



Pastoral for Family

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

Love in Marriage

Amoris Laetitia - Chapter IV
First and Second Part

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B. GROWING IN CONJUGAL LOVE

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapters and as Pope Francis has affirmed many times, it has been confirmed that for God, man has been created by and for love (cf. Jn 15). Throughout Chapter IV of the Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, we discover that the only purpose of the Church, through the sacrament of marriage and other ways of accompanying couples, is, without a doubt, to consolidate, strengthen, increase and animate the love of the spouses, starting from the *Love* that is God, as the Apostle Paul expresses it well in the first letter to the Corinthians: "If I do not have love, I am nothing" (1 Co 13, 2).

A. OUR DAILY LOVE

Jesus said that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field; it is a very small seed, almost smaller than any seed, but when it grows it becomes a tree and can even nest the birds of the sky (cf. Mt 13, 31-32). The same can be said of love. It is a seed that God has placed in the heart of every human being but that has to be cared for and cultivated so that it grows like a lush tree and can give life to others. Saint Paul explains it in a quite concrete way through the well-known Hymn of Love or Hymn of Charity:

“Love is patient, love is kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Co 13:4-7). It is in itself a whole life project; a project that has to be lived day by day in the home among its members. It is extremely important to emphasize that for a better understanding of the text it is necessary to unravel its meaning, starting not only from what each of these expressions means today in our society, in our culture and our time, but also by rediscovering the deep meaning of each Greek expression, and try to apply it to the concrete reality of each family (Cf. AL 90).

Patience



Its meaning is clarified by the Greek translation of the Old Testament, where we read that God is "slow to anger" (Ex 34:6; Num 14:18); when his behavior, in a certain way, baffles the human being by the exaggerated exercise of mercy. We find this quality in the God of the Covenant, that inspires the Christian life in all its dimensions; even more so within family life. The patience spoken of in Paul's text, has to do with that which is glimpsed when couples do not allow themselves to be carried away by the impulses marked by aggressiveness and avoid at all costs that the family becomes a battlefield (Cf. AL 91).

Being patient does not mean enduring mistreatment, tolerating humiliation and abuse, much less allowing our dignity as human beings and as children of God to be stepped on. No. To be patient is to know that we are, people of relationships, that the world cannot revolve around my own interests – which are sometimes selfish-; it means recognizing that the other is not perfect and neither am I, and that it is necessary to *"let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice"* (Eph 4:31), because 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" (Cf. AL 92).

Attitude of service

In this context, the Greek Word *jrestós* appears which refers not only to the good that a person can have, but also specifies the way in which that goodness is shown: in deeds. The attitude of service, or helpful love, is the result of the aforementioned patience, that is, it becomes palpable and "accessible" from a dynamic, creative, life-giving interaction with others.

Pope Francis insists on unraveling the fullest meaning of the verb "to love" from its Hebrew roots: to do good. Saint Ignatius of Loyola, in the Spiritual Exercises, says that "love must be shown more in deeds than by words"¹, that is, a love like that of Jesus: agape, which always gives itself to the other, without measure, without expecting anything in return... that is how conjugal love should also be (Cf. AL 93-94).

Healing envy

True love joyfully celebrates the achievement of others, life, success, happiness of the other. Envy is a form of sadness provoked by another's prosperity; it shows that we are not concerned for the happiness of others but only with our own well-being. Living this way, how can we be interested in the happiness of others?

I love this person, and I see him or her with the eyes of God, who gives us everything "for our enjoyment" (1 Tim 6:17). As a result, I feel a deep sense of happiness and peace. This same deeply rooted love also leads me to reject the injustice whereby some possess too much and others too little. It moves me to find ways of helping society's outcasts to find a modicum of joy. That is not envy, but the desire for equality (Cf. AL 95-96).

Without boasting and inflating oneself

Whoever loves is not arrogant or pretends greatness; those who love not only refrain from speaking too much about themselves, but are focused on others; they do not need to be the center of attention. The Greek word *physioutai* indicates that love does not "puffed up" before others, but is simply what it is, realistic. An arrogant person not only strives to make his qualities stand out above others, but also loses his sense of reality because he sees himself as greater than he/she is... and no one is greater than anyone; at least not in that sense. According to the Gospel of Jesus, what makes us really great is the love that understands, cares for and protects the weak (Jn 15: 13-14) (Cf. AL 97).

It is important for Christians to show their love by the way they treat family members who are less knowledgeable

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about the faith, weak or less sure in their convictions. At times the opposite occurs: the supposedly mature believers within the family become unbearably arrogant. The attitude of humility appears here as something that is part of love, because in order to understand, forgive and serve others from the heart, our pride has to be healed and our humility must increase. Jesus told his disciples that in a world where power prevails, each tries to dominate the other, but “it shall not be so among you” (Mt 20:26) (Cf. AL 98).

Kindness

To love is also to be kind, and there the word *asjemonéi* makes sense. It indicates that love is not rude or impolite; it is not harsh. It is not something that a Christian may accept or reject. As an essential requirement of love, “every human being is bound to live agreeably with those around him”².

Kindness leads to a true encounter with the other. A kind look helps us to see beyond our own limitations, to be patient and to cooperate with others, despite our differences. Loving kindness builds bonds, cultivates relationships, creates new networks of integration and knits a firm social fabric, like Jesus. Those who love are capable of speaking words of comfort, strength, consolation, and encouragement; avoid words that demean, sadden, anger or show scorn... Let's see, for example, some words that Jesus said to people: "Take heart, son!" (Mt 9,2), "Great is your faith!" (Mt 15:28), "Arise!" (Mk 5,41), "Go in peace" (Lk 7,50), "Neither do I condemn you" (Jn 8, 11), among others. In our families, we must learn to imitate Jesus' own gentleness in our way of speaking to one another (Cf. AL 99-100).



Detachment

We have repeatedly said that to love another we must first love ourselves. Paul's hymn to love, however, states that love “does not seek its own interest”, nor “seek what is its own”. This same idea is expressed in another text: “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil 2:4). The Bible makes it clear that 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: “If a man is mean to himself, to whom will he be generous? No one is meaner than the man who is grudging to himself” (Sir 14:5-6).

Saint Thomas Aquinas explains that “it is more proper to charity to desire to love than to desire to be loved”³; indeed, “mothers, who are those who love the most, seek to love more than to be loved”⁴. Consequently, love can transcend and overflow the demands of justice, “expecting nothing in return” (Lk 6:35), and the greatest of love can lead to “laying down one's life” for another (Cf. Jn 15:13) (Cf. AL 101-102).

Without interior violence

Now another word appears —*paroxýnetai*—, which continues to illuminate the text. It is an interior indignation caused by something from without. It is a violent reaction within, of a hidden irritation that sets us on edge where others are concerned, as if they were troublesome or threatening and thus to be avoided. To nurture such interior hostility helps no one. It only causes hurt and alienation. Indignation is only healthy when it makes us react to a grave injustice; when it permeates our attitude towards others it is harmful.

One thing is to feel the force of the aggressiveness that springs up and to indulge into it is, to let it become a permanent attitude is another thing. Therefore, you should never end the day without making peace in the family. Pope Francis offers us a *tip* to know how to make peace. Kneel down? No! Just a small gesture, something

² Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae II-II, q. 114, a. 2, ad 1.

³ Summa Theologiae II-II, q. 27, a. 1, ad 2.

⁴ Summa Theologiae II-II, q. 27, a. 1.

small, and family harmony returns. A caress is enough, without words. But never end the day as a family without making up. If we have to fight an evil, let's do it, but always say NO to inner violence (Cf. AL 103-104).

Forgiveness



Once we allow ill will to take root in our hearts, it leads to deep resentment. Forgiveness, on the other hand, is a positive attitude that seeks to understand other people's weaknesses and to excuse them. As Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk. 23:34). Yet we keep looking for more and more faults, imagining greater evils, presuming all kinds of bad intentions, and so resentment grows and deepens. Thus, every mistake or lapse on the part of a spouse can harm the bond of love and the stability of the family. Be careful!

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. There is no family that does not know how selfishness, discord, tension and conflict violently attack and at times mortally wound its own communion: hence there arise the many and varied forms of division in family life"⁵.

Today we recognize that being able to forgive others implies the liberating experience of understanding and forgiving ourselves... It is necessary to pray with our own history, accept ourselves, know how to live with our own limitations, and even forgive ourselves, in order to have that same attitude with the rest. 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 (Cf. AL 105-108).

Rejoices with others

The expression *jairi epi te adikía* refers to the toxic attitude of those who rejoice at seeing an injustice done to others. The following phrase expresses its opposite: *sygcháirei te aletheía*: "it rejoices in the right". In other words, we rejoice at the good of others when we see their dignity and value their abilities and good works. This is impossible for those who must always be comparing and competing, even with their spouse, so that they secretly rejoice in their failures.

When a loving person can do good for others, or sees that others are happy, they themselves live happily and in this way give glory to God, for "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor 9:7). 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 (Cf. AL 109-110).

Bears all things

Paul's list ends with four phrases containing the words "all things". Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Here we see clearly the countercultural power of a love that is able to face whatever might threaten it.

To bear all things *-panta stegei-* has to do with the use of the tongue and can mean "holding one's peace" about what may be wrong with another person. Being willing to speak ill of another person is a way of asserting ourselves, venting resentment and envy without concern for the harm we may do. True love does not kill; we have already said it several times and, therefore, cherish the good name of others, with delicacy and respect.

Married couples joined by love speak well of each other; they try to show their spouse's good side, not their weakness and faults. In any event, they keep silent rather than speak ill of them. This is not merely a way of

⁵ Cf. John Paul II, Exhort. Ap. Familiaris Consortio, November 22, 1981, 21: AAS 74 (1982).

acting in front of others; it springs from an interior attitude. Far from ingenuously claiming not to see the problems and weaknesses of others... It recognizes that these failings are a part of a bigger picture; they are not the totality of who the other is. To fix only at them, would be to limit the greatness of that other who shares life with me and who is a human. Love coexists with imperfection, “bears all things” and can hold its peace before the limitations of the loved one (Cf. AL 111-113).

Trust, believes all things

Panta pisteuei, “believes all things”, here “belief” is not to be taken in its strict theological meaning, but more in the sense of what we mean by “trust”. This goes beyond simply presuming that the other is not lying or cheating, but cultivating trust which makes possible a relationship to be free. It means we do not have to control the other person, to follow their every step lest they escape our grip. Love trusts, it sets free, it does not try to control, possess and dominate everything. In this way, the spouses then share with one another the joy of all they have received and learned outside the family circle. An environment where there is trust and appreciation of being in its essence is a sure bridge for sincerity and transparency, thus, propitiating an authentic life and without hiding anything (Cf. AL 114-115).



Hopes all things

Panta elpizei, speaks of the hope of one who knows that others can change. It always hopes that a maturation is possible, an unexpected radiation of beauty, that the most hidden potentialities of other will germinate one day. This does not mean that everything will change in this life. It does involve realizing that, though things may not always turn out as we wish, God may well make crooked lines straight and draw some good from the evil we endure in this world.

Here hope comes most fully into its own, for it embraces the certainty of life after death. Each person, with all his or her failings, is called to the fullness of life in heaven. There, fully transformed by Christ’s resurrection, every weakness, darkness and infirmity will pass away. There the person’s true being will shine forth in all its goodness and beauty (Cf. AL 116-117).

Endures all things

Panta hypoménei means that it endures with a positive spirit all setbacks. It stands firm in hostile surroundings. This “endurance” involves not only the ability to tolerate certain aggravations, but to bet sincerely and radically on love despite of everything, even when the whole context invites something else. It is an irrepressible commitment to goodness. To endure implies looking at the face of each man and discovering within him the “image of God”. It is, then, when we open the door that leads us to love him “in spite of”. No matter what he does, you see God’s image there.

Another way that you love your enemy is this: when the opportunity presents itself for you to defeat your enemy that is the time which you must not do it... When you rise to the level of love, of its great beauty and power, you seek only to defeat evil systems. The strong person is the person who can cut off the chain of hate, the chain of evil, it is capable 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. In spite of everything it does not mean enduring evil. There are persons who opt “to separate from their spouse for their own protection from physical violence yet, because of their enduring conjugal love that goes beyond sentiments, still try to help them, even by enlisting others, in their moments of illness, suffering or trial. Here too we see a love that never gives up” (Cf. AL 118-119).

B. GROWING IN CONJUGAL LOVE

Our reflection on saint Paul's hymn to love has prepared us to discuss conjugal love. This is the love between husband and wife, a love sanctified, enriched and illuminated by the grace of the sacrament of marriage. It is an "affective union", spiritual and sacrificial, which combines the warmth of friendship and erotic passion, and endures long after emotions and passion subside.



Pope Pius XI taught that this love permeates the duties of married life and enjoys pride of place⁶. Infused by the Holy Spirit, this powerful love is a reflection of the unbroken covenant between Christ and humanity that culminated in his self-sacrifice on the cross. "The Spirit which the Lord pours forth gives a new heart and renders man and woman capable of loving one another as Christ loved us. Conjugal love reaches that fullness to which it is interiorly ordained: conjugal charity"⁷ (Cf. AL 120).

Pope Francis insists in affirming that "when a man and a woman celebrate the sacrament of marriage, God is, as it were, 'mirrored' in them; he impresses in them his own features and the indelible character of his love, because communion reigns in them. Indeed, God is also communion: the three persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit live eternally in perfect unity. And this is precisely the mystery of marriage: God makes of the two spouses one single existence" (Gn 2: 22-24) (Cf. AL 121).

In synthesis, the love that resembles that of Jesus - in its surrender, above all - is the only one capable of consolidating the bonds not only between two people who love each other, but also in each member of the family.

I ASK MYSELF AND SHARE:

1. Do I really consider the experience of a love that permits gratuity and giving until the end possible?
2. As a Capuchin Tertiary Sister of the Holy Family, what is my contribution to couples who have difficulties to live a selfless, generous and oblation love?
3. How can I live in the community each part of the Hymn to Love, which saint Paul speaks to us?

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⁶ Carta enc. Casti connubii (31 diciembre 1930): AAS 22 (1930), 547-548).

⁷ Juan Pablo II, Exhort. ap. Familiaris consortio (22 noviembre 1981), 13: AAS 74 (1982), 94.