories are to be noted, especially when we see them in the light of the Trinity which is the source, foundation and goal of all families.

### Psalm 128 and Its Background

This section of the work exposes the different backgrounds of the key text Ps 128, in order to highlight the rich and varied meanings they add to the discussion on family and marriage.

#### *The Cultic Setting of Psalm 128*

At the beginning of chapter 1 of AL, Ps 128 is introduced as a hymn that leads the wedding procession, which “resounds in Jewish and Christian wedding liturgies.” As a characteristic “Song of Ascents,” Ps 128 is replete with family motifs and it appears like a hymn of blessing to a couple about to enter into wedlock. Although the original setting of the psalm is cultic,<sup>6</sup> it was not originally intended for wedding ceremonies.<sup>7</sup> It is possible that this post-exilic psalm,<sup>8</sup> with its concern for family, came

5. The historical experiences of the couple is the topic of the second chapter of AL.

6. This is the view of some scholars, for instance, Lipinski, “Macarismes et psaumes,” 347–48. For the various views, see Allen, “Psalms 101–150,” 183.

7. In the psalter, Ps 128 forms a pair with Ps 127, and both, with clear wisdom motifs, serve didactic functions. Both share common family motifs, being connected especially through the idea of “building a house” in verse 1: “If the Lord does not build the house . . .” which refers metaphorically to raising a family.

8. The incorporation of the “shalom” formula in verse 6b and the mixed form of the psalm support its post-exilic context. See Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 184.



to be used also for wedding liturgies as scheme for building a blessed home.<sup>9</sup> Of all papal encyclicals or exhortations dedicated to the family, AL is unique in using this psalm as an invitation to embrace marriage according to God's original plan. Implicitly, the use of this psalm, with its setting in the liturgy, draws attention to the meaning of marriage as primarily a religious institution. Therefore, the first line of the psalm used here to encourage couples to begin their married life with the divine blessing which the liturgy mediates. By doing this, they are led to accept God's original design for marriage.

The *ashre* formula ("Happy is . . .") at the beginning of the psalm performs a number of functions in its cultic setting.<sup>10</sup> Composed as a beatitude, the psalm served a pedagogical tool for teaching from concrete human experience,<sup>11</sup> and as an implicit exhortation that refers to an ideal to emulate.<sup>12</sup> Specifically, Ps 128 is a wisdom teaching to pilgrims who participate in a religious festival in Jerusalem. On arrival at the sanctuary, the pilgrim is welcomed with congratulatory greetings (verses 1-3), and verse 4 is a rubric (*This is how a man is blessed*)<sup>13</sup> that introduces the blessing conferred on the pilgrim (verses 5-6).<sup>14</sup> In the first part of the psalm (verses 1-3), the double beatitude in verses 1-2 hangs on the fulfilment of two important conditions, that is, to fear the Lord and walk in his ways. In the Wisdom Literature, the expression, "fear of the Lord" means a person's proper and obedient response to God. The other terminology, "walk in his ways," is a language for personal relationship not strictly defined by obedience to concrete individual laws. A similar expression is found in Gen 17:1 (*Ḥālāk liphnê*—literally, "walk before me"),

9. As AL says at the beginning of the first chapter, "Let us now enter one of those houses, led by the Psalmist with a song that even today resounds in both Jewish and Christian wedding liturgies" (AL 8).

10. In the Old Testament, the formula occurs more frequently in the Psalms and the book of Proverbs where it refers to one who has received God's favor or blessing, the sanctuary being the place where blessing is mediated. Together with another motif ("derek"—way), *ashre* is an important wisdom motif that makes Ps 128 a traditional wisdom psalm. See Allen, "Psalms 101-150," 185.

11. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 23-26.

12. See W. Janzen, "AŠRÊ in the Old Testament," 215-26; Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult*, 328.

13. See a similar rubric in Num 6:23.

14. The phrase "the man who fears the Lord" in verses 1 and 4 are indicators of beginning of separate strophes. See "Division of the Psalm" in Allen, "Psalms 101-150," 183-84.



where it presents God's instruction to Abraham to live in such a way that every of his single steps is made with reference to God.<sup>15</sup> The meaning of these two terms shows that they relate in a synonymous manner. To fear the Lord is to walk in his ways, and obviously, to "walk in his ways" is to adopt a way of life in conformity with God's design.<sup>16</sup> One could conclude that the two expressions point to a religiously motivated life, a fundamental option to adhere to God's ways. Such a life would surely attract achievement in the basics of life which the psalm describes: fertility, good harvest and general wellbeing.

It is important to explain how the *ashre* formula relates to the language of blessing in the second part of the psalm. The structure of the psalm shows a correspondence between the God-fearer who is proclaimed happy (verses 1-2) and the one who is blessed (verse 4).<sup>17</sup> In biblical tradition, the language of blessing spells out both the invitation to share in God's life and the mission such a status confers on the beneficiary.<sup>18</sup> The sign of such relationship with God is fruitfulness, evidenced in the continuation of the person's generation, through whom God promotes his project, and their general wellbeing. This is evident in both the patriarchal and Mosaic traditions where God's blessing is connected to the promise of innumerable seed and wellbeing in God's land.<sup>19</sup> In the Wisdom tradition, as Ps 128 shows, the context for blessing is cultic, being connected to the sanctuary or Zion (verse 5) as the earthly link to Yahweh and a medium of the bestowal of such blessing.<sup>20</sup> The cultic setting implies that God, in deed, is the origin of the fortunes of the God-fearer. This explains the goal of Ps 128 as a psalm of pilgrimage. The second part of the psalm further shows that the continuation of blessing depends on the survival of the holy city with its religious traditions (verse 5) and the unbroken chain of the community from generation to genera-

15. This priestly tradition represents a period in which God's commands are no longer passed on as concrete instructions but are directed to a person's entire life and existence in relation to God. See Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 259.

16. The emphasis is more on lived life rather than observance of specific laws.

17. The double beatitude in verses 1-2 corresponds with the double language of blessing in the second part of the psalm (verses 4-5).

18. In the creation account of Gen 1:1-2:4a and in the account of the call of Abraham in Gen 12:1-3, the language of blessing fulfills these two functions.

19. See Gen 12:1-3; Deut 6:18; 11:8-9. Explicit connection between blessing and progeny is found in Deut 7:13, "I will bless you and give you increase."

20. See Allen, "Psalms 101-150," 185.



tion (verse 6).<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the holy city and its cult have vital roles to play in the assurance of God's blessing for the people.

The content of the exhortation of Ps 128 also draws attention to a Deuteronomic background.<sup>22</sup> In addition to having the exhortatory tone of the Deuteronomic tradition, Ps 128, with its concern for family, also uses the language of Deuteronomy to describe the blessings which obedience to God attracts—fruitfulness of the womb (Ps 128:3; Deut 7:12), fruit of human labor (Ps 128:2; Deut 8:7–10), general wellbeing and long life in the land (Ps 128:5; Deut 5:33; 6:2). In its verse 2, the psalm repeats a purpose clause which is typical of Deuteronomy, “so that it may go well with you” (Deut 6:3,18; 12:28). In fact, the psalm represents the Deuteronomic teaching according to which fear of the Lord and obedience are the essence of religion and condition for inheritance of blessing and wellbeing (Deut 5:29 and 10:12).<sup>23</sup> The teaching of Ps 128 and its cultic setting seem, therefore, to be part of the concerted effort of the post-exilic Jewish community to exhort families on a life lived in total conformity with God's law.

#### *The Deuteronomic Background and Didactic Function of Psalm 128*

The didactic function of Ps 128 is more comprehensibly seen from its Deuteronomic background. Biblical texts connected to this background share similar goals with Deuteronomy, which is to interpret the meaning of the exodus event, to exhort on the blessings of obedience to God's law in a time of gross infidelity in the land and to endorse the teaching office of Moses and his successors.<sup>24</sup> Texts such as Deut 4:14; 5:23–31; 29:1; 31:19,28 highlight the position of Moses as custodian and teacher

21. Since the psalm is post-exilic, this could be an aspect of the reward for obedience to God. Therefore, “Zion” and “Jerusalem” in verse 5 being references to the sanctuary and the city respectively.

22. Ps 128 encloses certain recurrent themes which are found in Deuteronomy and Wisdom Literature. These are: fear of the Lord (Prov 1:7; Job 28:28), pedagogical function in the areas of cultic teaching on the law (Deut 6:4–9) and transmission of faith to the children (Deut 6:7; 9:20–25; 11:19; Prov 2:1; 2:1; 4:1). See Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, 151.

23. See Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, 151, 179; Fuhs, “Yārēh,” 313–14.

24. AL does not discuss the teaching office of the church as previous papal documents on the family do, but it does it implicitly by using Ps 128 as key text. See the paragraph on “*Amoris Laetitia* and Previous Papal Documents . . .” below.



of the sacred traditions and laws which God gave to the people.<sup>25</sup> Within the book of Deuteronomy, a text like Deut 6:31 is very significant in this regard. God tells Moses, “. . . I shall tell you all the commandments, the laws and the customs which you are to teach them and which they are to observe in the country which I am giving them as their possession.” At the end of his ministry, Moses committed the teaching of Israel’s sacred traditions to the care of Levites (Deut 31:24) and of heads of families (Deut 32:45–47). He did this amidst fears that the Israelites might abandon the ways of the Lord after his death (Deut 4:25–26; 31:27, 29). With this, the transmission of Israel’s most sacred traditions was ensured from generation to generation. Such transmission also happened around night gatherings and during festivals as elders and professional story tellers handed over those traditions to the younger generation (see Deut 6:20–25). Given the focus on the family, the cultic setting in which this psalm is used was part of a systematic catechesis to Israelite families on God’s law and Israel’s sacred traditions. Ps 128 shows further that one of the contexts for such teaching is the marriage ceremony.

### The Content of AL’s Teaching on Marriage

The exposition of the cultic and Deuteronomical backgrounds of Ps 128 highlights very important ideas which are not immediately deducible in AL,<sup>26</sup> and which would enrich the understanding of the entire exhortation. These backgrounds draw attention to an age of gross infidelity to God’s law which made necessary a catechetical project on Israel’s sacred traditions in liturgical contexts. The psalm’s backgrounds, therefore, bring out more clearly both the teaching office of the church as custodian of God’s law and the content of that teaching. In using Ps 128 as a key text in AL, Pope Francis shares a similar goal with the Deuteronomical tradition when he speaks of the presence of ideologies that devalue marriage and family, and of a cultural decline which encourages extreme individualism and fails to promote love and self-giving (AL 33–39). While the cultures of same-sex marriage and single parenthood continue to grow in popularity, with so much being proposed under the guise of individual

25. The admonition to listen (Deut 4:1; 6:3,4; 7:12; 9:1; 27:9) underscores the pedagogical context.

26. Ideas such as (a) defense of the teaching office of the church; (b) the church as legitimate custodian of sacred traditions revealed by God; (c) the faithful transmission of these sacred traditions from generation to generation.



or civil rights, the pope sees the need to redirect and situate the dialogue on marriage in its proper context—the word of God which explains God’s design from the beginning of creation (Gen 1:26–28). The use of Ps 128 in this exhortation further establishes the function of the liturgical setting of marriage as an occasion for teaching the couple and the people of God the specific vocation of the family within God’s creative and salvific design. While the pope used this psalm to renew divine blessings of obedience for anyone who would embrace marriage according to God’s original design, he draws the content of that teaching from these two key texts as the paragraphs below show.

#### Genesis 1:26–28 and 2:24: The Married Couple as Image of God

The presence of similar themes in Ps 128 and Gen 1 and 2 prove that the psalm is a re-interpretation of the message of Genesis for post-exilic Israelite families. Both texts share similar concerns, which is to mediate divine blessings to families who live according to God’s plan. They are used here as foundational texts, which disclose the profound meaning upon which the institution of marriage is founded. After crossing “the threshold of this tranquil home,” the very first text Pope Francis addressed himself to is Gen 1:26–28. According to him, this text “presents the human couple in its deepest reality” (AL 10). The first founding statement about the couple is that God created them in his image (Gen 1:26). As important as it is in the interpretation of the relationship between God and human beings, the image motif in Gen 1:26 has received various and varied interpretations.<sup>27</sup> Primarily, this motif functions to distinguish human beings from other creatures, having been created to have a special relationship with God which serves the wellbeing of other creatures. From this primary meaning derives the interpretation that human beings, created male and female, are God’s representative or regent in a manner that reflects the actions of God.<sup>28</sup> From the beginning, therefore, the significance of marriage is grounded in the meaning disclosed by the word of God, whereby the married couple become a special means of

27. See interpretations by W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*. G. J. Wenham lists five main proposals of interpretation: natural qualities in man, mental and spiritual faculties, physical resemblance, representational function, and relational capacity. See Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 29–31.

28. For the many views of scholars on this topic, see Nwachukwu, *Creation–Covenant Scheme*, 61–64.





representing God in the world. This implies that the primary task of the couple is to live in a manner that replicates God's life as a unique communion of persons and as life giving principle. Pope Francis's interpretation of these texts in AL 10–13 reveals ways in which the human couple is the image of God:

- a) The image of God is the human couple, composed necessarily as male and female (Gen 1:27). This statement is made against any sexist interpretation of God's nature or any prejudice to God's transcendence. It simply underscores the constitution of the human couple as essentially male and female. Any marital union short of this human constitutional differentiation, which symbolizes their completeness,<sup>29</sup> is not a reflection of God's image. Matt 19:4 is Jesus's confirmation of this divine design for marriage.
- b) The human couple is also truly the image of God in their fruitfulness, that is, their ability to open themselves and their love to new life. The fruitfulness of the couple is in many ways a visible sign of God's creative act and symbol of God's inner life. The triune God is family, constituted of father, Son and Spirit, a communion of love . . . (AL 11). Here, the idea of fruitfulness corresponds with the terminology of blessing in Ps 128:4–5, which in biblical tradition is connected both to progeny and to God's project in the world.
- c) Thirdly, Gen 2:24 evokes the marital union between the couple in their voluntary self-giving in love, and as united as one flesh. Herein lies the joy and the burden of the marital union, the aptitude for reciprocal self-surrender. According to Pope Francis, the couple image God most in their capacity for self-surrender. Both creation and salvation are possible, thanks to God's act of self-giving. The direct encounter and union of hearts and life between the couple also reflects our union with God, because the man clings to his wife just as the human soul clings to God (AL 12–13). In clinging to his wife, the man realizes that the full meaning of life is achieved through communion; that is, through relationship in which one exists with and for someone. Citing also Eph 5:21, Pope Francis implies that what is required here is the mutual submission of the couples.

<sup>29</sup> Gen 1 is a wisdom text which characteristically designates reality as the pairing of opposites: darkness and light, heaven and earth, day and night, male and female, good and evil. These opposites designate totality and completeness.





The foregoing interpretation of Gen 1:26–28 within the liturgical context suggested by Ps 128 is an assertion of the most fundamental meaning of marriage. It underlines that through the liturgical ceremony, the couple is inserted sacramentally into the life of the Trinity, and in the occasion, they are given the mission to participate in God's creative project and to build a union nurtured by reciprocal self-giving. The couple's capacity to build communion through total self-gift to each other is the essence of their reflection of God's image. In underscoring these dimensions of the image motif, Pope Francis justifiably and by implication exhorts against attitudes and cultural practices which contradict them, such as, unions contracted without the blessing of the liturgical setting, unions that reject openness to new life, and cultural practices that place more value on the couple's ability to bear children rather than on their capacity for reciprocal self-surrender and communion. In order to explain how the couple, having been inserted in God's life, participate in God's creative project, Pope Francis returns to the message of Ps 128.

#### The Home: Your Wife, Your Children, and The Labor of Your Hands

The presence of children invites other responsibilities conferred on them through blessing.<sup>30</sup> Blessing gives human beings the ability to guide all created realities to their respective purposes in God's plan, "be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28). Therefore, in AL 14–18, the Pontiff describes the different ways in which God's blessing gives the human couple specific roles towards others and towards the society.

#### *The Home of the Blessed: A Domestic Church*

Ps 128 depicts a concrete home where husband and wife are seated at table with children, who represent the foundations of that home.<sup>31</sup> The use of symbols of the vine and the olive to describe this home are clear references to the community of God's people.<sup>32</sup> This home, with a divinely

30. See notes 18 and 19 above. In Gen 1:27–28, God's blessing for human beings differ from the blessing given to animals. True to its biblical meaning, God's blessing does not only confer the power to procreate; it also confers a sense of mission.

31. See Ps 127:1–5.

32. The prophets use these symbols to describe Israel's relationship with God. See notes 33–34 below.



oriented goal is a domestic church, a home filled with God's blessing, a setting for the Eucharist, a home in which children receive their first lessons in the faith.<sup>33</sup> The psalm safeguards the role of parents in the transmission of God's way of life to their children (Deut 4:9; 6:7,20).<sup>34</sup> The symbols by which this domestic church is depicted are further interpreted in the paragraphs below.

*Your Wife Like a Fruitful Vine (Psalm 128:3a)*

The vine is frequently mentioned in the Bible as a known cultivated plant in Israel. Every element of this plant is useful: the leaves are edible; the sweet and juicy fruits, which grow in large clusters, may be consumed fresh or dried as raisins and currants. Wine or vinegar is made from its juice, while the remainder of the plant is used for fodder. The prophets considered the vine as a symbol of peace and prosperity,<sup>35</sup> and of Israel as a nation.<sup>36</sup> This symbol draws attention to the many traits in the woman by whose resourcefulness the home thrives and is sustained in peace. It refers not only to her fertility but also to her unitive relevance as a woman. The Wisdom Literature recommends this image of the ideal wife as an important pedagogy for building peaceful and meaningful homes.<sup>37</sup> Like the vine, the woman spends all that she is for nurturing her family, and through her unreserved attention and commitment to every member and every aspect of the family.<sup>38</sup>

This description offered here of a woman's domestic role is growing very unpopular, thanks to the activities of individuals and institutions that broke the chains which confined women solely to the domestic sphere.<sup>39</sup> The efforts of these institutions have empowered women to

33. This insight is drawn from Ps 128:4-5, "Thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord. The Lord bless you from Zion." See AL, 15 and 16.

34. A major item in the great commandment is respect for and submission to parental guidance and authority, "Honor your father and your mother" (Deut 5:16).

35. See Mic 4:4; 1 Kgs 4:25.

36. See Jer 2:21; Ezek 15:6; Hos 10:1.

37. See Prov 31:10-31.

38. AL 24 appraises the labor of mothers.

39. Until the twentieth century, women's roles were defined in procreative terms, confined to the home, and made object of pleasure and exploitation. John XXIII lists the sudden entry of women into public life among the signs of the times. See John XXIII, Encyclical Letter, *Pacem in Terris*, 22. As the modern society experience the



build up an image and status that enable them to contribute to the development of the human society and to participate successfully in different spheres of life, areas that were previously reserved only for men.<sup>40</sup> This breaking of barriers is welcomed in modern society as progressive. While commitments in defense of women's rights and interests continue, I suggest here that every investigation into the plan of God about marriage should also include what constitutes women's role in that divine plan. I find this stated in the narrative of the second account of creation.

The second account of creation (Gen 2:4-25) is like a drama of two scenes (verses 15-17 and 18-24), introduced by a long preface (verses 4-16) and a short conclusion (verse 25). The first scene represents the woeful attempt to run the affairs of the human family without the involvement of the woman. The second scene begins with a divine assessment of the inappropriateness of this earlier attempt, "it is not good . . ." (verse 18), which is a divergence in the divine evaluation that concludes the first creation account, "God saw all he had made, and in deed it was very good" (Gen 1:31).<sup>41</sup> Although the drama of the second scene is presented as an after-thought in God's plan,<sup>42</sup> the story is told to draw attention to what is proper to a woman's mission according to God's plan, which is, that the good or overall wellbeing of creation is not complete without her.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, as "the mother of all the living" (Gen 3:20), every human institution, especially the human family, needs to be blessed by the touch of a woman's maternal instinct in order to experience wholeness.<sup>44</sup>

gradual collapse of sex-determined roles, the role and position of women in the church still remains one of the most controversial issues, a challenge with great pastoral implications.

40. See Scaraffia, "Socio-Cultural Changes in Women's Lives," 15-22.

41. In the first and second creation stories, the Hebrew word "tov" (translated as "good") designates what corresponds with the cosmic order and what is in harmony with God's original design for creation. See Nwachukwu, *Creation-Covenant Scheme*, 58.

42. A similar literary device is found in Gen 6:5, which says that God is sorry to have made mankind. The story that follows this divine evaluation represents the view point that accords with God's plan.

43. The meaning of the text will elude anyone whose interpretation is guided by any form of cultural bias. This text should be understood in the light of the Yahwist attempt to explain the origin of the frustrations which human beings encounter in life.

44. According to John Paul II, "the presence of the feminine element, alongside the male element and together with it, signifies an enrichment for man in the whole perspective of his history, including the history of salvation." See John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, 49.



Herein lies an evident weakness in the message of AL. The interpretation of the symbol of the vine that is offered here complements the almost lack of attention given to it in AL. The exhortation contains only but a very brief appraisal of woman's labor in its twenty-fourth paragraph. A more generous appreciation of the feminine genius would not have been out of place in an exhortation located in an extraordinary Jubilee year of Mercy,<sup>45</sup> especially since the message of the jubilee projected women's natural capacities, such as their maternal solicitude, ability to live the values of compassion, tenderness and care of life in all of its forms.

*Your Children Like Olive Shoots (Psalm 128:3b)*

The second part of chapter 1 (AL 14–18) speaks of children as the sign of continuity of the family from generation to generation. Children, described as olive shoots or branches, are a sign of growth in the life of the couple and of the domestic church. The olive tree is known for being ever green through all seasons, with its numerous branches clustering around the main trunk. As a figurative representation of children, the olive shoots symbolize God's provision of life, health, fruitfulness and wholeness to the family. Therefore, as branches that spring from and derive nutrient from the olive trunk, children depend on parents to achieve the purpose of their existence.<sup>46</sup> By implication, the olive branch depicts a task to be accomplished. The required pruning of the branches in order for them to bear much fruit, and the crushing of the fruit and its seed to produce oil; all these describe the great and sensitive tasks involved in the proper upbringing of children and their education in faith traditions. Like the olive trunk, the couple is expected to remain ever green in order to withstand challenges that might present themselves.<sup>47</sup> In a parent-child relationship, children also learn to respect their parents

45. The terminology of mercy in Francis's *Misericordiae Vultus* describes God's maternal solicitude for creation (1–18).

46. The olive tree also points beyond itself. It is used for lighting the Temple, the anointing of kings, the anointing of the sick and for the blessing of God's people for various purposes. See Ps 92:10; Isa 10:27; Mark 6:13; Rom 10:17; Jas 5:14–15. Insights in this paragraph are taken from Trever, "Olive Tree."

47. See Exod 12:26–27; 13:14; Deut 6:20–25; Ps 78:3–6; 148:12. The pedagogical responsibility of parents is brought out more clearly in the book of Proverbs, a biblical sapiential book that is dedicated to the transmission of wisdom to the young. See Prov 3:11–12; 6:20–22; 13:1; 22:15; 23:13–14; 29:17.





and to fulfill family and social commitments.<sup>48</sup> In the life of Jesus, we see a confirmation of divine arrangement of these parent-children responsibilities in his own life. Without neglecting the obedience he owed his parents,<sup>49</sup> Jesus showed that a child's life is an essential part of God's project for his kingdom in the world.<sup>50</sup>

*By the Labor of Your Hands (Psalm 128:2)*

Human labor is a necessary requirement for the building of a home. According to the foundational text of Gen 2, work is not an option for humans; it is part of the essence of being human and a requirement for human dignity and wellbeing (Gen 2:15).<sup>51</sup> The wellbeing of society also depends very much on human labor. Ps 128:2 introduces the *pater familias*, a laborer who sustains the family wellbeing through the work of his hands: "You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you." This hope expressed in the context of marriage ceremony belongs to the original divine mandate to humans to develop themselves, the family and the human society through labor.<sup>52</sup> The essential nature of labor for human dignity and development unveils the evil of life deprived of labor. The document puts forward biblical examples of people and families affected by the evil and effects of unemployment,<sup>53</sup> of the abusive ravaging of nature<sup>54</sup> and of injustice.<sup>55</sup>

An appreciation of chapter 1 of AL is enhanced when this chapter is placed in diachronic analysis and relationship with other chapters of the documents and in comparative relationship with other papal documents on marriage and the family. These two relationships are the topic of the next paragraphs.

48. Exod 20:12; Sir 3:3-4; Mark 7:11-13.

49. Luke 2:52.

50. See Luke 2:48-50; 8:21.

51. See Prov 31:10-31; Acts 18:3; 1 Cor 4:12; 9:12; 1 Thess 3:10; 4:11.

52. See Ps 128:5-6.

53. For instance, Matt 20:1-16.

54. Gen 3:17-19.

55. 1 Kgs 21; Luke 12:13; 16:1-31.





## Meaning of the Biblical Foundation for the Development of Other Parts of the Document

In developing the biblical foundation for the institution of marriage, the first chapter of AL also introduces pertinent themes that are developed in the different chapters of the papal Apostolic Exhortation. This first chapter presents the couple, the interlocutor, as seated at a festive table, surrounded by their children, and with their personal stories of love and experiences. These experiences become the topic of discussion in the second chapter, which projects the situation of married people and their families in its lights and shadows, valuing them as the seed bed for divine revelation. Chapter 2 is like the description of challenges that inspired both the choice of the foundational texts of chapter 1 and the unique interpretation they are given in this exhortation. Of these challenges, special mention is made of those that affect and/or detract the biblical foundation of marriage. These are: the individualistic cultures that erode the marriage bond and family unity, a flourishing ideology of gender which makes human identity the choice of the individual and which denies the anthropological basis of the family, and human procreation technologies which manipulate the reproductive act, making it independent of the sexual relationship between the man and the woman.

Chapter 1 of AL lays much emphasis on marriage as a special way of sharing in the life of the Trinity. This leading idea is developed in chapter 3, which further elaborates on the aim of pastoral activity for married people, that is, to help them to enter more deeply into the mystery of the Father's infinite love revealed in Christ. Should married couples, therefore, seek for models of love to emulate, this chapter refers them to the example of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, who is the model of self-immolation and mutual self-giving. Jesus is also at the heart of many stories which reveal the deepest truth about human relationships and the deeper meaning of marriage in God's plan. Chapter 4 further provides a basis for nurturing the love of the spouses through a path of fidelity and mutual self-giving. This chapter links with the first chapter, especially because it develops the connection which the first chapter makes between human labor and family crisis. Since the linking of family crisis to human labor is also found in the key text, Gen 2-3,<sup>56</sup> the implication is that crisis in marital union is an aspect of the elemental disorderly reality

<sup>56</sup> In Gen 3:17-19, human labor and suffering are punishment for sin, even though Gen 2:15 shows that labor is consequential to the human vocation in general.



that constantly threatens the good of creation.<sup>57</sup> The relationship of the couple is subject to complex realities that affect the unity and peace of the family. Crises seem to break in upon the pleasant relationship of the couple, threatening the foundation upon which marriage is founded. In fact, Jesus's teaching about marriage is given in the context of a discussion about divorce, an outcome of the original flaw in human relationship.<sup>58</sup>

Chapter 4 develops concrete ways of healing family wounds through its detailed explanation of the behaviors which love demands, as they are presented in 1 Cor 13. The last part of this fourth chapter presents the compassionate attitude that heals families in crisis, the tenderness of an embrace. It also suggests, with the use of Ps 131, an attitude that the couple must shun, that is, haughty or scornful attitude and conceited self-concepts that promote self-love. An interpretation of the demands of love in 1 Cor 13 in this chapter serves this purpose.<sup>59</sup>

The fifth chapter returns to the topic of the responsibilities of the couple to the primary task of being God's image, especially in relation to children. Chapters 6 and 7 speak of the different ways in which the family is a great asset for building up the church and a setting for education and social integration of their children. An Apostolic Exhortation that gets its inspiration from the life and virtues of God would, by implication, propose action plans and modes of behavior that correspond with its original propositions. The last chapters of the document do this with the language of mercy, encouragement and hope.

#### *Amoris Laetitia* and Previous Papal Documents on Family and Marriage

Marriage and the family is a frequently visited topic in papal encyclicals and exhortations through the centuries. It is important to locate this within the wider teaching ministry of the pope. Recognizing the great importance of the family as the foundation of both the society and church, the church through the centuries, has expressed the deepest desire and task of the church to protect it from ever new ideologies that promote perverse, life-threatening and family-endangering forms of morality. The

57. According to Gerhard Von Rad, chaos is the threat to everything created and the abyss of formlessness that lies behind all creation. See Von Rad, *Genesis*, 51.

58. AL 19–21. See Gen 3:16; Matt 19:3–9.

59. This chapter prepares for the ideas about conjugal love (see AL 120).



task to protect families from all negative teachings, morality and ideologies, as well as from all forms of social experimentation, led the church through the years to vindicate the divine institution of marriage, to illumine the heart of all people with the true doctrine regarding marriage in God's plan and to enable married people to act in conformity with that plan. All papal documents on marriage and family<sup>60</sup> defend the essential aspects of marriage—its place in God's plan, the union of the couple, its sacramental nature, love for and education of children and the dignity of work. All these ideas are defined and sustained with texts from the Bible, the canon law, Vatican II, the Fathers and the church's liturgy.

There are salient ideas which receive elaborate attention in previous papal documents, but which are only deducible from the text of AL and/or not easily evident in it. These ideas are: moral norms guiding sexuality in marriage, indissolubility of marriage, the dignity of human life, influence of government or public authorities on decision regarding their children, use of contraception, sex education and the church as legitimate custodian and teacher of truths revealed by God. Although resembling previous documents in many ways, AL registers a very unique identity in having its first chapter entirely dedicated to explaining the biblical foundation of marriage. It is also important to point out that of all papal documents on the family since the *Casti Connubii* of Pius XI in 1930,<sup>61</sup> the letter *Gratissimam Sane* (GS)<sup>62</sup> of John Paul II in 1994, is closest to AL in style and content. Both documents are also similar in being located historically in Jubilee years, where the concern for family is proposed as essential step towards a fruitful preparation and celebration of the Jubilee.<sup>63</sup>

60. Since *Gaudium et Spes* of Vatican II, the most outstanding papal documents on marriage and family are: *Humane Vitae* of Paul VI (July 25, 1968); *Familiaris Consortio* of John Paul II (November 22, 1981); *Gratissimam Sane* of John Paul II (February 2, 1994); *Deus Caritas Est* of Benedict XVI (2005), *Africae Munus* of Benedict XVI (2011), *Lumen Fidei* of Pope Francis (2013); and *Amoris Laetitia* of Pope Francis (March 19, 2016).

61. *Casti Connubii* of Pius XI, given on December 31, 1930. Another significant papal document on marriage and family before this date is *Arcanum* of Leo XIII given in 1880.

62. Represented as GS in this work from here henceforth.

63. See GS 3; "This exhortation is especially timely in this Jubilee Year of Mercy . . . needs to encourage everyone to be a sign of mercy and closeness wherever family life remains imperfect or lacks peace and joy" (AL 5).



At the beginning of the exhortation, Pope Francis is similarly motivated as John Paul II to address a real interlocutor, with the gesture of “knocking and entering a home,”<sup>64</sup> in order to share in their joys, hopes, sorrows and anxieties (GS 1).<sup>65</sup> By addressing a historical interlocutor and their challenges, both documents express similar aims while affirming the character of God’s word as encounter with concrete people in history, “the word of God is not a series of abstract ideas but rather a source of comfort and companionship for every family that experiences difficulties or suffering.”<sup>66</sup>

In both documents, the key interpretive principle is the biblical idea of “the human being as image of God” (Gen 1:26–27). Both documents interpret Gen 1:27 as the creation, not of single human persons, but of the community of two physically different human subjects, male and female, with qualities of communion and complementarity.<sup>67</sup> Pope Francis followed Pope John Paul II in seeing this biblical text as a reference to the family, and saying that the family stands at the beginning of human existence, whose primordial model is the Triune God, the eternal mystery of communion and life. Lastly, AL and GS also meet in the importance they give to 1 Cor 13 and its lessons on the truth and virtues of love, marital fidelity, and both derive from this text the teaching about indissolubility of marriage.<sup>68</sup>

### Concluding Remarks and Pastoral Application

The goal of this final part of the essay is to show how the light of God’s word, which shines in the first chapter of AL, offers a pastoral plan of action on behalf of families in Africa.

64. Similarly, Pope Francis, “Let us cross the threshold of this tranquil home . . .” (AL 9).

65. The first family-related situation he mentioned is that of those who did not experience at birth the loving care and embrace of a family, and who thereby develop an anguished sense of pain and loss which burden their entire life (GS 2).

66. AL 22; see GS 2.

67. See GS 6, 8; “It is striking that the “image of God” here refers to the couple, “male and female” (AL 10).

68. AL, chapter 4; GS 14 calls it the “Civilization of Love.”



## The Ministry of Mercy for Families

The historical location of AL in the context of Jubilee adds a significant flavor to the message of the exhortation. In the biblical sense, every Jubilee is a time of grace and of return to the Lord.<sup>69</sup> Consequently, the publication of AL in the Year of Mercy places every family in the forefront of the pilgrimage towards the "Door of Mercy." By placing family concerns within mercy, the church invites all couples and all families to approach the throne of God's mercy with their stories of joy and pain, so that they could experience the profound richness of the mystery of God's love for his people.<sup>70</sup> This note of mercy seems to exert considerable weight in the exhortation, to the almost neglect of moral laws guiding marriage which received so much attention in previous documents on the family. This certainly presents enormous challenge to the church and its leaders, who must bear practical witness to this gospel through courageous gestures that reflect the values of God. This involves especially rejecting a self-concept defined by exclusion, but bearing witness to the unity of God's people, to compassion, generosity and to forgiveness that heals. Every local church is thereby challenged to devise ways of being present to the families as the "soothing balm of mercy" and to minimize the punitive measures that keep them away from the sacraments.

## A Church in Dialogue with Families

Although known as an essential ingredient for the achievement of peace and wellbeing among parties and peoples, dialogue is still very far from being brought to bear practically on relationships between parties because human beings tend to guard their boundaries from what they consider eccentric and unfamiliar. The God-human relationship, which the Bible presents, offers human beings in the church a model of relationship to adopt. God is not ashamed to choose as dialogue partner weak and stubborn human beings whose ways are different from God's, and God makes human experiences of joys and sorrows the preferred backdrop for divine revelation. The entire Bible show that God's merciful ways is the

69. See Lev 25:13.

70. See *Misericordiae Vultus*, 18.





dimension of relationship that turned the biblical stories of families in crises<sup>71</sup> into stories of salvation.

The dialogical character of salvation inspired the tone of AL. In presenting the exhortation as a conversation with a historical interlocutor, AL draws attention to the experiential dimension which should underlie both pastoral plans in the church and relationships among different groups in the church. This dialogue is most necessary in the modern society, where various forms of ideology also claim the right to define questions concerning human life, gender, parenthood and education of children. Many families find themselves at the crossroads between faith and other relativizing options. In responding to this situation, Pope Francis counsels against an excessive idealization that makes Christian marriage uninteresting and undesirable. Pertinently, he asks, "... have we always provided solid guidance to young married couples, understanding their timetable, their way of thinking and their concrete concerns. At times, we have also proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families" (see AL 36–37).

In today's Africa, many more families are affected by challenges never experienced before, caused by political and socio-economic factors. On the increase are cases of divorce, single-parenting and conflicts that rupture family unity. The church will find in these contexts a rich mine of human experiences, family stories that are raw materials for a narrative theology. The narrative method is not foreign to the African; rather, it has served as a means for articulating African religious and ethical worldview. Theology in Africa should exhaust the benefits of this method, bringing it to bear on African ecclesiology. In fact, the church's renewal and enrichment depends a lot on the options it makes on behalf of the "weak and overburdened."<sup>72</sup> This narrative method is recommended because in both biblical and African thought, narrative as a literary *genre*, presents the characters of a story as they are, without judging them (see AL 296); it includes the good and the bad in its comprehensive vision of reality; and in biblical thought, it is more open to God's grace.

71. The stories of the families of Adam, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all begin with crisis.

72. The church experiences renewal through openness to the weak. See Dowling, "Bishops as Theologians," 3.



## Reconsidering Marriage Customs in the Light of God's Word

A strong focus on families in Africa has been on how they are affected by marriage cultural practices, especially practices that encourage divorce, polygamy, exploitation of women and neglect of the education of children. These negative realities point to the need to positively consider what the founding vision of marriage says to the rich culture and customs of marriage which have served the local people of Africa for a long time. The liturgy should feature more clearly those aspects of the African vision of marriage which reflect the biblical vision; for instance, marriage as creator of perpetual bonds and lasting friendships, promoter of solidarity between families and communities, the invaluable contribution of the woman to the wellbeing of the family, and marriage as a means for perpetuating the chain of humanity.<sup>73</sup> The purpose should be to promote the image of family which reflects the triune God as a communion of love (see AL 11) and to reflect a family image where every member is helped to experience growth in their human dignity as human beings made in God's image. Moreover, with the collapse of cultural structures in Africa, which previously encouraged male dominance and their traditionally conceived status of the man as "bread winner," the contribution of women to the family is coming to greater light. Many families are surviving today thanks to the resourcefulness of women and their commitment to both the education of children and care of the more elderly members of the family unit. This is another "sign of the time" which the church should preach by discouraging customs opposed to the biblical vision, especially those that promote selfishness, exploitation of women and negation of their human right.

## More Committed Catechesis for the Family

*Amoris Laetitia* is almost a year old, yet many families in some local churches are ignorant of its existence. The same thing holds for some

<sup>73</sup> These basic ideas about how life's chain is continued during and after a person's historical existence recapture the idea of immortality, which is found in creation stories of ancient peoples. So long as a deceased person is still remembered and recognized by some by relations who knew him, he or she is a living dead. He is in a state of personal immortality, which is externalized through reincarnation, sharing of symbolic meals and libation and obedience to instructions they had given. The process of dying is completed when no family member could perform these memorial acts on behalf of the dead. See Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 24-25.





previous papal exhortations and encyclicals which address either the entire church or some members of it. In most cases, the people of God are uninformed and ignorant of church teaching on marriage and the family. While growing up, I experienced a church in which the priest is personally committed to teaching the people of God, especially at evening Sunday schools. This practice is eroding or is almost absent in some local churches. The crises of faith into which individuals and families are plunged stem from ignorance and lack of guidance. In some cases, also, this lack of knowledge is pervasive, extending even to those who should teach the people. For this reason, the proposed dialogue with families should include the following: (a) efforts to improve the reading culture and interests of agents of evangelization, (b) efforts directed towards faithful transmission of received doctrine, and (c) a thoroughgoing catechesis for families on the content of the church's teaching on marriage. These pedagogical efforts serve for building the capacity of the dialogue partners. Moreover, the African continent, with its rich cultures, offers various festive moments which the church should consider as favorable setting for teaching. Occasions which necessitate family re-unions, such as traditional and church weddings, child-dedication ceremonies, blessing of a new house, initiation rites of different kinds, and so on; all these are advantageous for interpreting the inherent values of these family-related rites in the light of the gospel. Today, more than previously, given the dangers to which families are exposed due to the presence of teachings and ideologies that contradict faith, the church must not relent in her mission to educate people on the values of God.

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There is no papal document that has generated as much interest, controversy, and debate in recent times as Pope Francis's *Amoris Laetitia*. This document, which came out of two very divisive synods of Catholic bishops and leaders in Rome in 2014 and 2015, will probably be the most discussed document ever produced by a pope in modern Catholicism on marriage and family life. This volume has gathered seminal commentaries on *Amoris Laetitia* by African Catholic theologians, social scientists, and pastoral workers. They offer African theological and pastoral responses to the principles and practices proposed by Pope Francis and the Synod on the family on such contested issues as same-sex relations, divorce and remarriage, and reception and denial of Holy Communion in the church, among other divisive issues. These important essays and commentaries show the strengths and weaknesses of this papal commentary and point out the missing link in the global conversation on marriage, family, and same-sex relations. Their argument for the inclusion of African perspectives and moral traditions in the search for a third way in finding an inclusive and integrated pastoral art of accompaniment is very compelling. The authors here also call for the inclusion of Africa's own unique challenges—like polygamy, childless marriages, and the impact of migration, civil conflict, diseases, ecological and population crises, and the rights of African women—in the global discussion on marriage and family life. They also challenge uncritical clichés in world Christianity that Africa's opposition to same-sex marriages (or Western propaganda about population or birth control and contraception) are conservative, while showing diverse African conversations on these topics in the search for abundant life on this beautiful continent.

STAN CHU ILO is a research professor at the Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology at DePaul University, Chicago, where he coordinates the African Catholicism Project. He is the author of *A Poor and Merciful Church: The Illuminative Ecclesiology of Pope Francis* and editor of *Wealth, Health, and Hope in African Christian Religion*. He is the 2017 winner of the AfroGlobal Excellence Award for Global Impact.

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