

“The Joy of Love”

AT THE HEART OF THE FAMILY

A brief journey through “Amoris Laetitia”

During the Jubilee Year of Mercy, in his post-synodal exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (*The Joy of Love*),¹ Pope Francis invited us, in the manner of a kindly grandfather, to rediscover the immense beauty of God’s plan – a plan that meets the aspirations of the human heart from generation to generation. One word sums up the 325 paragraphs of this unique document filled with respect, tenderness and practical wisdom about love in the family: HOPE!

Pope Francis walks resolutely in the footsteps of Saint John Paul II, Benedict XVI, Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council, to support Christian spouses and families, inviting them “to value the gifts of marriage and the family, and to persevere in a love strengthened by the virtues of generosity, commitment, fidelity and patience”.



*"The Joy of Love experienced by families
is also the joy of the Church"(1).*

The Holy Father “seeks to encourage everyone to be a sign of mercy and closeness wherever family life remains imperfect or lacks peace and joy” (5).

One cannot appreciate adequately this reminder about marriage, sexuality and family without situating it in the context of the New Evangelization. This perspective allows us to understand the depth of compassion, the patience to wait as we accompany, and the boldness of the invitation to conversion that inform each statement that the Holy Father addresses to each of us and to our families.

Pope Francis is well aware of the complexity of current family situations, of the challenges and vulnerabilities of families; he asks that we be sowers of hope by being close to families, and to invite them to discover what Christ can do for them: “no family drops down from heaven perfectly formed; families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love. ... Let us make this journey as families, let us keep walking together. What we have been promised is greater than we can imagine. May we never lose heart because of our limitations, or ever stop seeking that fullness of love and communion which God holds out before us” (325).

This papal exhortation seeks to help and accompany families in their response to the beautiful teaching on marriage and family offered by Christ and His Church. What Christ commands is synonymous with happiness, and we will not reach it without the help of spiritual forces stronger than our own, that is, without grace – grace available to us freely in prayer and in the sacraments. We are never alone.

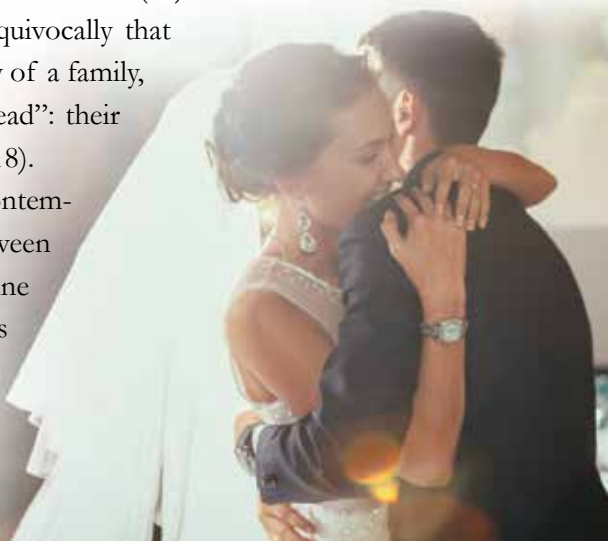
LET US WALK IN THE LIGHT OF THE WORD OF GOD

Love stories and family crises have been around since Adam and Eve; the Scriptures amply illustrate this fact. This is why Pope Francis chose to begin his apostolic Exhortation “The Joy of Love” by drawing on the word of God and the teachings of the Church founded by the Son of God: “Have you not read that the Creator from the beginning made them male and female?” (*Mt* 19:4)... “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and they become one flesh” (*Gn* 2:24) (9)... “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (*Gn* 2:15) (23).

The conjugal union envisioned by God is a “voluntary gift of love” (13), and the children born of that union are “living stones” in the edifice of the family (*1Pet* 2:5). With the parents as foundation, the Christian family becomes a domestic Church. Here “the parents are called to become their children’s first teachers in the faith” (16).

The Gospel teaches unequivocally that “children are not the property of a family, but have their own lives to lead”: their personal Christian vocation (18).

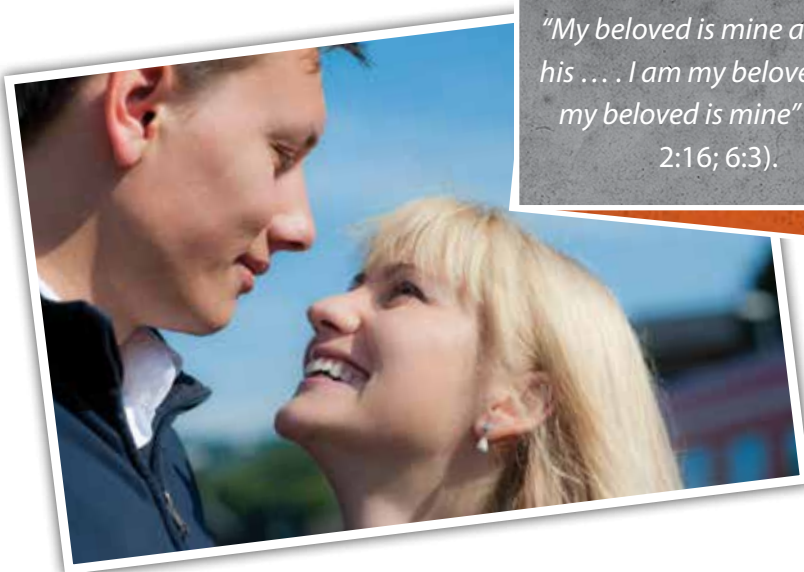
In the Bible, “we have contemplated the relationship between human families and the divine Trinity. The word of God tells us that the family is entrusted to a man, a woman and their children, so that they may become a communion



of persons in the image of the union of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Begetting and raising children, for its part, mirrors God's creative work. In an attitude of mercy, forgiveness and tenderness, the family is called to join in daily prayer, to read the word of God and to share in Eucharistic communion, and thus to grow in love and become ever more fully a temple in which the Spirit dwells" (29).

Unfortunately, sin and a spirit of domination can generate "the presence of pain, evil and violence that break up families and their communion of life and love" (19), and thus cause suffering. Unemployment and work insecurity can have a similar effect.

In such difficult circumstances, the word of God is a comforting "travelling companion". This companion shows us not only the purpose of life, but also what lies ahead, when God "will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more" (*Rev* 21:4) (22).



"My beloved is mine and I am his ... I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine" (Song 2:16; 6:3).

FEET FIRMLY ON THE GROUND: FACING LIGHT AND DARKNESS

Inasmuch as the future of the world and of the Church depends in large measure on the welfare of the family, how can we help but be concerned about the challenges and threats of contemporary “cultural decadence”? “Families face many challenges, from migration to the ideological denial of differences between the sexes (“ideology of gender”); from the culture of the provisional to the anti-birth mentality and the impact of biotechnology in the field of procreation; from the lack of housing and work to pornography and abuse of minors; from inattention to persons with disabilities, the lack of respect for the elderly; from the legal dismantling of the family, to violence against women,”²² not to mention drug, alcohol and gambling addictions.



Let us not forget the impact on all of us of narcissism and extreme individualism, which have led to confusion between true freedom grounded in objective truth and the concept that everything is of equal value and thus legitimate “as if there were no truths, values and principles to provide guidance, and everything were possible and permissible” (34), as noted in chapter two of *Amoris Laetitia*. In the context of such a culture, one could easily come to doubt “the ideal of marriage, marked by a commitment to exclusivity and stability” and fail to see that marriage is a dynamic path, allowing human development as well as providing a sense of fulfilment. On the one hand, people fear loneliness and long after a haven of safety and fidelity, but on the other hand, there is “a growing fear of entrapment in a relationship that could hamper the achievement of one’s personal goals” (34).

Clearly, it is urgent that we find the words, the reasons and the witnesses to touch the hearts of young people, “appealing to their capacity for generosity, commitment, love and even heroism and in this way inviting

“As Christians, we can hardly stop advocating marriage simply to avoid countering contemporary sensibilities, or out of a desire to be fashionable or a sense of helplessness in the face of human and moral failings. We would be depriving the world of values that we can and must offer. ... What we need is a more responsible and generous effort to present the reasons and motivations for choosing marriage and the family, and in this way to help men and women better to respond to the grace that God offers them” (35).



them to take up the challenge of marriage with enthusiasm and courage” (40). The state bears the responsibility of creating laws, family policies and employment conditions “to ensure the future of young people and help them realize their plan of forming a family” (43).

After stating that we cannot “placidly” compare common-law unions or those of same-sex partners to marriage, Pope Francis regrets the widespread “failure to realize that only the exclusive and indissoluble union between a man and a woman has a plenary role to play in society as a stable commitment that bears fruit in new life” (52), thus ensuring the future of society.

Pope Francis invites us to rediscover the true meaning of family and the way toward its renewal, reminding ourselves that its strength “lies in its capacity to love and to teach how to love. For all a family’s problems, it can always grow, beginning with love” (53). Hence the importance of focusing not only on doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, but also of encouraging spouses to be open to God’s grace, and to better train their consciences (37).

MARRIAGE: A CALL TO HOLINESS

In this third chapter, Pope Francis explains that “the mystery of the Christian family can be fully understood only in the light of the Father’s infinite love revealed in Christ, who gave himself up for our sake and who continues to dwell in our midst” (59); we are invited to imitate Jesus in order to successfully transmit the Gospel of the Family. Born into a Nazarene family, “he looked upon the women and men whom he met with love and tenderness, accompanying their steps in truth, patience and mercy as he proclaimed the demands of the Kingdom of God” (60). The Samaritan woman, the adulterous woman, the rich young man come to mind.

Since the very beginning, the Church has taught that marriage is a gift from God. Over the past fifty years, through her magisterium and



"With inner joy and deep comfort, the Church looks to the families who remain faithful to the teachings of the Gospel, encouraging them and thanking them for the testimony they offer. For they bear witness, in a credible way, to the beauty of marriage as indissoluble and perpetually faithful" (86).

on the occasion of the Second Vatican Council, especially, the Church has repeated that marriage is an "intimate partnership of married life and love" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 48). God invites spouses to be co-creators with him, hence the "intrinsic link between marital love and the procreation of life" (*Humanae Vitae*, 10); love refuses to close in on itself and "from the outset ... is open to a fruitfulness that draws it beyond itself. Hence no genital act of husband and wife can refuse this meaning" (80).

We also know that "Christ the Lord makes himself present to the Christian spouses in the sacrament of marriage and remains with them" (67). In order to live "conjugal love" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 13), and to be true to their vocation to holiness in a total reciprocal gift, with loyalty, with openness to life, preserving unity and indissolubility, spouses can rely on the Spirit of Christ (69 and 77). They will never be left to fend for themselves. Moreover, when the spouses are united "by becoming one flesh, they embody the espousal of our human nature by the Son of God", and they are encouraged "to beg the Lord to bestow on every married couple an outpouring of his divine love" (73).

The transmission of life, the education of children and the pastoral care of broken families are the subject of three chapters in *Amoris Laetitia* and will be summarized later.

CONJUGAL LOVE: “THE GREATEST OF FRIENDSHIPS”

(Saint Thomas Aquinas)

According to Saint Thomas Aquinas, “the greatest of friendships,” after that which unites us to God, is conjugal love. The love of spouses adds “an indissoluble exclusivity expressed in the stable commitment to share and shape together the whole of life” (123) to the qualities of a good friendship - the search for the good of the other, intimacy, tenderness, stability, and a likeness that builds over time.

Even more importantly, they must see their life together as “an inevitable mixture of enjoyment and struggles, tensions and repose, pain and relief, satisfactions and longings, annoyances and pleasures” (126).

After reminding us that the grace of the sacrament of marriage is intended before all else to perfect the love of spouses (89), in this fourth chapter, Pope Francis presents a practical and inspirational exegesis of Saint Paul’s Hymn to Love (see page 12).

Fraternal love within the family requires deeds and words that actually show love. In their absence, the ongoing process of growth and maturing that characterizes a healthy family cannot take place (134). Citing one of his own catecheses on the family, the Holy Father insists on the importance of three key words that must be used daily: “...three words: ‘Please’, ‘Thank you’, ‘Sorry’. Three essential words! In our families when we are not overbearing and ask: ‘May I?’, in our families when we are not selfish and can say: ‘Thank you!’, and in our families when someone realizes that he or she did something wrong and is able to say ‘Sorry!’, our family experiences peace and joy. ... The right words, spoken at the right time, protect and nurture love daily” (133).



Furthermore, although it involves “a long and demanding apprenticeship”, dialogue is the better, the indispensable way to allow love to mature, to be expressed and lived in truth within both family and married life. Equally important are the “attitudes that express love and encourage authentic dialogue”. That is why it is necessary “to take time, quality time. This means being ready to listen patiently and attentively to everything the other person wants to say ... we need to be sure that we have heard everything the other person has to say” (136-137). This chapter offers many other tips on how to make love grow: cultivate the habit of giving genuine attention to each other, express feelings without being hurtful, augment thoughtful and affectionate gestures, etc.

Next comes a reflection on the desires, feelings and emotions which “all have an important place in married life” (143) – reminding us that God himself created sexuality, a truly wonderful gift: “Sexuality is not a

means of gratification or entertainment; it is an interpersonal language wherein the other is taken seriously, in his or her sacred and inviolable dignity. ... In this context, the erotic appears as a specifically human manifestation of sexuality. It enables us to discover ‘the nuptial meaning of the body and the authentic dignity of the gift’ ” (151).

The “transformation of love” is an essential element to consider throughout married life, where “longer life spans now mean that close and exclusive relationships must last for four, five or even six decades; consequently, the initial decision has to be frequently renewed” (163).

While physical appearance changes occur, mutual attraction and sexual desire evolve; spouses feel deeply united, happy to belong to each other, and able to share everything with tenderness: “There is no guarantee that we will feel the same way all through life. Yet if a couple can come up with a shared and lasting life project, they can love one another and live as one until death do them part, enjoying an enriching intimacy” (163) with the help of the Holy Spirit who bestows on us “his spiritual fire, to confirm, direct and transform our love in every new situation” (164).

Hymn to Love (1 Cor 13: 4-7)

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

THE SECRETS OF SAINT PAUL'S HYMN TO LOVE

Pope Francis draws on his wealth of experience as a pastor and spiritual guide to offer us a surprisingly concrete reflection on Saint Paul's Hymn to Love (*1 Cor* 13: 4-7). These excerpts illustrate his thoughts.

Patience... "It refers, then, to the quality of one who does not act on impulse and avoids giving offense" (91). "Patience takes root when I recognize that other people also have a right to live in this world, just as they are. ... Love always has an aspect of deep compassion that leads to accepting the other person as part of this world, even when he or she acts differently than I would like" (92).

Attitude of service... "Love is more than a mere feeling. ... As Saint Ignatius of Loyola said, 'Love is shown more by deeds than by words'. It thus shows its fruitfulness and allows us to experience the happiness of giving, the nobility and grandeur of spending ourselves unstintingly, without asking to be repaid, purely for the pleasure of giving and serving" (94).

Love does not envy... "Envy is a form of sadness provoked by another's prosperity True love values the other person's achievements. It does not see him or her as a threat It recognizes that everyone has different gifts and a unique path in life. So it strives to discover its own road to happiness, while allowing others to find theirs" (95).

Love does not boast, it is not proud... Some “people think that, because they are more ‘spiritual’ or ‘wise’, they are more important than they really are” (97). “Love, on the other hand, is marked by humility; if we are to understand, forgive and serve others from the heart, our pride has to be healed and our humility must increase. ... In family life, the logic of domination and competition about who is the most intelligent or powerful destroys love” (98).

Kindness... “To be open to a genuine encounter with others, ‘a kind look’ is essential. ...

Those who love are capable of speaking words of comfort, strength, consolation, and encouragement. ... These are not words that demean, sadden, anger or show scorn. In our families, we must learn to imitate Jesus’ own gentleness in our way of speaking to one another” (100).

Detachment... “Generously serving others is far more noble than loving ourselves. Loving ourselves is only important as a psychological prerequisite for being able to love others. ... Love can transcend and overflow the demands of justice, ‘expecting nothing in return’ (*Lk* 6:35), and the greatest of loves can lead to ‘laying down one’s life’ for another (cf. *Jn* 15:13)” (101-102).

No interior violence... “Indignation is only healthy when it makes us react to a grave injustice; when it permeates our attitude towards others it is harmful. ... Do not let the day end without making peace in your family. ... Our first reaction when we are annoyed should be one of heartfelt blessing, asking God to bless, free and heal that person” (103-104).

Forgiveness... “When we have been offended or let down, forgiveness is possible and desirable, but no one can say that it is easy”. The truth is that “family communion can only be preserved and perfected through a great spirit of sacrifice. It requires, in fact, a ready and generous openness of each and all to understanding, to forbearance, to pardon, to reconciliation. ...



We recognize that being able to forgive others implies the liberating experience of understanding and forgiving ourselves. ... All this assumes that we ourselves have had the experience of being forgiven by God, justified by his grace and not by our own merits” (106 to 108).

Rejoice with others... “If we fail to learn how to rejoice in the well-being of others, and focus primarily on our own needs, we condemn ourselves to a joyless existence, for, as Jesus said, “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (*Acts* 20:35). “The family must always be a place where, when something good happens to one of its members, they know that others will be there to celebrate it with them” (110).

Love bears all things... “Married couples joined by love speak well of each other; they try to show their spouse’s good side, not their weakness and faults. ... The other person is much more than the sum of the little things that annoy me. Love does not have to be perfect for us to value it. The other person loves me as best they can, with all their limits, but the fact that love is imperfect does not mean that it is untrue or unreal. It is real, albeit limited and earthly. ... Love coexists with imperfection” (113).

Love is trusting... “Love trusts, it sets free, it does not try to control, possess and dominate everything. This freedom, which fosters independence, openness to the world around us and to new experiences, can only enrich and expand relationships. ... The spouses then share with one another the joy of all they have received and learned outside the family circle. At the same time, this freedom makes for sincerity and transparency, for those who know that they are trusted and appreciated can be open and hide nothing” (115).

Love hopes... “Love does not despair of the future. ... This phrase speaks of the hope of one who knows that others can change, mature and radiate unexpected beauty and untold potential” (116).

Love endures all things... “This means that love bears every trial with a positive attitude. ... It is a love that *never gives up* Here I think of the words of Martin Luther King, who met every kind of trial and tribulation with fraternal love: ... The strong person is the person who can cut off the chain of hate, the chain of evil Somebody must have religion enough and morality enough to cut it off and inject within the very structure of the universe that strong and powerful element of love. ... The Christian ideal, especially in families, is a love that never gives up” (118-119).

LOVE ALWAYS GIVES LIFE

Borrowing the words of Saint John Paul II, Pope Francis reminds us in this fifth chapter that conjugal love “does not end with the couple The couple, in giving themselves to one another, give not just themselves but also the reality of children, who are a living reflection of their love, a permanent sign of their conjugal unity and a living and inseparable synthesis of their being a father and a mother”.³

Every child is born according to God the Father’s eternal plan, and entrusted by him to his parents. “The gift of a new child, entrusted by the Lord to a father and a mother, begins with acceptance, continues with lifelong protection and has as its final goal the joy of eternal life” (166).

Before reviewing the roles and responsibilities of mothers and fathers, the Holy Father reiterates: “Every child has a right to receive love from a mother and a father; both are necessary for a child’s integral and harmonious development”. Children need to feel their parents’ mutual love, a love “perceived as the source of one’s life and the solid foundation of the family” (172).

The fecundity of conjugal love can sometimes be faced with the painful reality of infertility. Adoption can become a generous way toward motherhood and



"With great affection I urge all future mothers: keep happy and let nothing rob you of the interior joy of motherhood. Your child deserves your happiness. Don't let fears, worries, other people's comments or problems lessen your joy at being God's means of bringing a new life to the world" (171).

fatherhood (179-180). Clearly, families should not seek to live in isolation in an attempt to protect themselves from society; on the contrary, they are called to live a spirit of solidarity, always finding new ways to "make God's love present in society" (184), and "to open the doors of the family to greater fellowship with the underprivileged. ... Families who are properly disposed and receive the Eucharist regularly, reinforce their desire for fraternity, their social consciousness and their commitment to those in need" (186).

This is how small nuclear families with "a big heart" experience the joy of sharing the challenges and dreams of extended family members; sharing not only with parents, in-laws, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, neighbours, as well as families of close friends. But also sharing with their "larger" family, providing "love and support to teenage mothers, children without parents, single mothers left to raise children, persons with disabilities needing particular affection and closeness, young people struggling with addiction, the unmarried, separated or widowed who are alone, and the elderly and infirm who lack the support of their children", without forgetting "those who have made shipwreck of their lives" (196-197).

In order to radiate life, love must build this "culture of encounter".

NURTURING LOVE THROUGH ACCOMPANIEMENT

In her proclamation of the Gospel of the Family, the Church is now seeking new ways to support young people who are preparing for marriage, as well as newly married couples and those going through a crisis and/or a broken relationship. One thing becomes abundantly clear in the context of the “missionary conversion” called for by Pope Francis: Christian families are themselves the principal agents of the family apostolate; especially through “their joy-filled witness” (200).

Parishes are at the heart of this endeavour. Pastors bear a great responsibility in evangelizing and catechizing couples, presenting them “(with) a high ideal of a love that is strong, solid, enduring and capable of sustaining them through whatever trials they may have to face” (200).





It is also urgent to encourage and support “lay people who are involved, as Christians, in the cultural and socio-political fields” (201), without forgetting that “a more adequate formation of seminarians, priests, deacons, religious, and lay pastoral workers is critical” (202). The importance of “the fundamental value of spiritual direction ... and sacramental Reconciliation” cannot be overstated (204).

In this sixth chapter, Pope Francis insists on the need to introduce young people to the value and richness of marriage through practical, down-to-earth marriage preparation classes, providing them with the opportunity to recognize each other’s weaknesses, incompatibilities or risks: “they should be strongly encouraged to discuss what each other expects from marriage, what they understand by love and commitment, what each wants from the other and what kind of life they would like to build together” (209). Another important point: engaged couples should

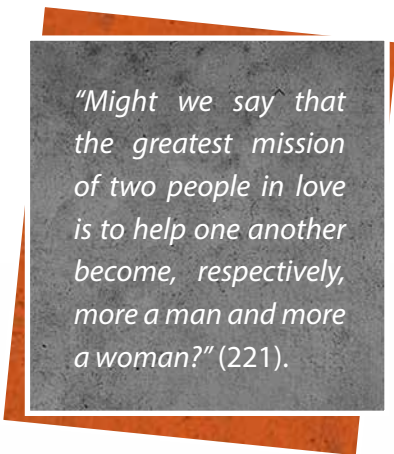
be encouraged to pray to God together, so they can discern His will for them.

The first years of married life would also benefit from support and guidance. Spouses must understand that, in order to “enrich and deepen their conscious and free decision to have, hold and love one another for life” (217), they are called to grow in maturity by going through several stages. They will learn, among other things, to “negotiate”... “Such negotia-

tion is ... an interplay of give and take, for the good of the family ..., so that there will be no winners and losers, but rather two winners” (220).

Crises are to be expected in the life of a couple as a normal occurrence, and it is essential to remember that “surmounting a crisis need not weaken their relationship; instead, it can improve, settle and mature the wine of their union” (232). In fact, “to know how to forgive and to feel forgiven is a basic experience in family life” (236). And yet some families will face the tragic hardships brought on by separation and divorce. Adults and children affected by these situations need support and compassion. They need a caring presence, so that they know that they have their place in the Christian community.

The Holy Father concludes by stating that “our most important pastoral task with regard to families is to strengthen their love, helping to heal wounds and working to prevent the spread of this drama [of divorce] of our times” (246).



“Might we say that the greatest mission of two people in love is to help one another become, respectively, more a man and more a woman?” (221).

EDUCATING TO LOVE AND SELF-GIVING

Earlier in his exhortation, Pope Francis emphasized the all-important responsibility of parents: “The overall education of children is a ‘most serious duty’ and at the same time a ‘primary right’ of parents ... parents themselves enjoy the right to choose freely the kind of education – accessible and of good quality – which they wish to give their children in accordance with their convictions” (84). In this seventh chapter, the Holy Father adds that parents “can never completely delegate the moral formation of their children to others” (263).

Turning to the issue of sex education, Pope Francis insists that it must be “both positive and prudent”, as well as understood “within the broader framework of an education for love, for mutual self-giving” (280),

all the while respecting the modesty of the child. Children are invited “to accept their own body as it was created” and to value the sexual difference (285). After wondering if our schools have properly understood the challenge, he maintains that “the information has to come at a proper time and in a way suited to their age” (281). Pope Francis deplores that promoting notions of “safe sex” and the need to “protect themselves” among young



people encourages them to consider negatively “the natural procreative finality of sexuality, as if an eventual child were an enemy to be protected against” (283).

Since the family is the first school where values are taught (274), it is of paramount importance that children can actually learn, step by step, the proper use of their freedom, in order to have the self-mastery necessary to become accountable and autonomous. “Young people need to realize that they are bombarded by messages that are not beneficial for their growth towards maturity; they should be helped to recognize and to seek out positive influences, while shunning the things that cripple their capacity for love” (281).

Pope Francis finally invites us to reflect on what he considers the crux of the matter:

“The real question, then, is not where our children are physically, or whom they are with at any given time, but rather where they are existentially, where they stand in terms of their convictions, goals, desires and dreams. The questions I would put to parents are these: Do we seek to understand ‘where’ our children really are in their journey? Where is their soul, do we really know? And above all, do we want to know?”(261).

“The home must continue to be the place where we learn to appreciate the meaning and beauty of the faith, to pray and to serve our neighbour. ...

In all families the Good News needs to resound, in good times and in bad, as a source of light along the way” (287, 290).

OF WOUNDED AND TROUBLED LOVE

The title of this eighth chapter, “Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating Weakness” speaks volumes regarding Pope Francis’ hope for the Church’s mission, which he compares to that of a field hospital. In other words, “the Church must accompany with attention and care the weakest of her children, who show signs of a wounded and troubled love, by restoring in them hope and confidence” (291), while avoiding judgements that do not reflect the complexity of irregular situations.

Faced with situations of fragility and imperfection, says the Holy Father, “the Church’s way ... has always been the way of Jesus, the way of mercy and reinstatement ... The way of the Church is not to condemn





anyone for ever; it is to pour out the balm of God's mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart" (296). The marriage nullity process is a relevant example. In fact, "the Church does not disregard the constructive elements in those situations which do not yet or no longer correspond to her teaching on marriage" (292).

Through a merciful, patient and respectful pastoral dialogue, couples who chose civil marriage or living together can become open to "the full reality of marriage and family in conformity with the Gospel" (294). Saint John Paul II suggested that there is a 'law of gradualness', in the sense that a human being "knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by different stages of growth".⁴

It becomes abundantly clear that good spiritual directors have a crucial role to play in accompanying people in their particular circumstances, in order to bring them “to an awareness of their situation before God” (300). They can then discover how much grace can help them to be “living members, able to live and grow in the Church”. Thus, “while avoiding any occasion of scandal”, it is important, namely for the care and Christian upbringing of their children, that couples who are divorced and remarried civilly be integrated into Christian communities (299).

No one should feel excluded or excommunicated, states Pope Francis. However, “to show understanding in the face of exceptional situations never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing less than what Jesus offers to the human being” (307).

“Without detracting from the evangelical ideal, there is a need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively appear”, making room for “the Lord’s mercy, which spurs us on to do our best” (308).

THE SPIRITUALITY OF COUNTLESS DAILY ACTS OF LOVE

In this ninth chapter, Pope Francis states that the spirituality of marriage and family is born of the relationship between spouses, and of those between children and parents; since our Lord is present “in real and concrete families, with all their daily troubles and struggles, joys and hopes”, we can affirm that “the spirituality of family love is made up of thousands of small but real gestures” (315).

Familial communion, lived in a positive way, is the ordinary path to sanctity for the majority. It is also conducive to a closer union with God. “The fraternal and communal demands of family life are an incentive to growth in openness of heart and thus to an ever fuller encounter with the Lord” (316).



Families benefit immensely from praying together simply. Hence the importance of reserving a few minutes every day to share – together! - our concerns with the living Lord, “to tell him our worries, to ask for the needs of our family, to pray for someone experiencing difficulty, to ask for help in showing love, to give thanks for life and for its blessings, and to ask Our Lady to protect us beneath her maternal mantle”(318).

The highlight of family prayer is Sunday Mass: “There, spouses can always seal anew the paschal covenant which united them and which ought to reflect the covenant which God sealed with mankind in the Cross The close bond between married life and the Eucharist thus becomes all the more clear. For the food of the Eucharist offers the spouses the strength and incentive needed to live the marriage covenant each day as a ‘domestic church’ ” (318).





In fact, when the spouses and the family are centred on Christ, he will come to unify and illumine them. “Moments of pain and difficulty will be experienced in union with the Lord’s cross, and his closeness will make it possible to surmount them. In the darkest hours of a family’s life, union with Jesus in his abandonment can help avoid a breakup”. Little by little, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, spouses grow in holiness “by sharing in the mystery of Christ’s cross, which transforms difficulties and sufferings into an offering of love. Moreover, moments of joy, relaxation, celebration, and even sexuality can be experienced as a sharing in the full life of the resurrection” (317).

At the heart of the conjugal covenant of love lies a decision that must be renewed each morning: to belong to each other only, and to grow old together, thus mirroring God’s faithfulness. “Every morning, on rising, we reaffirm before God our decision to be faithful, come what may in the course of the day. And all of us, before going to sleep, hope to wake up and continue this adventure, trusting in the Lord’s help” (319).

The love of spouses reaches a turning point “when each spouse realizes that the other is not his or her own, but has a much more important master, the one Lord”. This awareness makes spouses more realistic in their expectations towards each other; they understand that one spouse cannot fully meet the other’s needs, and that they are called “to stop expecting from that person something which is proper to the love of God alone” (320).

It is vital for each spouse to find time alone in order to speak with God; this moment spent with God in solitude “not only helps heal the hurts of life in common, but also enables the spouses to find in the love of God the deepest source of meaning in their own lives. Each day we have to invoke the help of the Holy Spirit to make this interior freedom possible” (320).

Family spirituality involves being attentive to one another, consoling and encouraging one another. In other words, “to contemplate our loved ones with the eyes of God and to see Christ in them”, never forgetting “that each of those who live with us merits complete attention, since he



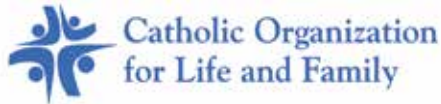
or she possesses infinite dignity as an object of the Father's immense love". Each family member's tenderness towards the other can "stir in the other the joy of being loved" (321-323).

When a man and a woman choose marriage as their vocation, they become "mutual reflections of that divine love which comforts with a word, a look, a helping hand, a caress, an embrace". In short, "to want to form a family is to resolve to be a part of God's dream, to choose to dream with him, to want to build with him, to join him in this saga of building a world where no one will feel alone" (321).

"Led by the Spirit, the family circle is not only open to life by generating it within itself, but also by going forth and spreading life by caring for others and seeking their happiness. This openness finds particular expression in hospitality" (324).

ENDNOTES

1. Pope Francis thus consolidates the reflections emerging from the two Synods he convened in 2014 and 2015 in order to consult all the Bishops and the people of God on the following topics: "Pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization" and "The vocation and mission of the family in the Church and contemporary world". (Numbers at the end of specific paragraphs correspond to the paragraphs of *Amoris Laetitia*).
2. Vatican Press Office, "Summary of the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (*The Joy of Love*) on love in the family," 8 April 2016.
3. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, n. 14.
4. *Familiaris Consortio*, n. 34.



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