



The joy of reunion

I warmly greet all participants in this International Gathering of the Teams of Our Lady and especially those who have worked so hard to achieve it. Thank you for everything you have done, which is so important for the Church and for the world.

It is important for the Church because the Church is, and should be, increasingly considered "a family of families" as Pope Francis calls it in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. He also reminds us that the first thirty years of Christ's life were spent in the domestic environment of the Nazareth Family, and that is why it is called the "Holy Family". A Family where God comes into the world, through the Virgin Mary and under the protection of St. Joseph. A Family where Jesus began His human journey, growing in stature, wisdom and grace. A Family where He receives an attentive and caring experience, which He will then extend to everyone in "God's family", to which we belong and to which we are all invited.

From the domestic to the ecclesial context, the family is always the criterion for being born, growing up and living together. Jesus did not constitute His family in the natural sense. But He created the supernatural family of God's children, referring to us, elevating the relation and affection that He had humanly experienced in the family of Nazareth. It is not by chance that familiar expressions arise to designate pastoral and ecclesial feelings. They are present in the filial, nuptial, and brotherly dimensions, true models of what we have to be as Church and Church in the world.

Let us keep this point very much in mind, as did the last two Synodal Assemblies, and as Pope Francis has done again and again. The dynamic relationship between the family and the ecclesial sphere is the Christian journey, lived and revealed by Jesus Christ himself. In fact, the Acts of the Apostles and the Letters of St. Paul show us that it was within the family that Christianity found a privileged place for its first expansion. In the first centuries it was difficult to find other places for ecclesial meetings, celebrations and catechesis. And from then on, both for the first evangelization and in times of persecution, Christian families have been indispensable for the Gospel to happen, for the spreading of the Good News and its practice.



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The theme of this conference is the "joy of reunion". Well, I am convinced – as well as the Holy Father and the Synod Fathers of 2014-2015 - that the revitalization of Christian families and the reinforcement of their place in the Church are fundamental to the new evangelization, to urgently re-encounter the living Christ. Christ, a real "elder brother", who - quite the opposite of the parable's elder brother who didn't like his wasteful brother's return - is absolutely on the side of the Father and even brings us from the "distant land" where we may be. Even if it costs His life, even if it is the only way to win us back and resurrect us. The joy of reunion is definitely paschal

When St. John Paul II insisted on the "new evangelization", he wanted it to be "new in ardour, new in methods and new in expression." He verified that the general picture of the seventies had three distinct situations: populations to which the first proclamation of Christ had not yet arrived, or where "local churches" had not been established yet with all that this implies; populations in which this had already taken place and continued their pastoral action, with preaching, the sacraments and charity; and populations in which the Christian tradition had weakened, to a point of almost losing the living memory of faith.

It was for the latter that Pope Wojtyla intended the "new evangelization", also counting on the contribution of Christian families. And it was not by chance that, especially during his pontificate, various forms of family mission were developed, including the "departure on mission" of entire couples and families, to elevate or "revive" the Christian life in many places throughout the world. A magnificent demonstration of evangelical family ardour, where there was no lack of creativity of methods and expression. Of methods, because we have new ways of communicating; and of expressions, because the contents are always better understood in today's language.

The family environment is particularly fruitful and creative for this to happen. The Christian community and society in general have everything to gain from the families evangelizing contribution. (I add my personal testimony to those of most of my fellow priests, to thank the collaboration of many couples and families both in faraway and nearby missions, thus reproducing that apostolic collaboration - families where this is so evident as we see in São Paulo, with Aquila and Priscilla and some others.)

One point seems to be essential for the "joy of reunion" to continue to happen in the current social and ecclesial context: "Reencounter" which means to take back something that had been lost, but truly existed and whose



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memory and promise persisted. The family is the safest place to activate the memory and react.

It was not by chance that Jesus used a familiar context for the parable of God's merciful love - which is its true subject, even more than the prodigality of the younger son. He speaks of a "father", of two brothers, of a house. He does not mention a "mother," but she would certainly have shared, in her own way, the love of that father. In other evangelical passages, there are many examples of mothers being deeply anxious for the good of their children, as happened with the Virgin Mary herself searching for a teenage Jesus, feeling as anxious as Joseph.

However, let us agree that this point is now facing special difficulties. Reunion means recovery from an encounter that actually happened. The prodigal son of the parable had lost everything: goods, relationships, and status. He had been reduced to the worst condition that a wealthy young Jew could reach: away from his land and looking after pigs, without even being able to eat the acorns. He had nothing, nothing. So it seemed and he suffered; but in fact he had retained something. One small thing that saved him: the memory of the family home, where he would certainly be received and well treated, even if he was the least of the workers...

It was this memory that encouraged him, brought him back, and made the reunion possible. And the great joy of the reunion, especially that of the father, who had not given up waiting for him: He leaves the house as soon as he sees the son from afar, cuts short the words of repentance, restores his filial condition and its significance and orders a great feast such as the prodigal son would never have imagined and which greatly surprises the older brother.

Needless to say, the immense joy that overflows from the parable is God's constant joy in reuniting with us – we were created to be his children and to be absolutely united with Him. This is the joy of Jesus, who fully shares the feelings of the Father in the Spirit that eternally unites them. Jesus, coming from the Father, comes into the world, and takes us with Him to the Father, in the life that He recovers for us and in the Spirit that He distributes.

This is also the Christian memory, which was passed down to us through our families, when we had the grace of being born and growing up in a believing family, as Paul reminded his disciple Timothy: *"I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice..."* (2 Tm 1, 5) And when we had the grace of increasing it in the Christian community, as the Apostle himself verified among the Thessalonians:



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“We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing...” (2 Thess 1, 3). This is the very first memory that is received and transmitted in the human family, preserving the foundational words of Genesis (cf. Gen 1: 27-28). It is an indispensable memory for us to achieve the basic security that will be accomplished and even restored in us. May we will encounter it at some time, with the essentials that we keep in the most intimate part of ourselves and yearn to perfect one day.

I take the liberty of quoting the verses of a great Portuguese poet which can almost be prayed as if at an intimate meeting and full reunion with God: “One day I will break all the bridges / That bind my whole living being / To the turmoil of the world of unreal things / And calmly I will go to the source. / I will go to the source where he lives / the fullness, the clear splendour / which I was promised every hour / And in the incomplete face of love / I will drink the light and the dawn / I will drink the voice of that promise / That sometimes fleetingly crosses me / And in it I will fulfil my whole being» (Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, *The sources*).

It is very beautiful, because it is entirely true. However, the present conditions of life make it particularly difficult in many cases. Without going back to previous times, which were not easy either, it is certain that today’s conditions of life, learning and work, as well as housing and belonging to a community, oscillate between precariousness and instability for a large number of people and not only for financial reasons. None of this helps to form solid memories that would guarantee reunions. This the reason for the existence of much of the current personality problems, for the postponement of family projects, as well as for the alarming number of frustrations and depression in older people.

Half a century ago, when the generation that was born and grew up after World War II became significant, many believed that through the accumulated cultural and civilizational debris, something new would come, without old chains or modern conditioning. We find out now, even without generalization, that much has been reduced to almost nothing, or simply to the “I”, constantly aroused by various consumerisms, which reduce everything to objects to be enjoyed and then discarded.

Family life was naturally affected in its constitution and solidity. The frequency of divorces is more a symptom than a cause, since it often derives from unprepared or badly prepared marriages. And there will be no



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preparation without the testimony of those who already practice the Christian family ideal. The new evangelization "will only happen with dynamically stabilized families, where no one gives up on anyone, where conflicts are avoided or overcome by the exercise of successive reencounters.

After all, reencounters are situations where we discover ourselves through the practice of conjugal and family charity. Pope Francis reminds us of this idea in *Amoris Laetitia*, in a chapter precisely entitled "Love in marriage" *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" (AL, 89).* And the Pope continues with a long and meaningful commentary on the Hymn to Charity in the First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians (13, 4-7), applying it to family life in a very concrete way. It is the sure basis for living and transmitting the Christian matrimonial ideal.

It is true that the current sociocultural conditions do not facilitate putting this ideal in practice. But neither did they some two thousand years ago in the context in which Jesus Christ presented it, with words as clear and assertive as those that we will always find in the Gospels (see Mark 10, 1-12 and others).

The Christian marriage proposition is a constant gateway, return and progress in divine life, and we encounter it in the Father's mercy, in the Son's fidelity and in the unity of the Spirit. For this reason, Pope Francis, in addition to paying attention to the concrete situation of each couple and family, does not cease to insist. *"In no way must the Church desist from proposing the full ideal of marriage, God's plan in all its grandeur [...] A lukewarm attitude, any kind of relativism, or an undue reticence in proposing that ideal, would be a lack of fidelity to the Gospel and also of love on the part of the Church for young people themselves. To show understanding in the face of exceptional situations never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing less than what Jesus offers to the human being. Today, more important than the pastoral care of failures is the pastoral effort to strengthen marriages and thus to prevent their breakdown. (AL, 307).*

Dearest participants in this happy International Gathering of the Teams of Our Lady: God met us in the family atmosphere of Bethlehem and Nazareth. Today reunion with God will also happen in a family context, in families that live, and are witnesses to, the Christian matrimonial ideal. So to be born, to grow and to live; to learn the sentiments and behaviours, we should feel each



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of our families as part of the "family of God" (cf. Eph 2:19), and implement Christ's Gospel with new ardour and appropriate means and expressions.

This family configuration of the Church and mission was highlighted by the Synod of Bishops and clearly proposed by Pope Francis. Let's hear it: *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"* And later on: *"Christian families, by the grace of the sacrament of matrimony, are the principal agents of the family apostolate, above all through "their joy-filled witness as domestic churches". (AL, 200).*

The International Gathering in these days, under the protective mantle of Our Lady of Fatima, highlights the great truth of these papal teachings. In each of your families, through the sacramental grace that sustains it, the atmosphere of the Holy Family, where God came to meet us, is revived by the Mother of the Church. Likewise, through your testimony, many more will reencounter Christ!

+ Manuel Clemente, Cardinal Patriarch of Lisbon