



CONTENTS:

- A. A SPIRITUALITY OF SUPERNATURAL COMMUNION**
- B. GATHERED IN PRAYER IN THE LIGHT OF EASTER**
- C. A SPIRITUALITY OF EXCLUSIVE AND FREE LOVE**
- D. A SPIRITUALITY OF CARE, CONSOLATION AND INCENTIVE**



INTRODUCTION

We have come to the last chapter of the Apostolic Exhortation on love in the family. Pope Francis could not fail to explain something that he has undoubtedly kept in mind in all the reflections that he has been proposing to us throughout the previous eight chapters, to raise the question of marital and family spirituality, not an easy task; it is to be appreciated that Pope Francis has done so, because he can help us to situate all the reflections that have led us here.

For this reason, the first message that he wanted to transmit to us has the character of a basic principle on which he will base all his explanation: charity, that is, love, which acquires different nuances according to the state of life to which each one has been called. Therefore, any reflection on love in married and family life must be carried out from the perspective of marital and family spirituality, that is, from the conception of marriage and the family as something willed by God and a reality in which God has wanted to be present in a special way.

We speak of spirituality, in the Christian sense, when we refer to the dimension of every human person that has to do with the aspiration to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity; and this gives rise to a more human standard of living, also in earthly society. Thus, we say that a person is very spiritual to indicate that he is very sensitive to the Gospel of Jesus and strives to follow it faithfully.

The "spirituality of the laity must have its own character by reason of the state of marriage and the family"¹, and that family concerns must not be something alien "to their spiritual lifestyle"².

In this chapter, Pope Francis has set out to describe some fundamental notes of this specific spirituality that develops in family life and in the relationships between its members (AL 313). Among these notes Francis has highlighted four:

- *In the first place*, a spirituality of **family communion**, which is possible. Thanks to the presence of God "in the temple of marriage communion.

- *Secondly*, a spirituality of **prayer in the light of Easter**, which is maintained and enriched day after day. Thanks to the family prayer.

- *Thirdly*, a spirituality of **exclusive and free love**, which has as its first reference the same love of God.

- *Fourthly*, a spirituality of **care, comfort and encouragement**, which disposes the family to go out and meet other families in need.

¹ Decr. Apostolicam actuositatem, sobre el apostolado de los laicos, 4.

² *Ibid.*

A - A SPIRITUALITY OF FAMILY COMMUNION

The first of the fundamental notes of family spirituality is *family communion*. We have always spoken of how God dwells in the hearts of those living in his grace. Today we can add that the Trinity is present in the temple of marital communion. Just as God dwells in the praises of his people (cf. Ps 22:3), he dwells deep within the marital love that gives Him glory (AL 314).



Living in a family makes it hard for us to feign or lie; we cannot hide behind a mask. If that authenticity is inspired by love, then the Lord reigns there, with his joy and his peace. This mutual concern “brings together the human and the divine”³, for it is filled with the love of God. In the end, marital spirituality is a spirituality of the bond, in which divine love dwells (AL 315).

Pope Benedict XVI pointed out that “closing our eyes to our neighbour also blinds us to God”⁴, and that, in the end, love is the only light which can “constantly illuminate a world grown dim”⁵. If only we “love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us”⁶. Since “the human person has an inherent social dimension, and the first and basic expression of that social dimension of the person is the married couple and the family”⁷.

A positive experience of family communion is a true path of sanctification and mystical growth, a means for ever deeper union with God. The fraternal and communal demands of family life constitute an incentive to open the heart more and more, and thus to achieve a fuller encounter with the Lord every day.

Hence, those who have deep spiritual aspirations 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 (AL 316).

B - GATHERED IN PRAYER IN THE LIGHT OF EASTER

For a Christian marriage, the awareness of the presence of God in all moments of family life, even in the moments of maximum expression of conjugal love, constitutes a powerful stimulus. If a family is centred on Christ, he will unify and illumine its entire life. 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. Gradually, “with the grace of the Holy Spirit, [the spouses] grow in holiness through married life, also 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. Married couples shape with different daily gestures a “God-enlightened space in which to experience the hidden presence of the risen Lord”⁸ (AL 317).

This “spiritual” reality becomes more evident in daily life if it is accompanied by family prayer; the family’s communal journey of prayer culminates by sharing together in the Eucharist, especially in the context of the Sunday rest.

Family prayer is a special way of expressing and strengthening this paschal faith. A few minutes can be found each day to come together before the living God, 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,



³ CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Const. past. *Gaudium et spes*, sobre la Iglesia en el mundo actual, 49.

⁴ Carta enc. *Deus caritas est* (25 diciembre 2005), 16.

⁵ *Ibid*, 39.

⁶ 1 Jn 4:12.

⁷ JUAN PABLO II, Exhort. Ap. Postsin. *Christifideles laici* (30 diciembre 1988), 40.

⁸ JUAN PABLO II, Exhort. Ap. Postsin. *Vita Consecrata* (25 marzo 1996), 42.

and to ask Our Lady to protect us beneath her maternal mantle. With a few simple words, this moment of prayer can do immense good for our families. The various expressions of popular piety are a treasure of spirituality for many families (Cf. AL 318).

C - A SPIRITUALITY OF EXCLUSIVE AND FREE LOVE

The faith of Christian spouses in the loving presence of God in their married and family life helps them to relativize many things, because nothing can be as important as this joyful reality: the company of an endearing God in the family home.

Fidelity to that loving God who presides over their lives and to whom they have consecrated their marriage and their children allows them to understand the meaning of a conjugal love that has no expiration date, not because a foreign law imposes it and they accept it with resignation, but because it is a matter of heart that has God as a witness.

Marriage is also the experience of belonging completely to another person. Spouses accept the challenge and aspiration of supporting one another, growing old together, and in this way reflecting God's own faithfulness. This firm decision, which shapes a style of life, is an interior requirement of the covenant of the covenant of conjugal love, since a person who cannot choose to love for ever can hardly love for even a single day. At the same time, such fidelity would be spiritually meaningless were it simply a matter of following a law with obedient resignation. Rather, it is a matter of the heart, into which God alone sees⁹.

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. In this way, each spouse is for the other a sign and instrument of the closeness of the Lord, who never abandons us: "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age"¹⁰ (AL 319).

At the same time, the same love of God allows the spouses to place the conjugal love that unites them in the place that corresponds to it: a primacy that is in no way limited by the presence of God, but this presence is a guarantee of full satisfaction in their own married and family life.

There comes a point where a couple's love attains the height of its freedom and becomes the basis of a healthy autonomy. This happens when each spouse realizes that the other is not his or her own, but has a much more important master, the one Lord. No one but God can presume to take over the deepest and most personal core of the loved one; he alone can be the ultimate centre of their life. At the same time, the principle of spiritual realism requires that one spouse not presume that the other can completely satisfy his or her needs.

The spiritual journey of each – as Dietrich Bonhoeffer nicely put it – needs to help them to a certain "disillusionment" with regard to the other¹¹, to stop expecting from that person something which is proper to the love of God alone. This demands an interior divestment. The space which each of the spouses makes exclusively for their personal relationship with God 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 (AL 320).

It is interesting that we pay attention to a detail that cannot go unnoticed, when assessing the importance of being aware of the presence of God in family life, Francis stresses that this presence of God will never leave conjugal love in second place, but will favor it. That is, the exclusive and free love between the spouses does not exclude the love of God, precisely because it is God's love for the spouses that gives full meaning to conjugal love.

⁹ Mateo 28, 20.

¹⁰ Cf. Mateo 5, 28.

¹¹ Cf. *Gemeinsames Leben*, Munich 1973,18.

D - A SPIRITUALITY OF CARE, CONSOLATION AND INCENTIVE

The inner richness, intimacy and possibilities that characterize family life are hardly comparable with those of other social institutions who have as their purpose the care of people. In other words, the care, comfort and encouragement that a family life inspired by Christ Jesus can offer spouses, children and other family members are unique and irreplaceable. Francis also referred to it.

"Christian spouses are, for themselves and for their children and other relatives, cooperators of grace and witnesses of the faith. God calls spouses to transmit life and to take care of life. Therefore, the family has always been the "closest hospital"¹².

So let us care for one another, guide and encourage one another, and experience this as a part of our family spirituality. Life as a couple is a daily sharing in God's creative work, and each person is for the other a constant challenge from the Holy Spirit. God's love is proclaimed "through the living and concrete word whereby a man and the woman express their conjugal love"¹³. The two are thus mutual reflections of that divine love which comforts with a word, a look, a helping hand, a caress, an embrace. For this reason "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 (AL 321).

The whole life of the family is a "merciful shepherding." Each one, with his love and care, leaves a mark on the lives of others: "You are our letter of recommendation, written in our hearts..., written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God"¹⁴. This is a way of worshipping God, who has sown so many good things in others, hoping that we will do our part to make them grow (cf. AL 322).

To understand the scope of the message he wishes to convey to us, Francis invites us to contemplate our loved ones with the eyes of God and to recognize Christ present in them. This requires a freedom and openness that enable us to value their dignity.



We can be fully present to others only by giving fully of ourselves and forgetting everything else. Our loved ones merit our complete attention. Jesus is our model in this, for whenever people approached to speak with him, he would meet their gaze, directly and lovingly. No one felt overlooked in his presence, since his words and gestures conveyed the question: "What do you want me to do for you?"¹⁵.

This is what we experience in the daily life of the family. We are constantly reminded 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. This gives rise to a tenderness which can "stir in the other the joy of being loved. Tenderness is expressed in a particular way by exercising loving care in treating the limitations of the other, especially when they are evident (AL 323).

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 hospitality¹⁶, which the word of God eloquently encourages: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares"¹⁷. When a family is welcoming and reaches out to others, especially the poor and the neglected, it is "a symbol, witness and participant in the Church's motherhood" (AL 324).

Francis concludes the reflection he has proposed to us in this Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* with these words: "All of us are called to keep striving towards something greater than ourselves and our families, and

¹² *Catechesis* (10 junio 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, ed. Semanal en lengua española, 12 de junio de 2015, p.6.

¹³ JUAN PABLO II, Exhort. Ap. *Familiaris consortio* (22 noviembre 1981), 12.

¹⁴ 2 Corintios 3, 23.

¹⁵ Marcos 10, 51.

¹⁶ Cf. JUAN PABLO II, Exhort. Ap. *Familiaris consortio* (22 noviembre 1981), 44.

¹⁷ Hb 13,2.

every family must feel this constant impulse. 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 fullness of love and communion which God holds out before us” (AL 325).

I REFLECT AND SHARE:

- 1.** Do you consider that in your family the spirituality of communion, care, comfort and encouragement is lived?
- 2.** What is the place of prayer and the Eucharist in your family life?
- 3.** What image, word or thought has the reflection you have made on this Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis on love in the family left you?

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