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Religious Questions Text

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CHAPTER FOUR

LOVE IN MARRIAGE

89. All that has been said so far would be insufficient to express the Gospel of marriage and the family, were we not also to *speak of love*. For we cannot encourage a path of fidelity and mutual self-giving without encouraging the growth, strengthening and deepening of conjugal and family love. Indeed, the grace of the sacrament of marriage is intended before all else “to perfect the couple’s love”.¹⁰⁴ Here too we can say that, “even if I have faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing” (*1 Cor 13:2-3*). The word “love”, however, is commonly used and often misused.¹⁰⁵

Our daily love

90. In a lyrical passage of Saint Paul, we see some of the features of true love:

“Love is patient,
love is kind;

¹⁰⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1641.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est* (25 December 2005), 2: AAS 98 (2006), 218.

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 Cor 13:4-7).

Love is experienced and nurtured in the daily life of couples and their children. It is helpful to think more deeply about the meaning of this Pauline text and its relevance for the concrete situation of every family.

Love is patient

91. The first word used is *makrothyméi*. This does not simply have to do with “enduring all things”, because we find that idea expressed at the end of the seventh verse. 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*). It refers, then, to the quality of one who does not act on impulse and avoids giving offense. We find this quality in the God of the Covenant, who calls us to imitate him also within the life of the family. Saint Paul’s texts using this word need to be read in the light of the Book of Wisdom (cf. 11:23; 12:2, 15-18), which extols God’s

restraint, as leaving open the possibility of repentance, yet insists on his power, as revealed in his acts of mercy. God's "patience", shown in his mercy towards sinners, is a sign of his real power.

92. Being patient does not mean letting ourselves be constantly mistreated, tolerating physical aggression or allowing other people to use us. We encounter problems whenever we think that relationships or people ought to be perfect, or when we put ourselves at the centre and expect things to turn out our way. Then everything makes us impatient, everything makes us react aggressively. Unless we cultivate patience, we will always find excuses for responding angrily. We will end up incapable of living together, antisocial, unable to control our impulses, and our families will become battlegrounds. That is why the word of God tells us: "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you, with all malice" (*Eph 4:31*). Patience takes root when I recognize that other people also have a right to live in this world, just as they are. It does not matter if they hold me back, if they unsettle my plans, or annoy me by the way they act or think, or if they are not everything I want them to be. 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.

Love is at the service of others

93. The next word that Paul uses is *chrestéuetai*. The word is used only here in the entire Bible. It is derived from *chrestós*: a good person, one who shows his goodness by his deeds. Here, in strict parallelism with the preceding verb, it serves as a complement. Paul wants to make it clear that “patience” is not a completely passive attitude, but one accompanied by activity, by a dynamic and creative interaction with others. The word indicates that love benefits and helps others. For this reason it is translated as “kind”; love is ever ready to be of assistance.

94. Throughout the text, it is clear that Paul wants to stress that love is more than a mere feeling. Rather, it should be understood along the lines of the Hebrew verb “to love”; it is “to do good”. As Saint Ignatius of Loyola said, “Love is shown more by deeds than by words”.¹⁰⁶ It thus shows its fruitfulness and allows us to experience the happiness of giving, the nobility and grandeur of spending ourselves unstintingly, without asking to be repaid, purely for the pleasure of giving and serving.

Love is not jealous

95. Saint Paul goes on to reject as contrary to love an attitude expressed by the verb *zelói* – to be

¹⁰⁶ *Spiritual Exercises*, Contemplation to Attain Love (230).

jealous or envious. This means that love has no room for discomfiture at another person's good fortune (cf. *Acts* 7:9; 17:5). 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 wellbeing. Whereas love makes us rise above ourselves, envy closes us in on ourselves. True love values the other person's achievements. It does not see him or her as a threat. It frees us from the sour taste of envy. It recognizes that everyone has different gifts and a unique path in life. So it strives to discover its own road to happiness, while allowing others to find theirs.

96. In a word, love means fulfilling the last two commandments of God's Law: "You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbour's" (*Ex* 20:17). Love inspires a sincere esteem for every human being and the recognition of his or her own right to happiness. 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.

Love is not boastful

97. The following word, *perpereúetai*, denotes vainglory, the need to be haughty, pedantic and somewhat pushy. Those who love not only refrain from speaking too much about themselves, but are focused on others; they do not need to be the centre of attention. The word that comes next – *physioútai* – is similar, indicating that love is not arrogant. Literally, it means that we do not become “puffed up” before others. It also points to something more subtle: an obsession with showing off and a loss of a sense of reality. Such people think that, because they are more “spiritual” or “wise”, they are more important than they really are. Paul uses this verb on other occasions, as when he says that “knowledge puffs up”, whereas “love builds up” (*1 Cor 8:1*). Some think that they are important because they are more knowledgeable than others; they want to lord it over them. Yet what really makes us important is a love that understands, shows concern, and embraces the weak. Elsewhere the word is used to criticize those who are “inflated” with their own importance (cf. *1 Cor 4:18*) but in fact are filled more with empty words than the real “power” of the Spirit (cf. *1 Cor 4:19*).

98. It is important for Christians to show their love by the way they treat family members who are less knowledgeable 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. Love, on the other hand, is marked by humility; if we are 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). The inner logic of Christian love is not about importance and power; rather, “whoever would be first among you must be your slave” (*Mt* 20:27). In family life, the logic of domination and competition about who is the most intelligent or powerful destroys love. Saint Peter’s admonition also applies to the family: “Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility towards one another, for ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble’” (*1 Pet* 5:5).

Love is not rude

99. To love is also to be gentle and thoughtful, and this is conveyed by the next word, *aschemonéi*. It indicates that love is not rude or impolite; it is not harsh. Its actions, words and gestures are pleasing and not abrasive or rigid. Love abhors making others suffer. Courtesy “is a school of sensitivity and disinterestedness” which requires a person “to develop his or her mind and feelings, learning how to listen, to speak and, at certain times, to keep quiet”.¹⁰⁷ It is not something that a

¹⁰⁷ Octavio Paz, *La llama doble*, Barcelona, 1993, 35.

Christian may accept or reject. As an essential requirement of love, “every human being is bound to live agreeably with those around him”.¹⁰⁸ Every day, “entering into the life of another, even when that person already has a part to play in our life, demands the sensitivity and restraint which can renew trust and respect. Indeed, the deeper love is, the more it calls for respect for the other’s freedom and the ability to wait until the other opens the door to his or her heart”.¹⁰⁹

100. To be open to a genuine encounter with others, “a kind look” is essential. This is incompatible with a negative attitude that readily points out other people’s shortcomings while overlooking one’s own. 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. In this way, it grows ever stronger, for without a sense of belonging we cannot sustain a commitment to others; we end up seeking our convenience alone and life in common becomes impossible. Antisocial persons think that others exist only for the satisfaction of their own needs. Consequently, there is no room for the gentleness of love and its

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 114, art. 2, ad 1.

¹⁰⁹ Catechesis (13 May 2005): *L’Osservatore Romano*, 14 May 2015, p. 8.

expression. Those who love are capable of speaking words of comfort, strength, consolation, and encouragement. These were the words that Jesus himself spoke: “Take heart, my son!” (*Mt* 9:2); “Great is your faith!” (*Mt* 15:28); “Arise!” (*Mk* 5:41); “Go in peace” (*Lk* 7:50); “Be not afraid” (*Mt* 14:27). These are not words that demean, sadden, anger or show scorn. In our families, we must learn to imitate Jesus’ own gentleness in our way of speaking to one another.

Love is generous

101. 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).

102. Saint Thomas Aquinas explains that “it is more proper to charity to desire to love than

to desire to be loved”;¹¹⁰ indeed, “mothers, who are those who love the most, seek to love more than to be loved”.¹¹¹ Consequently, love can transcend and overflow the demands of justice, “expecting nothing in return” (*Lk* 6:35), and the greatest of loves can lead to “laying down one’s life” for another (cf. *Jn* 15:13). Can such generosity, which enables us to give freely and fully, really be possible? Yes, because it is demanded by the Gospel: “You received without pay, give without pay” (*Mt* 10:8).

Love is not irritable or resentful

103. If the first word of Paul’s hymn spoke of the need for a patience that does not immediately react harshly to the weaknesses and faults of others, the word he uses next – *paroxýnetai* – has to do more with an interior indignation provoked by something from without. It refers to a violent reaction within, 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.

¹¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 27, art. 1, ad 2.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, q. 27, art. 1.

104. The Gospel tells us to look to the log in our own eye (cf. *Mt* 7:5). Christians cannot ignore the persistent admonition of God's word not to nurture anger: "Do not be overcome by evil" (*Rm* 12:21). "Let us not grow weary in doing good" (*Gal* 6:9). It is one thing to sense a sudden surge of hostility and another to give into it, letting it take root in our hearts: "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger" (*Eph* 4:26). My advice is never to let the day end without making peace in the family. "And how am I going to make peace? By getting down on my knees? No! Just by a small gesture, a little something, and harmony within your family will be restored. Just a little caress, no words are necessary. But do not let the day end without making peace in your family".¹¹² Our first reaction when we are annoyed should be one of heartfelt blessing, asking God to bless, free and heal that person. "On the contrary bless, for to this you have been called, that you may obtain a blessing" (*1 Pet* 3:9). If we must fight evil, so be it; but we must always say "no" to violence in the home.

Love forgives

105. Once we allow ill will to take root in our hearts, it leads to deep resentment. The phrase *ou logízetai to kakón* means that love "takes no

¹¹² Catechesis (13 May 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 14 May 2015, p. 8.

account of evil”; “it is not resentful”. The opposite of resentment is forgiveness, which is rooted in 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. Something is wrong when we see every problem as equally serious; in this way, we risk being unduly harsh with the failings of others. The just desire to see our rights respected turns into a thirst for vengeance rather than a reasoned defence of our dignity.

106. 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”.¹¹³

107. Today we recognize that being able to forgive others implies the liberating experience of understanding and forgiving ourselves. Often our mistakes, or criticism we have received from loved ones, can lead to a loss of self-esteem. We become distant from others, avoiding affection and fearful in our interpersonal relationships. Blaming others becomes falsely reassuring. We need to learn to pray over our past history, to accept ourselves, to learn how to live with our limitations, and even to forgive ourselves, in order to have this same attitude towards others.

108. 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. We have known a love that is prior to any of our own efforts, a love that constantly opens doors, promotes and encourages. If we accept that God’s love is unconditional, that the Father’s love cannot be bought or sold, then we will become capable of showing boundless love and forgiving others even if they have wronged us. Otherwise, our family life will no longer be a place of understanding, support and encouragement, but rather one of constant tension and mutual criticism.

¹¹³ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (22 November 1981), 21: AAS 74 (1982), 106.

Love rejoices with others

109. The expression *chaírei epì te adikía* has to do with a negativity lurking deep within a person's heart. It is the toxic attitude of those who rejoice at seeing an injustice done to others. The following phrase expresses its opposite: *sygchaírei 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.

110. 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).

Our Lord especially appreciates those who find joy in the happiness of others. If we fail to learn how to rejoice in the wellbeing of others, and focus primarily on our own needs, we condemn ourselves to a joyless existence, for, as Jesus said, "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). 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.

Love bears all things

111. 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.

112. First, Paul says that love “bears all things” (*panta stégei*). This is about more than simply putting up with evil; it has to do with *the use of the tongue*. The verb can mean “holding one’s peace” about what may be wrong with another person. It implies limiting judgment, checking the impulse to issue a firm and ruthless condemnation: “Judge not and you will not be judged” (*Lk 6:37*). Although it runs contrary to the way we normally use our tongues, God’s word tells us: “Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters” (*Jas 4:11*). 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. We often forget that slander can be quite sinful; it is a grave offense against God when it seriously harms another person’s good name and causes damage that is hard to repair. Hence God’s word forthrightly states that the tongue “is a world of iniquity” that “stains the whole body” (*Jas 3:6*); it is a “restless evil, full of deadly poison” (*3:8*). Whereas the tongue can be used to “curse those who are made in the likeness of God” (*3:9*), love cherishes the good name of others, even one’s enemies. In seeking to uphold God’s law we must never forget this specific requirement of love.

113. 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 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 sees those weaknesses and faults in a wider context. It recognizes that these failings are a part of a bigger picture. We have to realize that all of us are a complex mixture of light and shadows. The other person is much more than the sum of the little things that annoy me. Love does not have to be perfect for us to value it. The other person loves me as best they can, with all their limits, but the fact that love is imperfect does not mean that it is untrue or unreal. It is real, albeit limited and earthly. If I expect too much, the other person will let me know, for he or she can neither play God nor serve all my needs. Love coexists with imperfection. It "bears all things" and can hold its peace before the limitations of the loved one.

Love believes all things

114. *Panta pisteúei*. Love 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. Such basic trust recognizes God's light shining

beyond the darkness, like an ember glowing beneath the ash.

115. This trust enables 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. This freedom, which fosters independence, an openness to the world around us and to new experiences, can only enrich and expand relationships. The spouses then share with one another the joy of all they have received and learned outside the family circle. At the same time, this freedom makes for sincerity and transparency, for those who know that they are trusted and appreciated can be open and hide nothing. Those who know that their spouse is always suspicious, judgmental and lacking unconditional love, will tend to keep secrets, conceal their failings and weaknesses, and pretend to be someone other than who they are. On the other hand, a family marked by loving trust, come what may, helps its members to be themselves and spontaneously to reject deceit, falsehood, and lies.

Love hopes all things

116. *Panta elpízei.* Love does not despair of the future. Following upon what has just been said, this phrase speaks of the hope of one who knows that others can change, mature and radiate unexpected beauty and untold potential. 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.

117. 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. This realization helps us, amid the aggravations of this present life, to see each person from a supernatural perspective, in the light of hope, and await the fullness that he or she will receive in the heavenly kingdom, even if it is not yet visible.

Love endures all things

118. *Panta hypoménei*. This means that love bears every trial with a positive attitude. It stands firm in hostile surroundings. This "endurance" involves not only the ability to tolerate certain aggravations, but something greater: a constant readiness to confront any challenge. It is a love that *never gives up*, even in the darkest hour. It shows a certain dogged heroism, a power to resist every negative current, an irrepressible commitment to goodness. Here I think of the words of Martin Luther King, who met every

kind of trial and tribulation with fraternal love: “The person who hates you most has some good in him; even the nation that hates you most has some good in it; even the race that hates you most has some good in it. And when you come to the point that you look in the face of every man and see deep down within him what religion calls ‘the image of God’, you begin to love him in spite of [everything]. No matter what he does, you see God’s image there. There is an element of goodness that he can never sluff off... 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. Individuals who happen to be caught up in that system, you love, but you seek to defeat the system... Hate for hate only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe. If I hit you and you hit me and I hit you back and you hit me back and so on, you see, that goes on ad infinitum. It just never ends. Somewhere somebody must have a little sense, and that’s the strong person. The strong person is the person who can cut off the chain of hate, the chain of evil... Somebody must have religion enough and morality enough to cut it off and inject within the very structure

of the universe that strong and powerful element of love”.¹¹⁴

119. In family life, we need to cultivate that strength of love which can help us fight every evil threatening it. Love does not yield to resentment, scorn for others or the desire to hurt or to gain some advantage. The Christian ideal, especially in families, is a love that never gives up. I am sometimes amazed to see men or women who have had to separate from their spouse for their own protection, yet, because of their enduring conjugal love, 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.

Growing in conjugal love

120. Our reflection on Saint Paul’s hymn to love has prepared us to discuss conjugal love. This is the love between husband and wife,¹¹⁵ a love sanctified, enriched and illuminated by the grace of the sacrament of marriage. It is an “affective union”,¹¹⁶ spiritual and sacrificial, which combines the warmth of friendship and erotic

¹¹⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., *Sermon delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, 17 November 1957.*

¹¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas calls love a *vis unitiva* (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 20, art. 1, ad 3), echoing a phrase of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (*De Divinis Nominibus*, IV, 12: PG 3, 709).

¹¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 27, art. 2.

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 place.¹¹⁷ 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.”¹¹⁸

121. Marriage is a precious sign, for “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. Marriage is the icon of God’s love for us. 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”.¹¹⁹ This has concrete daily consequences, because the spouses, “in virtue of the sacrament, are invested with a true and proper mission, so that, starting with the simple ordinary things of

¹¹⁷ Encyclical Letter *Casti Connubii* (31 December 1930): AAS 22 (1930), 547-548.

¹¹⁸ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (22 November 1981) 13: AAS 74 (1982), 94.

¹¹⁹ Catechesis (2 April 2014): *L’Osservatore Romano*, 3 April 2014, p. 8.

life they can make visible the love with which Christ loves his Church and continues to give his life for her”.¹²⁰

122. We should not however confuse different levels: 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”.¹²¹

Lifelong sharing

123. After the love that unites us to God, conjugal love is the “greatest form of friendship”.¹²² It is a union possessing all the traits of a good friendship: concern for the good of the other, reciprocity, intimacy, warmth, stability and the resemblance born of a shared life. Marriage joins to all this an indissoluble exclusivity expressed in the stable commitment to share and shape together the whole of life. Let us be honest and acknowledge the signs that this is the case. Lovers do not see their relationship as merely temporary. Those who marry do not expect

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (22 November 1981), 9: AAS 75 (1982), 90.

¹²² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 123; cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 8, 12 (ed. Bywater, Oxford, 1984, 174).

their excitement to fade. Those who witness the celebration of a loving union, however fragile, trust that it will pass the test of time. Children not only want their parents to love one another, but also to be faithful and remain together. These and similar signs show that it is in the very nature of conjugal love to be definitive. The lasting union expressed by the marriage vows is more than a formality or a traditional formula; it is rooted in the natural inclinations of the human person. For believers, it is also a covenant before God that calls for fidelity: “The Lord was witness to the covenant between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant... Let none be faithless to the wife of his youth. For I hate divorce, says the Lord” (*Mal* 2:14-16).

124. A love that is weak or infirm, incapable of accepting marriage as a challenge to be taken up and fought for, reborn, renewed and reinvented until death, cannot sustain a great commitment. It will succumb to the culture of the ephemeral that prevents a constant process of growth. Yet “promising love for ever is possible when we perceive a plan bigger than our own ideas and undertakings, a plan which sustains us and enables us to surrender our future entirely to the one we love”.¹²³ If this love is to overcome all trials and

¹²³ Encyclical Letter *Lumen Fidei* (29 June 2013), 52: AAS 105 (2013), 590.

remain faithful in the face of everything, it needs the gift of grace to strengthen and elevate it. In the words of Saint Robert Bellarmine, “the fact that one man unites with one woman in an indissoluble bond, and that they remain inseparable despite every kind of difficulty, even when there is no longer hope for children, can only be the sign of a great mystery”.¹²⁴

125. Marriage is likewise a friendship marked by passion, but a passion always directed to an ever more stable and intense union. This is because “marriage was not instituted solely for the procreation of children” but also that mutual love “might be properly expressed, that it should grow and mature”.¹²⁵ This unique friendship between a man and a woman acquires an all-encompassing character only within the conjugal union. Precisely as all-encompassing, this union is also exclusive, faithful and open to new life. It shares everything in constant mutual respect. The Second Vatican Council echoed this by stating that “such a love, bringing together the human and the divine, leads the partners to a free and mutual self-giving, experienced in tenderness and action, and permeating their entire lives”.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ *De sacramento matrimonii*, I, 2; in *Id.*, *Disputationes*, III, 5, 3 (ed. Giuliano, Naples, 1858), 778.

¹²⁵ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 50.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

Joy and beauty

126. In marriage, the joy of love needs to be cultivated. When the search for pleasure becomes obsessive, it holds us in thrall and keeps us from experiencing other satisfactions. Joy, on the other hand, increases our pleasure and helps us find fulfilment in any number of things, even at those times of life when physical pleasure has ebbed. Saint Thomas Aquinas said that the word “joy” refers to an expansion of the heart.¹²⁷ Marital joy can be experienced even amid sorrow; it involves accepting that marriage is an inevitable mixture of enjoyment and struggles, tensions and repose, pain and relief, satisfactions and longings, annoyances and pleasures, but always on the path of friendship, which inspires married couples to care for one another: “they help and serve each other”.¹²⁸

127. The love of friendship is called “charity” when it perceives and esteems the “great worth” of another person.¹²⁹ Beauty – that “great worth” which is other than physical or psychological appeal – enables us to appreciate the sacredness of a person, without feeling the need to possess it. In a consumerist society, the sense of beauty is impoverished and so joy fades. Everything is

¹²⁷ Cf. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 31, art. 3., ad 3.

¹²⁸ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 48.

¹²⁹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 26, art. 3.

there to be purchased, possessed or consumed, including people. Tenderness, on the other hand, is a sign of a love free of selfish possessiveness.

It makes us approach a person with immense respect and a certain dread of causing them harm or taking away their freedom. Loving another person involves the joy of contemplating and appreciating their innate beauty and sacredness, which is greater than my needs. This enables me to seek their good even when they cannot belong to me, or when they are no longer physically appealing but intrusive and annoying. For “the love by which one person is pleasing to another depends on his or her giving something freely”.¹³⁰

128. The aesthetic experience of love is expressed in that “gaze” which contemplates other persons as ends in themselves, even if they are infirm, elderly or physically unattractive. A look of appreciation has enormous importance, and to begrudge it is usually hurtful. How many things do spouses and children sometimes do in order to be noticed! Much hurt and many problems result when we stop looking at one another. This lies behind the complaints and grievances we often hear in families: “My husband does not look at me; he acts as if I were invisible”. “Please look at me when I am talking to you!”. “My wife no longer looks at me, she only has eyes for our children”. “In my own home nobody cares

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, q. 110, art. 1.

about me; they do not even see me; it is as if I did not exist”. Love opens our eyes and enables us to see, beyond all else, the great worth of a human being.

129. The joy of this contemplative love needs to be cultivated. Since we were made for love, we know that there is no greater joy than that of sharing good things: “Give, take, and treat yourself well” (*Sir* 14:16). The most intense joys in life arise when we are able to elicit joy in others, as a foretaste of heaven. We can think of the lovely scene in the film *Babette’s Feast*, when the generous cook receives a grateful hug and praise: “Ah, how you will delight the angels!” It is a joy and a great consolation to bring delight to others, to see them enjoying themselves. This joy, the fruit of fraternal love, is not that of the vain and self-centred, but of lovers who delight in the good of those whom they love, who give freely to them and thus bear good fruit.

130. On the other hand, joy also grows through pain and sorrow. In the words of Saint Augustine, “the greater the danger in battle the greater is the joy of victory”.¹³¹ After suffering and struggling together, spouses are able to experience that it was worth it, because they achieved some good, learned something as a couple, or came to appreciate what they have. Few human

¹³¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII, III, 7: PL 32, 752.

joys are as deep and thrilling as those experienced by two people who love one another and have achieved something as the result of a great, shared effort.

Marrying for love

131. I would like to say to young people that none of this is jeopardized when their love finds expression in marriage. Their union encounters in this institution the means to ensure that their love truly will endure and grow. Naturally, love is much more than an outward consent or a contract, yet it is nonetheless true that choosing to give marriage a visible form in society by undertaking certain commitments shows how important it is. It manifests the seriousness of each person's identification with the other and their firm decision to leave adolescent individualism behind and to belong to one another. Marriage is a means of expressing that we have truly left the security of the home in which we grew up in order to build other strong ties and to take on a new responsibility for another person. This is much more meaningful than a mere spontaneous association for mutual gratification, which would turn marriage into a purely private affair. As a social institution, marriage protects and shapes a shared commitment to deeper growth in love and commitment to one another, for the good of society as a whole. That is why marriage is more than a fleeting fashion; it is of enduring importance. Its essence derives from our human

nature and social character. It involves a series of obligations born of love itself, a love so serious and generous that it is ready to face any risk.

132. To opt for marriage in this way expresses a genuine and firm decision to join paths, come what may. Given its seriousness, this public commitment of love cannot be the fruit of a hasty decision, but neither can it be postponed indefinitely. Committing oneself exclusively and definitively to another person always involves a risk and a bold gamble. Unwillingness to make such a commitment is selfish, calculating and petty. It fails to recognize the rights of another person and to present him or her to society as someone worthy of unconditional love. If two persons are truly in love, they naturally show this to others. When love is expressed before others in the marriage contract, with all its public commitments, it clearly indicates and protects the “yes” which those persons speak freely and unreservedly to each other. This “yes” tells them that they can always trust one another, and that they will never be abandoned when difficulties arise or new attractions or selfish interests present themselves.

A love that reveals itself and increases

133. The love of friendship unifies all aspects of marital life and helps family members to grow constantly. This love must be freely and generously expressed in words and acts. In the family,

“three words need to be used. I want to repeat this! Three words: ‘Please’, ‘Thank you’, ‘Sorry’. Three essential words!”.¹³² “In our families when we are not overbearing and ask: ‘May I?’; in our families when we are not selfish and can say: ‘Thank you!’; and in our families when someone realizes that he or she did something wrong and is able to say ‘Sorry!’, our family experiences peace and joy”.¹³³ Let us not be stingy about using these words, but keep repeating them, day after day. For “certain silences are oppressive, even at times within families, between husbands and wives, between parents and children, among siblings”.¹³⁴ The right words, spoken at the right time, daily protect and nurture love.

134. All this occurs through a process of constant growth. The very special form of love that is marriage is called to embody what Saint Thomas Aquinas said about charity in general. “Charity”, he says, “by its very nature, has no limit to its increase, for it is a participation in that infinite charity which is the Holy Spirit... Nor on the part of the subject can its limit be fixed, because as charity grows, so too does its capacity for an even greater increase”.¹³⁵ Saint

¹³² *Address to the Pilgrimage of Families during the Year of Faith* (26 October 2013): AAS 105 (2013), 980.

¹³³ *Angelus Message* (29 December 2013): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 30-31 December 2013, p. 7.

¹³⁴ *Address to the Pilgrimage of Families during the Year of Faith* (26 October 2013): AAS 105 (2013), 978.

¹³⁵ *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 24, art. 7.

Paul also prays: “May the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another” (*1 Th* 3:12), and again, “concerning fraternal love... we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more” (*1 Th* 4:9-10). More and more! Marital love is not defended primarily by presenting indissolubility as a duty, or by repeating doctrine, but by helping it to grow ever stronger under the impulse of grace. A love that fails to grow is at risk. Growth can only occur if we respond to God’s grace through constant acts of love, acts of kindness that become ever more frequent, intense, generous, tender and cheerful. Husbands and wives “become conscious of their unity and experience it more deeply from day to day”.¹³⁶ The gift of God’s love poured out upon the spouses is also a summons to constant growth in grace.

135. It is not helpful to dream of an idyllic and perfect love needing no stimulus to grow. A celestial notion of earthly love forgets that the best is yet to come, that fine wine matures with age. As the Bishops of Chile have pointed out, “the perfect families proposed by deceptive consumerist propaganda do not exist. In those families, no one grows old, there is no sickness, sorrow or death... Consumerist propaganda presents a fantasy that has nothing to do with the reality

¹³⁶ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 48.

which must daily be faced by the heads of families”.¹³⁷ It is much healthier to be realistic about our limits, defects and imperfections, and to respond to the call to grow together, to bring love to maturity and to strengthen the union, come what may.

Dialogue

136. Dialogue is essential for experiencing, expressing and fostering love in marriage and family life. Yet it can only be the fruit of a long and demanding apprenticeship. Men and women, young people and adults, communicate differently. They speak different languages and they act in different ways. Our way of asking and responding to questions, the tone we use, our timing and any number of other factors condition how well we communicate. We need to develop certain attitudes that express love and encourage authentic dialogue.

137. Take time, quality time. This means being ready to listen patiently and attentively to everything the other person wants to say. It requires the self-discipline of not speaking until the time is right. Instead of offering an opinion or advice, we need to be sure that we have heard everything the other person has to say. This means cultivating an interior silence that makes it possible to

¹³⁷ Chilean Bishops' Conference, *La vida y la familia: regalos de Dios para cada uno de nosotros* (21 July 2014).

listen to the other person without mental or emotional distractions. Do not be rushed, put aside all of your own needs and worries, and make space. Often the other spouse does not need a solution to his or her problems, but simply to be heard, to feel that someone has acknowledge their pain, their disappointment, their fear, their anger, their hopes and their dreams. How often we hear complaints like: “He does not listen to me.” “Even when you seem to, you are really doing something else.” “I talk to her and I feel like she can’t wait for me to finish.” “When I speak to her, she tries to change the subject, or she gives me curt responses to end the conversation”.

138. Develop the habit of giving real importance to the other person. This means appreciating them and recognizing their right to exist, to think as they do and to be happy. Never downplay what they say or think, even if you need to express your own point of view. Everyone has something to contribute, because they have their life experiences, they look at things from a different standpoint and they have their own concerns, abilities and insights. We ought to be able to acknowledge the other person’s truth, the value of his or her deepest concerns, and what it is that they are trying to communicate, however aggressively. We have to put ourselves in their shoes and try to peer into their hearts, to perceive their

deepest concerns and to take them as a point of departure for further dialogue.

139. Keep an open mind. Don't get bogged down in your own limited ideas and opinions, but be prepared to change or expand them. The combination of two different ways of thinking can lead to a synthesis that enriches both. The unity that we seek is not uniformity, but a "unity in diversity", or "reconciled diversity". Fraternal communion is enriched by respect and appreciation for differences within an overall perspective that advances the common good. We need to free ourselves from feeling that we all have to be alike. A certain astuteness is also needed to prevent the appearance of "static" that can interfere with the process of dialogue. For example, if hard feelings start to emerge, they should be dealt with sensitively, lest they interrupt the dynamic of dialogue. The ability to say what one is thinking without offending the other person is important. Words should be carefully chosen so as not to offend, especially when discussing difficult issues. Making a point should never involve venting anger and inflicting hurt. A patronizing tone only serves to hurt, ridicule, accuse and offend others. Many disagreements between couples are not about important things. Mostly they are about trivial matters. What alters the mood, however, is the way things are said or the attitude with which they are said.

140. Show affection and concern for the other person. Love surmounts even the worst barriers. When we love someone, or when we feel loved by them, we can better understand what they are trying to communicate. Fearing the other person as a kind of “rival” is a sign of weakness and needs to be overcome. It is very important to base one’s position on solid choices, beliefs or values, and not on the need to win an argument or to be proved right.

141. Finally, let us acknowledge that for a worthwhile dialogue we have to have something to say. This can only be the fruit of an interior richness nourished by reading, personal reflection, prayer and openness to the world around us. Otherwise, conversations become boring and trivial. When neither of the spouses works at this, and has little real contact with other people, family life becomes stifling and dialogue impoverished.