

## MARRIAGE, A CHRISTIAN VOCATION

At Christmas our thoughts turn to the different events and circumstances surrounding the birth of the Son of God. As we contemplate the stable in Bethlehem or the home of the Holy Family in Nazareth, Mary, Joseph and the Child Jesus occupy a special place in our hearts. What does the simple, admirable life of the Holy Family tell us? What can we learn from it?

I would like particularly to comment on one of the many considerations that we might make on this theme. As we read in Holy Scripture, the birth of Jesus means the beginning of the fullness of time.<sup>1</sup> It was the moment God chose to show the extent of his love for men, by giving us his own Son. And God's will is fulfilled in the simplest, most ordinary of circumstances: a woman who gives birth, a family, a home. The power of God and his splendour come to us through a human reality to which they are joined. Since that moment Christians have known that, with God's grace, they can and should sanctify everything that is good in their human lives. There is no human situation, no matter how trivial and ordinary it may seem, which cannot be a meeting-place with Christ and a step forward on our journey towards the kingdom of heaven.

It is only natural that the Church rejoices as it contemplates the modest home of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. We read in the hymn from matins on the feast of the Holy Family: "It is pleasing to recall the lowly house at Nazareth and its slender resources; it is pleasing to tell again in song Jesus' hidden life. Jesus grows up in hidden seclusion, to be trained in Joseph's lowly trade. The loving Mother sits beside her dear Son, the good wife by her husband, content if her loving attention can ease and comfort them in their weariness."

When I think of Christian homes, I like to imagine them as being full of the light and joy that were in the home of the Holy Family. The message of Christmas is heard in all its forcefulness: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will."<sup>2</sup> "And may the peace of Christ triumph in your hearts," writes the Apostle.<sup>3</sup> It is a peace that comes from knowing that our Father God loves us, and that we are made one with Christ. It results from being under the protection of our Lady, and assisted by Saint Joseph. This is the great light that illuminates our lives. In the midst of difficulties and our own personal failings, it encourages us to keep up our effort. Every Christian home should be a place of peace and serenity. In spite of the small frustrations of daily life, an atmosphere of profound and sincere affection should reign there together with a deep-rooted calm, which is the result of authentic faith that is put into practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Gal 4:4

<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:14

<sup>3</sup> Col 3:15

For a Christian marriage is not just a social institution, much less a mere remedy for human weakness. It is a real supernatural calling. A great sacrament, in Christ and in the Church, says Saint Paul.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, it is a permanent contract between a man and a woman. Whether we like it or not, the sacrament of matrimony, instituted by Christ, cannot be dissolved. It is a permanent contract that sanctifies in cooperation with Jesus Christ. He fills the souls of husband and wife and invites them to follow him. He transforms their whole married life into an occasion for God's presence on earth.

Husband and wife are called to sanctify their married life and to sanctify themselves in it. It would be a serious mistake if they were to exclude family life from their spiritual development. The marriage union, the care and education of children, the effort to provide for the needs of the family as well as for its security and development, the relationships with other persons who make up the community, all these are among the ordinary human situations that Christian couples are called upon to sanctify.

They will achieve this aim by exercising the virtues of faith and hope, facing serenely all the great and small problems which confront any family, and persevering in the love and enthusiasm with which they fulfil their duties. In this way they practice the virtue of charity in all things. They learn to smile and forget about themselves in order to pay attention to others. Husband and wife will listen to each other and to their children, showing them that they are really loved and understood. They will forget about the unimportant little frictions that selfishness could magnify out of proportion. They will do lovingly all the small acts of service that make up their daily life together.

The aim is this: to sanctify family life, while creating at the same time a true family atmosphere. Many Christian virtues are necessary in order to sanctify each day of one's life. First, the theological virtues, and then all the others: prudence, loyalty, sincerity, humility, industriousness, cheerfulness.... But when we talk about marriage and married life, we must begin by speaking clearly about the mutual love of husband and wife.

### **The sanctity of human love**

Their pure and noble love is a sacred thing. As a priest, I bless it with all my heart. Christian tradition has often seen in Christ's presence at the wedding feast in Cana a proof of the value God places on marriage. "Our Saviour went to the wedding feast," writes Saint Cyril of Alexandria, "to make holy the origins of human life."<sup>5</sup>

Marriage is a sacrament that makes one flesh of two bodies. Theology expresses this fact in a striking way when it teaches us that the matter of the sacrament is the bodies of husband and wife. Our Lord sanctifies and blesses the mutual love of husband and wife. He foresees, not only a union

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<sup>4</sup> Eph 5:32

<sup>5</sup> *In Ioannem commentarium*, 2,1 (PG 73,223)

of souls, but a union of bodies as well. No Christian, whether or not he is called to the married state, has a right to underestimate the value of marriage.

We have been created by God and endowed with an intelligence which is like a spark of the divine intellect. Together with our free will, another gift of God, it allows us to know and to love. And God has also placed in our body the power to generate, which is a participation in his own creative power. He has wanted to use love to bring new human beings into the world and to increase the body of the Church. Thus, sex is not a shameful thing; it is a divine gift, ordained to life, to love, to fruitfulness.

This is the context in which we must see the Christian doctrine on sex. Our faith does not ignore anything on this earth that is beautiful, noble and authentically human. It simply teaches us that the rule of our life should not be the selfish pursuit of pleasure, because only sacrifice and self-denial lead to true love. God truly loves us; and now he invites us to love him and others with the truthfulness and authenticity with which he loves. It is the paradox expressed in St Matthew's Gospel: "He who seeks to keep his life will lose it; and he who loses his life for my sake will find it."<sup>6</sup>

People who are constantly concerned with themselves, who act above all for their own satisfaction, endanger their eternal salvation and cannot avoid being unhappy even in this life. Only if a person forgets himself and gives himself to God and to others, in marriage as well as in any other aspect of life, can he be happy on this earth, with a happiness that is a preparation for, and a foretaste of, the joy of heaven.

As long as we walk on this earth, suffering will always be the touchstone of love. If we were to describe what occurs in the married state, we could say that there are two sides to the coin. On the one hand, there is the joy of knowing that one is loved, the desire and enthusiasm involved in starting a family and taking care of it, the love of husband and wife, the happiness of seeing the children grow up. On the other hand, there are also sorrows and difficulties—the passing of time that consumes the body and threatens the character with the temptation to bitterness, the seemingly monotonous succession of days that are apparently always the same.

We would have a poor idea of marriage and of human affection if we were to think that love and joy come to an end when faced with such difficulties. It is precisely then that our true sentiments come to the surface. Then the tenderness of a person's gift of himself takes root and shows itself in a true and profound affection that is stronger than death.<sup>7</sup>

When love is authentic it demands faithfulness and rectitude in all marital relations. Saint Thomas Aquinas says that God has joined to the exercise of the different functions of human life a pleasure or satisfaction, which is, therefore, something good.<sup>8</sup> But if man, inverting the proper

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<sup>6</sup> Matt 10:39

<sup>7</sup> Cant 8:6

<sup>8</sup> *S. Th.*, I-II, q.31 et q.141

order of things, seeks satisfaction as an aim in itself, in contempt of the good to which it is joined and which is its aim, he perverts its true nature and converts it into a sin, or an occasion of sin.

Chastity is not merely continence, but a decisive affirmation on the part of the will in love. It is a virtue that keeps love young in any state in life. There is a kind of chastity that is proper to those who begin to feel the awakening of physical maturity, and a kind of chastity that corresponds to those who are preparing for marriage; there is a chastity for those whom God calls to celibacy, and a chastity for those who have been chosen by him to live in the married state.

I cannot avoid calling to mind the strong and clear counsel given to Tobias by the angel Raphael before the young man's marriage to Sarah: "Then the angel Raphael said to him: Hear me, and I will show you who are those over whom the devil can prevail. For they who enter into matrimony in such a manner as to shut out God from themselves and from their mind, and to give themselves to their lust, as the horse and the mule which have not understanding, are those over whom the devil has power."<sup>9</sup>

Human love—pure, sincere and joyful—cannot subsist in marriage without the virtue of chastity, which leads a couple to respect the mystery of sex and ordain it to faithfulness and personal dedication. I have never talked about impurity, and I have always avoided falling into a distasteful and meaningless casuistry. But I have spoken many times, as I have to do, about chastity, purity and the joyful affirmation of love.

With regard to chastity in married life, I can assure all married couples that they need not be afraid of showing affection for each other. On the contrary, this inclination is at the root of their family life. What our Lord expects from them is that they should respect each other and that they should be loyal to each other; that they should act with refinement, naturalness and modesty. I must also tell them that the dignity of their conjugal relations is a result of the love that is expressed in them. And there will be love if those relations are open to fruitfulness, to bringing children into the world.

To stop up the sources of life is a crime against the gifts that God has granted to mankind. It proves that a person is moved by selfishness, not love. Everything becomes clouded, because husband and wife begin to look at each other as accomplices, and the dissensions that are produced, if this state is allowed to continue, are almost always impossible to heal.

When there is chastity in the love of married persons, their marital life is authentic; husband and wife are true to themselves, they understand each other and develop the union between them. When the divine gift of sex is perverted, their intimacy is destroyed, and they can no longer look openly at each other.

A married couple should build their life together on the foundation of a sincere and pure affection for each other, and on the joy that comes from having brought into the world the children God has enabled them to have. They should be capable of renouncing their personal comfort; and

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<sup>9</sup> Tob 6:16-17

they should put their trust in the providence of God. To have a large family—if such is the will of God—is a guarantee of happiness and of effectiveness, in spite of everything that the mistaken proponents of a life based on selfish pleasure may say to the contrary.

Don't forget that it is impossible for husband and wife to avoid at least some arguments. But never quarrel in front of your children; you would make them suffer, and they would take sides in the argument, contributing unwittingly to the lack of unity between you. But quarrels, so long as they don't happen often, are also a proof of love, and they are almost a need. The occasion of a quarrel—not its motive—is often the tiredness of the husband, worn out by his work, or the fatigue, not to say boredom, of the wife who has had to struggle with the children, with domestic chores, or with her own character, which might be lacking in fortitude. Don't get me wrong: women can be stronger than men, if determined to be so.

Avoid pride. It is the greatest enemy of your married life. In your little quarrels, neither of you is right. Whoever is the calmer should say a word or two to ward off bad temper for a while. Then, later on, when you are alone with each other, go ahead and argue it out—soon afterwards you will make peace anyway.

Wives, you should ask yourselves whether you are not forgetting a little about your appearance. Remember all the sayings about women who should take care to look pretty. Your duty is, and will always be, to take as good care of your appearance as you did before you were married—and it is a duty of justice, because you belong to your husband. And husbands should not forget that they belong to their wives, and that as long as they live they have the obligation to show the same affection as a young man who has just fallen in love. It would be a bad sign if you smile ironically as you hear this; it would mean that your love has turned into cold indifference.

### **Bright and cheerful homes**

We cannot talk about marriage without referring to the family, which is the result and continuation of what is begun with marriage. A family includes not only husband and wife, but also the children, and, in different degrees, the grandparents, other relatives, and even the domestic help in those households that have it. All these persons should in some way share in the warmth of the home and family.

Of course, there are couples to whom our Lord does not grant any children. If this happens, it is a sign that he is asking them to go on loving each other with the same affection and to put their efforts, if they can, into serving and working for the good of other souls. But the normal thing for a couple is to have children, who must always be their first concern.

Being a father or a mother is not simply a matter of bringing children into the world. The capacity for generation, which is a share in the creative power of God, is meant to have a continuation. Parents are called to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the development of their children into men and women who will be authentic Christians.

The parents are the first persons responsible for the education of their children, in human as well as in spiritual matters. They should be conscious of the extent of their responsibility. To fulfil it, they need prudence, understanding, a capacity to love and a concern for giving good example. Imposing things by force, in an authoritarian manner, is not the right way to teach. The ideal attitude of parents lies more in becoming their children's friends—friends who will be willing to share their anxieties, who will listen to their problems, who will help them in an effective and agreeable way

Parents should find time to spend with their children, to talk with them. They are the most important thing—more important than business or work or rest. In their conversations, parents should make an effort to listen, to pay attention, to understand, to recognize the fact that their children are sometimes partly right—or even completely right—in some of their rebellious attitudes. At the same time, they should help their children to direct their efforts and to carry out their projects properly, teaching them to consider things and to reason them out. It is not a matter of imposing a line of conduct, but rather of showing the human and supernatural motives for it. In a word, parents have to respect their children's freedom, because there is no real education without personal responsibility, and there is no responsibility without freedom.

Parents teach their children mainly through their own conduct. What a son or daughter looks for in a father or mother is not only a certain amount of knowledge or some more or less effective advice, but primarily something more important: a proof of the value and meaning of life, shown through the life of a specific person, and confirmed in the different situations and circumstances that occur over a period of time.

If I were to give advice to parents, I would tell them, above all, let your children see that you are trying to live in accordance with your faith. Don't let yourselves be deceived: they see everything, from their earliest years, and they judge everything. Let them see that God is not only on your lips, but also in your deeds; that you are trying to be loyal and sincere, and that you love each other and you really love them too.

This is how you will best contribute to making your children become true Christians, men and women of integrity, capable of facing all life's situations with an open spirit, of serving their fellow men and helping to solve the problems of mankind, of carrying the testimony of Christ to the society of which they will be a part.

Listen to your children. Give them your time, even the time that you have reserved for yourselves. Show them your confidence; believe whatever they tell you, even if sometimes they try to deceive you. Don't be afraid when they rebel, because, at their age, you yourselves were more or less rebellious. Go to meet them half-way and pray for them. If you act in this Christian manner, they will come to you with simplicity, instead of trying to satisfy their legitimate curiosity by taking it to some rough or vulgar friend. Your confidence, your friendly dealings with your children, will receive an answer in their sincerity in dealing with you. Then, even if there are quarrels and lack of understanding, they will never amount to much; and this is what peace in the family and a truly Christian life mean.

“How can I describe,” says a Christian writer of the early centuries, “the joy of a marriage united by the Church, strengthened by the dedication of husband and wife, sealed with a blessing, proclaimed by the angels, and accepted by God the Father?... Husband and wife are as brother and sister, servants of each other, and nothing separates them, either in the flesh or in the spirit. For they are truly two in one flesh, and where there is one flesh there should be one spirit... Contemplating such a family, Christ rejoices and sends his peace. Where there are two together, he is also present; and where he is present, there can be no evil.”<sup>10</sup>

We have tried to mention and comment on some of the characteristics of a family that reflects the light of Christ. As I mentioned before, theirs is a home full of light and cheerfulness. The unity between the parents is transmitted to their children, to the whole family, and to everyone who is involved in their life. In this way, every truly Christian family reproduces in some way the mystery of the Church, chosen by God and sent to be the guide of the world.

To every Christian, whatever his state in life—priest or layman, married or single—we can apply fully the words of the Apostle, which we read precisely on the feast of the Holy Family: “...chosen by God, holy and beloved.”<sup>11</sup> This is what we all are, each one in his place and position in the world, despite our errors and in the midst of the struggle to conquer them: men and women chosen by God to give witness to Christ and to bring all those who surround us the joy of knowing that we are God’s children.

It is very important that the idea of marriage as a real call from God never be absent, either from the pulpit and the religion class or from the conscience of those whom God wishes to follow this way. Couples should be convinced that they are really and truly called to take part in the fulfilment of God’s plan for the salvation of all men.

For this reason, there is perhaps no better model for a Christian couple than that of the Christian families of apostolic times: the centurion Cornelius, who obeyed the will of God and in whose home the Church was made accessible to the gentiles;<sup>12</sup> Aquila and Priscilla, who spread Christianity in Corinth and Ephesus, and who cooperated in the apostolate of Saint Paul;<sup>13</sup> Tabitha, who out of charity attended to the needs of the Christians in Joppe.<sup>14</sup> And so many other homes and families of Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and Romans, in which the preaching of our Lord’s first disciples began to bear fruit. Families who lived in union with Christ and who made him known to others. Small Christian communities which were centres for the spreading of the Gospel and its message. Families no different from other families of those times, but living with a new spirit, which spread to all those who were in contact with them. This is what the first Christians were, and this is what we have to be: sowers of peace and joy, the peace and joy that Jesus has brought to us.

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<sup>10</sup> Tertullian, *Ad uxorem*, 1,2,9 (PL 1,1302)

<sup>11</sup> Col 3:12

<sup>12</sup> Acts 10:24-48

<sup>13</sup> Acts 18:1-26

<sup>14</sup> Acts 9:36