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INTRODUCTION

The Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* calls the whole Church to embody the joy of love in the families of our time. The sixth chapter presents "the need to develop new pastoral paths in which communities must elaborate practical and effective proposals that take into account both the teachings of the Church and local needs and challenges. For families to be increasingly active subjects of family ministry, an evangelizing and catechetical effort directed at the family is required (Cf. AL 199-200).

A. PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL OF THE FAMILY TODAY

Family ministry must make it possible to experience that the Gospel of the family responds to the deepest expectations of the human person: to their dignity and to full fulfillment in reciprocity, in communion and in fruitfulness. Proposing the values of the Gospel is a necessity today. An evangelization that frankly denounces the cultural, social, political and economic conditions, such as the excessive space granted to the logic of the market, which impede an authentic family life, determining discrimination, poverty, exclusions and violence. For this, it is necessary to establish a dialogue and cooperation with social structures, as well as to encourage and support the laity who are committed, as Christians, in the cultural and socio-political sphere (Cf. AL 201).

The main contribution to the pastoral care of families is offered by the parish, which is the family of families. Along with a pastoral outreach aimed specifically at families, we are faced with the need for a more adequate formation of priests, deacons, seminarians, men and women religious, catechists and other pastoral workers with the help of teachers and counsellors and community physicians, social workers and juvenile and family advocates. Good pastoral training is important "especially in light of particular emergency situations arising from cases of domestic violence and sexual abuse". All this in no way diminishes, but rather complements, the fundamental value of spiritual direction, the rich spiritual treasures of the Church and sacramental Reconciliation

(Cf. AL 202-204).

B. PREPARING ENGAGED COUPLES FOR MARRIAGE



To help young people discover the dignity and beauty of marriage, requires a greater effort on the part of the whole Christian community before the complexity of today's society. In the preparation, it is stressed the importance of virtues, of witnessing and of the quality of formation giving priority to contents, which along with the proclamation of the Kerygma and presenting in an attractive and cordial manner, they help the engaged couples to live the rest of their lives together "with great courage and generosity"¹. May the initiation to the sacrament of Marriage provide couples with the help they need to receive the sacrament worthily and to make a solid beginning of life as a family (Cf. AL 205-207).

Discussion groups and optional talks on a variety of topics of genuine interest to young people can also prove helpful. But some personalized moments are essential, because the main objective is to help each one to learn to love this specific person with whom he intends to share his whole life. Parents themselves should be the best teachers and witnesses of what a Christian marriage is. We must not forget the valuable resources of the traditional religious practices (Cf. AL 208).

It is important to know each other well. The preparation to marriage, must give the engaged couples the possibility of eventual problems and risks. They should be strongly encouraged to discuss what each expects from marriage, what they understand by love and commitment, what each wants from the other, what kind of life they would like to build together. Nothing is more volatile, precarious and unpredictable than desire. The decision to marry should never be encouraged unless the couple has discerned reasons that will ensure a genuine and stable commitment (Cf. AL 209-210).

To help them not to see the wedding ceremony as the end of the road, but to accept marriage as a vocation that propels them forward, with the firm and realistic decision to go through all the trials and difficult moments together. The pastoral care of engaged and married couples should be above all a pastoral of the bond, where elements are provided that help both to mature love and to overcome difficult moments. In addition to the precious spiritual resources that the Church always offers, well-embodied advice, tactics drawn from experience, psychological guidance should be offered. All this configures a pedagogy of love that cannot ignore the current sensitivity of young people, in order to mobilize them internally. In preparing the bride and groom, it must be possible to indicate places and people, consultancies or families available, where they can go for help when difficulties arise (Cf. AL 211).

Preparation of the celebration

The preparation of the celebration is considered of great importance. Given the thousand issues and details to take into account, the bride and groom arrive burdened and exhausted at the wedding, which is unfortunate. The Pope tells them: "Have the courage to be different. Don't let yourselves get swallowed up by a society of consumption and empty appearances. What is important is the love you share, strengthened and sanctified by grace. You are capable of opting for a more modest and simple celebration in which love takes precedence over everything else" (Cf. AL 212).

The couple must be helped to perceive the matrimonial consent with all its theological and spiritual weight; implies a totality that includes the future: "until death do us part". That they capture the mystery, the sacrifice and even the liturgy that marriage contains (Cf. AL 214).

The marriage liturgy is a unique event, which is both a family and a community celebration. The first signs of Jesus were performed at the wedding feast of Cana: the good wine, resulting from the Lord's miracle that brought joy to the beginning of a new family, is the new wine of Christ's Covenant with the men and women of

¹ Ignacio de Loyola, Ejercicios Espirituales, anotación 5.

every age... Frequently, the celebrant speaks to a congregation that includes people who seldom participate in the life of the Church, or who are members of other Christian denominations or religious communities. The occasion thus provides a valuable opportunity to proclaim the Gospel of Christ (Cf. AL 216).

C. ACCOMPANYING THE FIRST YEARS OF MARRIED LIFE

It is essential to accompany in the first years of married life to enrich and deepen the conscious and free decision to belong to each other and to love each other to the end. Neither spouse can expect the other to be perfect, it is necessary to accept the other as he or she actually is: an unfinished product, needing to grow, work in progress. A persistently critical attitude towards one's partner is a sign that marriage was not entered into as a project to be worked on together, with patience, understanding, tolerance and generosity. Slowly but surely, love will then give way to constant questioning and criticism, dwelling on each other's good and bad points, issuing ultimatums and engaging in competition and self-justification. The couple then prove incapable of helping one another to build a mature union. This fact needs to be realistically presented to newly married couples from the outset, so that they can grasp that the wedding is "just the beginning". By saying "I do", they embark on a journey that requires them to overcome all obstacles standing in the way of their reaching the goal. They can only benefit from sitting down and talking to one another about how, concretely, they plan to achieve their goal (Cf. AL 218).



Hope is the leaven that, in those first years of engagement and marriage, makes it possible to look beyond arguments, conflicts and problems and to see things in a broader perspective. It harnesses our uncertainties and concerns so that growth can take place. Hope also bids us live fully in the present, giving our all to the life of the family, for the best way to prepare a solid future is to live well in the present (Cf. AL 219).

At each new stage of married life, there is a need to sit down and renegotiate agreements, so that there will be no winners and losers, but rather two winners. In the home, decisions cannot be made unilaterally, since each spouse shares responsibility for the family; yet each home is unique and each marriage will find an arrangement that works best (Cf. AL 220).

Be careful with too high expectations, they are a danger, it is necessary to assume marriage as a path of maturation, where each spouse is an instrument of God to make the other grow. Change, improvement, the flowering of the good qualities present in each person, all these are possible. Each marriage is a kind of "salvation history". Fostering growth means helping a person to shape his or her own identity. Love is thus a kind of craftsmanship (Cf. AL 221)

Decisions involving responsible parenthood presupposes the formation of conscience, which is "the most secret core and sanctuary of a person, there each one is alone with God, whose voice echoes in the depths of the heart"². Moreover, "the use of methods based on the 'law of nature and the incidence of fertility'"³ are to be promoted, since 'these methods respect the bodies of the spouses, encourage tenderness between them and favour the education of an authentic freedom'⁴, greater emphasis needs to be placed on the fact that children are a wonderful gift from God and a joy for parents and the Church, through them, the Lord renews the world (Cf. AL 222).

Some resources in the accompaniment of marriage

² Gaudium et Spes, 16.

³ Humanae Vitae, 11

⁴ Catecismo de la Iglesia Católica, 2370



Experienced couples are of great help in accompanying young couples. Help spouses to give importance to scheduling moments to be together for free, recreation times with their children, various ways of celebrating important events, spaces of shared spirituality that integrate prayer, Sunday Eucharist, confession and spiritual direction. Teach to communicate better, that they meet, stop, find exclusive time for them. Young married couples should be encouraged to develop a routine that gives a healthy sense of closeness and stability through shared daily rituals. These could include a morning kiss, an

evening blessing, waiting at the door to welcome each other home, taking trips together and sharing household chores. Yet it also helps to break the routine with a party, and to enjoy family celebrations of anniversaries and special events. We need these moments of cherishing God's gifts and renewing our zest for life.

Offer and promote in the parishes meetings of neighboring couples or friends, groups of families, consultancies on different conflictive family situations, spaces of spirituality, training workshops, family assemblies. Encourage frequent confession, spiritual direction, attendance at retreats and talks. Invite them to read God's Word together. Take advantage of all the moments of encounter: baptisms, first communions, funerals, marriage anniversary, weddings, to catechize and evangelize. It is necessary to have a good secretariat in the parish that is a facilitator. Today, family ministry must be fundamentally missionary, outgoing, close, instead of being reduced to being a factory of courses that few attend (Cf. AL 223-230).

D. CASTING LIGHT ON CRISES, WORRIES AND DIFFICULTIES

The challenge of crises

It is good to accompany the spouses so that they can accept the crises that come, take the glove and make a place for them in family life. Each crisis has a lesson to teach us; we need to learn how to listen for it with the ear of the heart (Cf. AL 232).

When problems are not dealt with, communication is the first thing to go. Little by little, "the person I love" slowly becomes "my mate", then just "the father or mother of my children", and finally a stranger". It is necessary to approach marital crisis with a look that does not ignore its burden of pain and anguish (Cf. AL 233).

Some crises are typical of almost every marriage: the crisis of the beginnings, the arrival of a child, the crisis of "empty nest"...; and there are those personal crises that affect the life of couples, often involving finances, problems in the workplace, emotional, social and spiritual difficulties. Experience shows that, with adequate help and with the reconciliation action of grace, a large percentage of marital crises are successfully overcome. Knowing how to forgive and feeling forgiven is a fundamental experience in family life (Cf. AL 235-236).

Inevitably, situations will arise involving human weakness and these can prove emotionally overwhelming. For example, the feeling of not fully appreciated, jealousy, attraction to another person, new interests that consume the other's time and attention, physical changes of the spouses, and so many other things, rather than threatening love, are so many occasions for reviving and renewing it (Cf. AL 237).

Old wounds

When problems emerge in a marriage, before important decisions are made it is important to ensure that each spouse has come to grips with his or her own history. This involves recognizing a need for healing, insistent prayer for the grace to forgive and be forgiven, a willingness to accept help and the determination not to give up but to keep trying. A sincere self-examination will make it possible to see how one's own shortcomings and immaturity affect the relationship (Cf. AL 240).

Accompaniment after breakdown and divorce

In some cases, respect for one's own dignity and the good of the children requires not giving in to excessive demands or preventing a grave injustice, violence or chronic ill-treatment. In such cases, separation becomes

inevitable. At times it even becomes morally necessary, precisely when it is a matter of removing the more vulnerable spouse or young children from serious injury due to abuse and violence, from humiliation and exploitation, and from disregard and indifference. Even so “separation must be considered as a last resort, after all other reasonable attempts at reconciliation have proved vain (Cf. AL 241).

Pastoral care must necessarily include efforts at reconciliation and mediation, through the establishment of specialized counselling centers in dioceses. The local community and pastors should accompany these people with solicitude, particularly when children are involved or when they are in serious financial difficulty (Cf. AL 242).

It is important that the divorced who have entered a new union should be made to feel part of the Church, who “are not excommunicated” and should not be treated as such, since they remain part of the ecclesial community. These situations require careful discernment and respectful accompaniment, avoiding all language and attitude which can make them feel discriminated, and they should be encouraged to participate in the life of the community. The Christian community’s care of such persons is not to be considered a weakening of its faith and testimony to the indissolubility of marriage; rather, such care is a particular expression of its charity (Cf. AL 243).

A large number of Synod Fathers also emphasized the need to make the procedure in cases of nullity more accesible and less time consuming, and, if possible, free of charge⁵ (Cf. AL 244).

I make this appeal to parents who are separated: “Never ever, take your child hostage! You separated for many problems and reasons. Life gave you this trial, but your children should not have to bear the burden of this separation or be used as hostages against the other spouse” (Cf. AL 245).

Divorce is an evil and the increasing number of divorces is very troubling. Hence, 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 our times (Cf. AL 246).



Certain complex situations

Issues involving mixed marriages require particular attention. Marriage between Catholics and other baptized persons ‘have their own particular nature, but they contain numerous elements that could well be made good use of and developed, both for their intrinsic value and for the contribution that they can make to the ecumenical movement’. For this purpose, “an effort should be made to establish cordial cooperation between the Catholic and non-Catholic ministers from the time that preparations begin for the marriage and the wedding ceremony”⁶ (Cf. AL 247).

“Marriages involving disparity of cult represent a privileged place for interreligious dialogue. They involve special difficulties regarding both the Christian identity of the family and the religious upbringing of the children... The number of households with married couples with disparity of cult, on the rise in mission territories, and even in countries of long Christian tradition, urgently requires providing a differentiated pastoral care according to various social and cultural contexts. In some countries where freedom of religion does not exist, the Christian spouse is obliged to convert to another religion in order to marry, and therefore, cannot celebrate a canonical marriage involving disparity of cult or baptize the children. We must therefore reiterate the necessity that the religious freedom of all be respected (Cf. AL 248).

The Church makes her own the attitude of the Lord Jesus, who offers his boundless love to each person without

⁵ Cf. *Mitis Iudex Dominus Iesus*, art. 2-3.

⁶ *Familiaris Consortio*, 78.

exception. The situation of families whose members include persons who experience same-sex attraction, is a situation not easy either for parents or for children. We would like before all else to reaffirm that every person, regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be respected in his or her dignity and treated with consideration, while “every sign of unjust discrimination” is to be carefully avoided, particularly any form of aggression and violence (Cf. AL 250).

The Synod Fathers observed that, “as for proposals to place unions between homosexual persons on the same level as marriage, there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God’s plan for marriage and family”. It is unacceptable that local churches should be subjected to pressure in this matter and that international organizations condition financial aid to poor countries on the introduction of laws that institute ‘marriage’ between people of the same sex” (Cf. AL 251).

Single-parent families often result from the “unwillingness of biological mothers or fathers to be part of a family; situations of violence, where one parent is forced to flee with the children; the death of one of the parents; the abandonment of the family by one parent, and other situations. Whatever the cause, single parents must receive encouragement and support from other families in the Christian community, and from the parish’s pastoral outreach. Often, these families endure other hardships, such as economic difficulties, uncertain employment prospects, problems with child support and lack of housing” (Cf. AL 252).

F. WHEN DEATH MAKES US FEEL ITS STING

At times family life is challenged by the death of a loved one. We cannot fail to offer the light of faith as a support to families going through this experience. To turn our backs on a grieving family would show a lack of mercy, losing a pastoral opportunity, and that attitude can close the doors for any other evangelizing action (Cf. AL 253).

Ordinarily, the grieving process takes a fair amount of time, and when a pastor must accompany that process, he has to adapt to the demands of each of its stages. At particular times, we have to help the grieving person to realize that, after the loss of a loved one, we still have the mission to carry out, and that it does us no good to prolong the suffering, as if it were a form of tribute. If death is something powerful, “love is strong as death” (Ct 8,6). Love involves an intuition that can enable us to hear without sounds and to see the unseen. This does not mean imagining our loved ones as they were, but being able to accept them changed as they are now. The risen Jesus, when his friend Mary tried to embrace him, told her not to hold on to him, in order to lead her to a different kind of encounter (Cf. AL 255).

I REFLECT AND SHARE:

1. Is family ministry organized in my parish? What does it consist of? Who animates it? How can I participate and support?
2. What should we promote so that the pastoral care of marriage and the family does not remain in a theoretical announcement far from real problems?
3. As a local community, how can we participate and help strengthen family ministry?

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