



Pastoral for Family

"The Christian proclamation on the family is good news indeed"
AL 1

Looking to Jesus: The vocation of the family

Amoris Laetitia - Chapter III

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INTRODUCTION

Pope Francis sets the family of Jesus as an example to face the events of life and history. We try to contemplate and deepen the third chapter of *Amoris Laetitia*, which will make us fall in love of the richness of family life. Thus, in order to: first, value our own carnal and religious families; second, to continue praying for the families that suffer as a result of the continual effect of the pandemic; and lastly, to try to commit ourselves more and more in the work of accompaniment of families.

"God who has created man out of love has also called him to love, the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. Because man was created in the image and likeness of God (Cf. Gn 1:27), who is Love". (Cf. Jn 4:8-16)¹. God creates each one with a purpose, a mission, a vocation. The third chapter of the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* refers to the family as an experience of response to a call, to a vocation.

Before and in the midst of families, the first announcement must always resound, which is "the most beautiful, the greatest, the most attractive and at the same time the most necessary"² and "must occupy the center of the evangelizing activity". It is the principal announcement, "the one that must always be heard in various ways and the one that must always be announced again and again in one way or another" because "there is nothing more solid, deeper, safer, denser and wiser than that announcement" and "all Christian formation is above all the deepening of the kerygma" (AL 58).

"Fix your eyes on the one who began and consummated faith, in Jesus" (Cf. Hb 12:2). In this way the letter to the Hebrews expresses the Christian way of going through life, seeing reality as He sees it and living as He lived. Each family, making this vision their own, will be able to reorient their way of living, discerning possible ways of responding to God and growing amidst human limitations. Jesus looked at the women and men with whom he met with love and tenderness, accompanying their steps with truth, patience and mercy, announcing the demands of the Kingdom of God. Likewise, the Lord accompanies us in our interest to live and transmit the Gospel of the family today (Cf. AL 60).

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1604

² Exhort. ap. *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 noviembre 2013), 35

A. JESUS RESTORES AND FULFILLS GOD'S PLAN



Contrary to those who rejected marriage as evil, the New Testament teaches, “everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected” (1 Tim 4:4). Marriage is “a gift” from the Lord (1 Cor 7:7). This divine gift includes sexuality: “Do not refuse one another” (1 Cor 7:5) (Cf. AL 61).

Jesus, “in speaking of God’s original plan for man and woman, reaffirmed the indissoluble union between them, even stating that ‘it was for your hardness of heart that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so’ (Mt 19:8). The indissolubility of marriage – ‘what God has joined together, let no man put asunder’ (Mt 19:6) – should not be viewed as a ‘yoke’ imposed on humanity, but as a ‘gift’ granted to those who are joined in marriage. God’s indulgent love always accompanies our human journey; through grace, it heals and transforms hardened hearts, leading them back to the beginning through the way of the cross. The Gospels clearly present the example of Jesus who, proclaimed the meaning of marriage as the fullness of revelation that restores God’s original plan (cf. Mt 19:3) (AL 62).

“Jesus, who reconciled all things in himself, restored marriage and the family to their original form (cf. Mt 10:1-12). Marriage and the family have been redeemed by Christ (cf. Eph 5:21-32) and restored in the image of the Holy Trinity, the mystery from which all true love flows. The spousal covenant originating in creation and revealed in the history of salvation takes on its full meaning in Christ and his Church. Through his Church, Christ bestows on marriage and the family the grace necessary to bear witness to the love of God and to live the life of communion (Cf. AL 63).

“The example of Jesus is a paradigm for the Church... He began his public ministry with the miracle at the wedding feast of Cana (cf. Jn 2:1-11). He shared in everyday moments of friendship with the family of Lazarus and his sisters (cf. Lk 10:38) and with the family of Peter (cf. Mk 8:14). He sympathized with grieving parents and restored their children to life (cf. Mk 5:41; Lk 7:14-15). In this way he demonstrated the true meaning of mercy, which entails the restoration of the covenant³. This is clear from his conversations with the Samaritan woman (cf. Jn 1:4-30) and with the woman found in adultery (cf. Jn 8:1- 11), where the consciousness of sin is awakened by an encounter with Jesus’ gratuitous love” (Cf. AL 64).

The incarnation of the Word in a human family, in Nazareth, by its very newness changed the history of the world. We need to enter into the mystery of Jesus’ birth, into that “yes” given by Mary to the message of the angel, when the Word was conceived in her womb, as well as the “yes” of Joseph, who gave a name to Jesus and watched over Mary. We need to contemplate the joy of the shepherds before the manger, the adoration of the Magi and the flight into Egypt, in which Jesus shares his people’s experience of exile, persecution and humiliation. We need to contemplate the religious expectation of Zechariah and his joy at the birth of John the Baptist, the fulfilment of the promise made known to Simeon and Anna in the Temple and the marvel of the teachers of the Law who listened to the wisdom of the child Jesus.

We then need to peer into those thirty long years when Jesus earned his keep by the work of his hands, reciting the traditional prayers and expressions of his people’s faith and coming to know that ancestral faith until he made it bear fruit in the mystery of the Kingdom. This is the mystery of Christmas and the secret of Nazareth, exuding the beauty of family life! It was this that so fascinated Francis of Assisi, Theresa of the Child Jesus and Charles de Foucauld, and continues to fill Christian families with hope and joy (AL 65).

“The covenant of love and fidelity lived by the Holy Family of Nazareth illuminates the principle which gives shape to every family, and enables it better to face the vicissitudes of life and history. On this basis, every family, despite its weaknesses, can become a light in the darkness of the world. “Nazareth teaches us the meaning of family life,

³ Cf. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 4

its loving communion, its simple and austere beauty, its sacred and inviolable character. May it teach how sweet and irreplaceable is its training, how fundamental and incomparable its role in the social order”⁴ (Cf. AL 66).

B. THE FAMILY IN THE DOCUMENTS OF THE CHURCH

The Second Vatican Council, in its Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, was concerned “to promote the dignity of marriage and the family⁵. The Constitution “defined marriage as a community of life and love (cf. 48), placing love at the centre of the family... “True love between husband and wife” (49) involves mutual self-giving, includes and integrates the sexual and affective dimensions, in accordance with God’s plan (Cf. 48-49)”. The conciliar document also emphasizes “the grounding of the spouses in Christ. Christ the Lord ‘makes himself present to the Christian spouses in the sacrament of marriage’ and remains with them. In the incarnation, he assumes human love, purifies it and brings it to fulfilment. By his Spirit, he gives spouses the capacity to live that love, permeating every part of their lives of faith, hope and charity. In this way, the spouses are consecrated and by means of a special grace build up the Body of Christ and form a domestic church⁶, so that the Church, in order fully to understand her mystery, looks to the Christian family, which manifests her in a real way”⁷ (Cf. AL 67).



“Blessed Paul VI, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, further developed the Church’s teaching on marriage and the family. In a particular way, with the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* he brought out the intrinsic bond between conjugal love and the generation of life: ‘Married love requires of husband and wife the full awareness of their obligations in the matter of responsible parenthood, which today, rightly enough, is much insisted upon, but which at the same time must be rightly understood... The exercise of responsible parenthood requires that husband and wife, keeping a right order of priorities, recognize their own duties towards God, themselves, their families and human society’ (nº. 10). In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Paul VI highlighted the relationship between the family and the Church”⁸ (Cf. AL 68).

“Saint John Paul II devoted special attention to the family in his catecheses on human love, in his Letter to Families *Gratissimam Sane* and particularly in his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*. In these documents, the Pope defined the family as “the way of the Church”. He also offered a general vision of the vocation of men and women to love, and proposed basic guidelines for the pastoral care of the family and for the role of the family in society. In particular, by treating conjugal love⁹, he described how spouses, in their mutual love, receive the gift of the Spirit of Christ and live their call to holiness” (Cf. AL 69).

“Pope Benedict XVI, in his Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, returned to the topic of the truth of the love of man and woman, which is fully illuminated only in the love of the crucified Christ¹⁰. He stressed that “marriage based on an exclusive and definitive love becomes an icon of the relationship between God and his people, and vice versa. God’s way of loving becomes the measure of human love” (11). Moreover, in the Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, he highlighted the importance of love as a principle of life in society¹¹, a place where we learn the experience of the common good” (AL 70).

⁴ Paul VI, Address in Nazareth, 5 January 1964

⁵ Cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 47-52

⁶ Cf. *Lumen gentium*, 11

⁷ *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 17

⁸ *Relación final* 2015, 43

⁹ Cf. *Familiaris consortio*, 13

¹⁰ Cf. *Deus caritas est*, 2

¹¹ Cf. *Encíclica Caritas in veritate*, 44

C. THE SACRAMENT OF MATRIMONY



The sacrament is a gift given for the sanctification and salvation of the spouses, since “their mutual belonging is a real representation, through the sacramental sign, of the same relationship between Christ and the Church. The married couple are therefore a permanent reminder for the Church of what took place on the cross; they are for one another and for their children witnesses of the salvation in which they share through the sacrament”¹². Marriage is a vocation, inasmuch as it is a response to a specific call to experience conjugal love as an imperfect sign of the love between Christ and the Church. Consequently, the decision to marry and

to have a family ought to be the fruit of a process of vocational discernment (Cf. AL 72).

“Mutual self-giving in the sacrament of matrimony is grounded in the grace of baptism, which establishes the foundational covenant of every person with Christ in the Church. In accepting each other, and with Christ’s grace, the engaged couple promise each other total selfgiving, faithfulness and openness to new life. The couple recognizes these elements as constitutive of marriage, gifts offered to them by God, and take seriously their mutual commitment, in God’s name and in the presence of the Church. Faith thus makes it possible for them to assume the goods of marriage as commitments that can be better kept through the help of the grace of the sacrament... Consequently, the Church looks to married couples as the heart of the entire family, which, in turn, looks to Jesus”¹³.

The sacrament is not a “thing” or a “power”, for in it Christ himself “now encounters Christian spouses”¹⁴. He dwells with them, gives them the strength to take up their crosses and so follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another’s burdens”. Christian marriage is a sign of how much Christ loved his Church in the covenant sealed on the cross, yet it also makes that love present in the communion of the spouses. By becoming one flesh, they embody the espousal of our human nature by the Son of God. That is why “in the joys of their love and family life, he gives them here on earth a foretaste of the wedding feast of the Lamb”. Even though the analogy between the human couple of husband and wife, and that of Christ and his Church, is “imperfect”, it inspires us to beg the Lord to bestow on every married couple an outpouring of his divine love (Cf. AL 73).

Sexual union, lovingly experienced and sanctified by the sacrament, is in turn a path of growth in the life of grace for the couple. It is the “nuptial mystery”. The meaning and value of their physical union is expressed in the words of consent, in which they accepted and offered themselves each to the other, in order to share their lives completely. Those words give meaning to the sexual relationship and free it from ambiguity. More generally, the common life of husband and wife, the entire network of relations that they build with their children and the world around them will be steeped in and strengthened by the grace of the sacrament. For the sacrament of marriage flows from the incarnation and the paschal mystery, whereby God showed the fullness of his love for humanity by becoming one with us. Neither of the spouses will be alone in facing whatever challenges may come their way. Both are called to respond to God’s gift with commitment, creativity, perseverance and daily effort. They can always invoke the assistance of the Holy Spirit who consecrated their union, so that his grace may be felt in every new situation that they encounter (Cf. AL 74).

In the Church’s Latin tradition, the ministers of the sacrament of marriage are the man and the woman who marry; by manifesting their consent and expressing it physically, they receive a great gift. Their consent and their bodily union are the divinely appointed means whereby they become “one flesh”. By their baptismal consecration, they were enabled to join in marriage as the Lord’s ministers and thus to respond to God’s call.

¹² Cf. *Familiaris consortio* 13

¹³ *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 21

¹⁴ Cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 48

Hence, when two non-Christian spouses receive baptism, they need not renew their marriage vows; they need simply not reject them, since by the reception of baptism their union automatically becomes sacramental. Canon Law also recognizes the validity of certain unions celebrated without the presence of an ordained minister. The natural order has been so imbued with the redemptive grace of Jesus that “a valid matrimonial contract cannot exist between the baptized without it being by that fact a sacrament”. The Church can require that the wedding be celebrated publicly, with the presence of witnesses and other conditions that have varied over the course of time, but this does not detract from the fact that the couples who marry are the ministers of the sacrament. Nor does it affect the centrality of the consent given by the man and the woman, which of itself establishes the sacramental bond. This having been said, there is a need for further reflection on God’s action in the marriage rite; this is clearly manifested in the Oriental Churches through the importance of the blessing that the couple receive as a sign of the gift of the Spirit (AL 75).

D. SEEDS OF THE WORD AND IMPERFECT SITUATIONS

“The Gospel of the family also nourishes seeds that are still waiting to grow, and serves as the basis for caring for those plants that are wilting and must not be neglected.” Thus, building on the gift of Christ in the sacrament, married couples “may be led patiently further on in order to achieve a deeper grasp and a fuller integration of this mystery in their lives”¹⁵ (Cf. AL 76).

Natural marriage, therefore, is fully understood in the light of its fulfilment in the sacrament of Matrimony: only in contemplating Christ does a person come to know the deepest truth about human relationships. ‘Only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. Christ, the new Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to himself and makes his supreme calling clear’¹⁶. It is particularly helpful to understand in a Christocentric key. The good of the spouses¹⁷, which includes unity, openness to life, fidelity, indissolubility and, within Christian marriage, mutual support on the path towards complete friendship with the Lord. “Discernment of the presence of ‘seeds of the Word’ in other cultures¹⁸ can also apply to the reality of marriage and the family. In addition to true natural marriage, positive elements exist in the forms of marriage found in other religious traditions”, even if, at times, obscurely. We can readily say that “anyone who wants to bring into this world a family which teaches children to be excited by every gesture aimed at overcoming evil, a family which shows that the Spirit is alive and at work, will encounter our gratitude and our appreciation. Whatever the people, religion or region to which they belong”¹⁹ (Cf. AL 77).

“The light of Christ enlightens every person (Cf. Jn 1:9)²⁰. Seeing things with the eyes of Christ inspires the Church’s pastoral care for the faithful who are living together, or are only married civilly, or are divorced and remarried. Following this divine pedagogy, the Church turns with love to those who participate in her life in an imperfect manner: she seeks the grace of conversion for them; she encourages them to do good, to take loving care of each other and to serve the community in which they live and work... When a couple in an irregular union attains a noteworthy stability through a public bond – and is characterized by deep affection, responsibility towards the children and the ability to overcome trials – this can be seen as an opportunity, where possible, to lead them to celebrate the sacrament of Matrimony”²¹ (AL 78).

“When faced with difficult situations and wounded families, it is always necessary to recall this general principle: ‘Pastors must know that, for the sake of truth, they are obliged to exercise careful discernment of situations’²². The degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases and factors may exist which limit the ability to make a

¹⁵ Familiaris consortio 9

¹⁶ Gaudium et Spes, 22

¹⁷ Bonum coniugum

¹⁸ Cf. Ad Gentes 11

¹⁹ Cf. Homilía en la Santa Misa de clausura del VIII Encuentro Mundial de las Familias en Filadelfia (27 septiembre 2015)

²⁰ Cf. Gaudium et Spes, 22

²¹ Relación final 2015, 53-54

²² Familiaris Consortio, 84

decision. Therefore, while clearly stating the Church's teaching, pastors are to avoid judgements 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" (AL 79).

E. THE TRANSMISSION OF LIFE AND THE REARING OF CHILDREN

Marriage is firstly an "intimate partnership of life and love"²³ which is a good for the spouses themselves, while sexuality is "ordered to the conjugal love of man and woman"²⁴ follows that "spouses to whom God has not granted children can have a conjugal life full of meaning, in both human and Christian terms"²⁵. Nonetheless, the conjugal union is ordered to procreation "by its very nature"²⁶. The child who is born "does not come from outside as something added on to the mutual love of the spouses, but springs from the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and fulfilment"²⁷. He or she does not appear at the end of a process, but is present from the beginning of love as an essential feature, one that cannot be denied without disfiguring that love itself. From the outset, love refuses every impulse to close in on itself; it is open to a fruitfulness that draws it beyond itself. Hence no genital act of husband and wife can refuse this meaning, even when for various reasons it may not always in fact beget a new life (AL 80).



A child deserves to be born of that love, and not by any other means, for "he or she is not something owed to one, but is a gift"²⁸, which is "the fruit of the specific act of the conjugal love of the parents"²⁹. This is the case because, "according to the order of creation, conjugal love between a man and a woman, and the transmission of life are ordered to each other (Cf. Gen 1:27-28). Thus the Creator made man and woman share in the work of his creation and, at the same time, made them instruments of his love, entrusting to them the responsibility for the future of mankind, through the transmission of human life" (AL 81).

The Synod Fathers stated that "the growth of a mentality that would reduce the generation of human life to one variable of an individual's or a couple's plans is clearly evident". The Church's teaching is meant to "help couples to experience in a complete, harmonious and conscious way their communion as husband and wife, together with their responsibility for procreating life. We need to return to the message of the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* of Blessed Pope Paul VI, which highlights the need to respect the dignity of the person in morally assessing methods of regulating birth... The choice of adoption or foster parenting can also express that fruitfulness which is a characteristic of married life". With special gratitude the Church "supports families who accept, raise and surround with affection children with various disabilities" (Cf. AL 82).

Here I feel it urgent to state that, if the family is the sanctuary of life, the place where life is conceived and cared for, it is a horrendous contradiction when it becomes a place where life is rejected and destroyed. So great is the value of a human life, and so inalienable the right to life of an innocent child growing in the mother's womb, that no alleged right to one's own body can justify a decision to terminate that life, which is an end in itself and which can never be considered the "property" of another human being. The family protects human life in all its stages, including its last. Consequently, "those who work in healthcare facilities are reminded of the moral duty of conscientious objection. Similarly, the Church not only feels the urgency to assert the right to a natural death, without aggressive treatment and euthanasia", but likewise "firmly rejects the death penalty" (AL 83).

²³ *Gaudium et spes*, 48

²⁴ *Catecismo de la Iglesia Católica*, 2360

²⁵ *Catecismo de la Iglesia Católica*, 1654

²⁶ *Gaudium et spes*, 48

²⁷ *Catecismo de la Iglesia Católica*, 2366

²⁸ *Catecismo de la Iglesia Católica*, 2378

²⁹ *Donum vitae* 97



The Synod Fathers also wished to emphasize that “one of the fundamental challenges facing families today is undoubtedly that of raising children, made all the more difficult and complex by today’s cultural reality and the powerful influence of the media”. “The Church assumes a valuable role in supporting families, starting with Christian initiation, through welcoming communities”. At the same time I feel it important to reiterate that the

overall education of children is a “most serious duty” and at the same time a “primary right” of parents. This is not just a task or a burden, but an essential and inalienable right that parents are called to defend and of which no one may claim to deprive them. The State offers educational programmes in a subsidiary way, supporting the parents in their indeclinable role; 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. Schools do not replace parents, but complement them. This is a basic principle: “all other participants in the process of education are only able to carry out their responsibilities in the name of the parents, with their consent and, to a certain degree, with their authorization”. Still, “a rift has opened up between the family and society, between family and the school; the educational pact today has been broken and thus the educational alliance between society and the family is in crisis” (AL 84).

The Church is called to cooperate with parents through suitable pastoral initiatives, assisting them in the fulfilment of their educational mission. She must always do this by helping them to appreciate their proper role and to realize that by their reception of the sacrament of marriage they become ministers of their children’s education. In educating them, they build up the Church, and in so doing, they accept a God given vocation (AL 85).

F. THE FAMILY AND THE CHURCH

“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. Within the family”³⁰ which could be called a domestic church”, individuals enter upon an ecclesial experience of communion among persons, which reflects, through grace, the mystery of the Holy Trinity. “Here one learns endurance and the joy of work, fraternal love, generous – even repeated – forgiveness, and above all divine worship in prayer and the offering of one’s life”³¹ (AL 86).

The Church is a family of families, constantly enriched by the lives of all those domestic churches. “In virtue of the sacrament of matrimony, every family becomes, in effect, a good for the Church. From this standpoint, reflecting on the interplay between the family and the Church will prove a precious gift for the Church in our time. The Church is good for the family, and the family is good for the Church. The safeguarding of the Lord’s gift in the sacrament of matrimony is a concern not only of individual families but of the entire Christian community” (AL 87).

The experience of love in families is a perennial source of strength for the life of the Church. “The unitive end of marriage is a constant summons to make this love grow and deepen. Through their union in love, the couple experiences the beauty of fatherhood and motherhood, and shares plans, trials, expectations and concerns; they learn care for one another and mutual forgiveness. In this love, they celebrate their happy moments and support each other in the difficult passages of their life together... The beauty of this mutual, gratuitous gift, the joy which comes from a life that is born and the loving care of all family members – from toddlers to seniors – are just a

³⁰ Lumen gentium, 11

³¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1657

few of the fruits which make the response to the vocation of the family unique and irreplaceable”, both for the Church and for society as a whole (AL 88).

PRAYER

The gaze fixed in Jesus

Lord, we want to be inspired by you,
and be transfigured to the light of love and tenderness
that you lived in Nazareth.

We want to see you alive and present
in our history as a family.

Therefore, we invoke the fire of your Spirit
on our family
and on all the families in the world.

Come, Lord Jesus!

Send your Spirit
and renew our families.



I ASK MYSELF AND SHARE:

1. What does it mean marriage as a vocation?
2. What newness can we found in this third chapter of Amoris Laetitia?
3. Share the conclusions you have reached.

Sr. Mercedes Velásquez Zapata, TC