

## The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

You might remember that in addition to the World Meeting of Families held in Philadelphia last September, two Synods of Bishops also took place in 2014 and 2015 with the theme of “the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and in the contemporary world”. In case you’re not familiar, a Synod of Bishops is a gathering of bishops from around the world, which assist the pope by providing counsel on important questions facing the Church. At the end of the Synod of Bishops, the pope often writes a special letter called an apostolic exhortation, which communicates the mind of the pope, in light of the recommendations of the bishops, on a certain topic – in this case marriage and family life. Well just last week, Pope Francis released his apostolic exhortation on this most recent Synod of Bishops, entitled, *Amoris Laetitia*, “The Joy of Love”.

That title, “The Joy of Love”, comes from the opening line of the apostolic exhortation: “The Joy of Love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church.” Usually the opening line encapsulates the theme of the entire letter. Now, this document is some 250 pages. Let’s just call it “robust”! And although Pope Francis himself has urged a patient and careful reading of the document – with “the hope that, in reading it, all will feel called to love and cherish family life” – I know most of us probably won’t, so I’d like to provide a brief summary of some of the important points.

First, it begins with a reflection on the Bible, which “is full of families, births, love stories and family crises”. It’s a reminder that just as the family is not some abstract ideal, neither is the truth of marriage and family life presented in the Scriptures. Rather, the Bible offers a source of comfort and companionship, that even though the reality of marriage and family life has been wounded by sin from the beginning (just look at Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel), through the very difficulties and sufferings we experience as family the goal of this journey is presented – a journey which leads to heaven. On this difficult journey, the family is meant to be the “training ground” to prepare each of us for heaven. We all need to learn how to love and how to be loved. And, it’s through the realness of the family – the good, the bad, the ugly, and the beautiful – that we can concretely encounter the lessons of love. It’s interesting to note that when speaking about the family, Pope Francis doesn’t limit it to the “nuclear family”. Rather, given his own very close relationship with his grandmother, he clearly sees the importance of “extended family” as a fuller expression of family life.

A subsequent chapter in “The Joy of Love” is dedicated to reiterating some of the essential teachings of the Catholic Church on marriage and family life. These are unchanging topics like the indissolubility and sacramental nature of marriage, the transmission of life and the formation of children. Pope Francis then goes on to state that although Church teaching is unchangeable, since it comes from God, “pastors are to avoid judgments that do not take into account the complexity of various situations, and they are to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience and endure distress because of their condition.” In particular, in his mind are many of those controversial topics in modern society today, topics like the pro-abortion mentality, pornography, the abuse of children, contraception, same-sex marriages, and the legal dismantling of the family.

In all of this, the pope insists on concreteness, which is a key concept in the exhortation. He says, “If we fail to listen to reality, we cannot understand the needs of the present or the movements of the Spirit.” He says it is quite unrealistic to think that families can sustain themselves “simply by stressing doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace”. Rather, it is divine truth, as taught by the Church, that is to help “form consciences, not to replace them”. In other words, hearts open to the Good News, leads to minds transformed by the Gospel. But just as Jesus did with the woman caught in the act of adultery, when He showed compassion in her frailness and sinfulness, but told her to go and sin no more, so too must the Church today.

Pope Francis then offers a beautiful reflection, on that Scripture passage many of us are familiar with at weddings – “Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous; it is not pompous, etc.” In this part of his 1<sup>st</sup> Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul reminds us that this love he writes about between husband and wife is actually a sharing in the perfect love of Jesus for His Bride, the Church. However, Pope Francis reminds us that given this beautiful truth, “There is no need to lay upon two limited persons the tremendous burden of having to reproduce perfectly the union existing between Christ and his Church, for marriage as a sign entails ‘a dynamic process..., one which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God’”. In other words, it’s only by relying on God’s grace together that married couples and families can even grow towards, let alone achieve, such a divine ideal!

The next to the last chapter is an invitation to mercy and pastoral discernment in situations that do not fully match what the Lord proposes for marriage and family life. This chapter is very sensitive. And in reading it one must remember that “the Church’s task is often like that of a field hospital”. The Pope states that “the baptized, who are divorced and civilly remarried need to be more fully integrated into Christian communities in the variety of ways possible, while avoiding any occasion of scandal”. “Such persons need to feel not as excommunicated members of the Church, but instead as living members, able to live and grow in the Church... This integration is also needed in the care and Christian upbringing of their children”.

In this regard, Pope Francis employs what he calls a “logic of pastoral mercy”, and speaks the following tender message: “I encourage the faithful who find themselves in complicated situations to speak confidently with their pastors or with other lay people whose lives are committed to the Lord. They may not always encounter in them a confirmation of their own ideas or desires, but they will surely receive some light to help them better understand their situation and discover a path to personal growth. I also encourage the Church’s pastors to listen to them with sensitivity and serenity, with a sincere desire to understand their plight and their point of view, in order to help them live better lives and to recognize their proper place in the Church.”

Finally, in light of all the ups and the downs, the joys and the sorrows of family life, Pope Francis clearly states that we “should not feel that the family detracts from their growth in the life of the Spirit, but rather see it as a path which the Lord is using to lead them to the heights of mystical union”. Everything, “moments of joy, relaxation, celebration, and even sexuality can be experienced as a sharing in the full life of the resurrection”. And, he reminds us that “No family drops down from heaven perfectly formed; families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love ... All of us are called to keep striving towards something greater than ourselves and our families...Let us make this journey as families, let us keep walking together. 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”. And that’s the best I can do in 10 minutes or less. Maybe you’d like to read on – “The Joy of Love”. God bless you.