



POST-SYNODAL APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION

AMORIS LÆTITIA

OF THE HOLY FATHER

FRANCIS

TO BISHOPS, PRIESTS AND DEACONS

CONSECRATED PERSONS

CHRISTIAN MARRIED COUPLES

AND ALL THE LAY FAITHFUL

ON LOVE IN THE FAMILY

1. **T**HE JOY OF LOVE experienced by families is also the joy of the Church. As the Synod Fathers noted, for all the many signs of crisis in the institution of marriage, “the desire to marry and form a family remains vibrant, especially among young people, and this is an inspiration to the Church”.¹ As a response to that desire, “the Christian proclamation on the family is good news indeed”.²

2. The Synod process allowed for an examination of the situation of families in today’s world, and thus for a broader vision and a renewed awareness of the importance of marriage and the family. The complexity of the issues that arose revealed the need for continued open discussion of a number of doctrinal, moral, spiritual, and pastoral questions. The thinking of pastors and theologians, if faithful to the Church, honest, realistic and creative, will help us to achieve greater clarity. The debates carried on in the media, in certain publications and even among the Church’s ministers, range from an

¹ THIRD EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Relatio Synodi* (18 October 2014), 2.

² FOURTEENTH ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Relatio Finalis* (24 October 2015), 3.

immoderate desire for total change without sufficient reflection or grounding, to an attitude that would solve everything by applying general rules or deriving undue conclusions from particular theological considerations.

3. Since “time is greater than space”, I would make it clear that not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. *Jn* 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does. Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs. For “cultures are in fact quite diverse and every general principle... needs to be inculturated, if it is to be respected and applied”.³

³ *Concluding Address of the Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops* (24 October 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 26-27 October 2015, p. 13; cf. PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION, *Fede e cultura alla luce della Bibbia. Atti della sessione plenaria 1979 della Pontificia Commissione Biblica*, Turin, 1981; SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et Spes*, 44; JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (7 December 1990), 52: AAS 83 (1991), 300; Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 69, 117: AAS 105 (2013), 1049, 1068-69.

4. I must also say that the Synod process proved both impressive and illuminating. I am grateful for the many contributions that helped me to appreciate more fully the problems faced by families throughout the world. The various interventions of the Synod Fathers, to which I paid close heed, made up, as it were, a multifaceted gem reflecting many legitimate concerns and honest questions. For this reason, I thought it appropriate to prepare a post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation to gather the contributions of the two recent Synods on the family, while adding other considerations as an aid to reflection, dialogue and pastoral practice, and as a help and encouragement to families in their daily commitments and challenges.

5. This Exhortation is especially timely in this Jubilee Year of Mercy. First, because it represents an invitation to Christian families to value the gifts of marriage and the family, and to persevere in a love strengthened by the virtues of generosity, commitment, fidelity and patience. Second, because it seeks to encourage everyone to be a sign of mercy and closeness wherever family life remains imperfect or lacks peace and joy.

6. I will begin with an opening chapter inspired by the Scriptures, to set a proper tone. I will then examine the actual situation of families, in order to keep firmly grounded in reality. I will go on to recall some essential aspects of the Church's teaching on marriage and the family, thus paving

the way for two central chapters dedicated to love. I will then highlight some pastoral approaches that can guide us in building sound and fruitful homes in accordance with God's plan, with a full chapter devoted to the raising of children. Finally, I will offer an invitation to mercy and the pastoral discernment of those situations that fall short of what the Lord demands of us, and conclude with a brief discussion of family spirituality.

7. Given the rich fruits of the two-year Synod process, this Exhortation will treat, in different ways, a wide variety of questions. This explains its inevitable length. Consequently, I do not recommend a rushed reading of the text. The greatest benefit, for families themselves and for those engaged in the family apostolate, will come if each part is read patiently and carefully, or if attention is paid to the parts dealing with their specific needs. It is likely, for example, that married couples will be more concerned with Chapters Four and Five, and pastoral ministers with Chapter Six, while everyone should feel challenged by Chapter Eight. It is my hope that, in reading this text, all will feel called to love and cherish family life, for “families are not a problem; they are first and foremost an opportunity”.⁴

⁴ *Address at the Meeting of Families in Santiago de Cuba* (22 September 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 24 September 2015, p. 7.

SOME CHALLENGES

50. The responses given to the two pre-synodal consultations spoke of a great variety of situations and the new challenges that they pose. In addition to those already mentioned, many of the respondents pointed to the problems families face in raising children. In many cases, parents come home exhausted, not wanting to talk, and many families no longer even share a common meal. Distractions abound, including an addiction to television. This makes it all the more difficult for parents to hand on the faith to their children. Other responses pointed to the effect of severe stress on families, who often seem more caught up with securing their future than with enjoying the present. This is a broader cultural problem, aggravated by fears about steady employment, finances and the future of children.

51. Drug use was also mentioned as one of the scourges of our time, causing immense suffering and even breakup for many families. The same is true of alcoholism, gambling and other addictions. The family could be the place where these are prevented and overcome, but society and politics fail to see that families at risk “lose the ability to act to help their members... We see the serious effects of this breakdown in families torn apart, the young uprooted and the elderly abandoned, children who are orphans of living parents, adolescents and young adults confused

and unsupported.”³⁸ As the Bishops of Mexico have pointed out, violence within families breeds new forms of social aggression, since “family relationships can also explain the tendency to a violent personality. This is often the case with families where communication is lacking, defensive attitudes predominate, the members are not supportive of one another, family activities that encourage participation are absent, the parental relationship is frequently conflictual and violent, and relationships between parents and children are marked by hostility. Violence within the family is a breeding-ground of resentment and hatred in the most basic human relationships”.³⁹

52. No one can think that the weakening of the family as that natural society founded on marriage will prove beneficial to society as a whole. The contrary is true: it poses a threat to the mature growth of individuals, the cultivation of community values and the moral progress of cities and countries. There is a failure to realize that only the exclusive and indissoluble union between a man and a woman has a plenary role to play in society as a stable commitment that bears fruit in new life. We need to acknowledge the great variety of family situations that can offer a certain stability, but de facto or same-sex unions,

³⁸ ARGENTINIAN BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE, *Navega mar adentro* (31 May 2003), 42.

³⁹ MEXICAN BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE, *Que en Cristo Nuestra Paz México tenga vida digna* (15 February 2009), 67.

for example, may not simply be equated with marriage. No union that is temporary or closed to the transmission of life can ensure the future of society. But nowadays who is making an effort to strengthen marriages, to help married couples overcome their problems, to assist them in the work of raising children and, in general, to encourage the stability of the marriage bond?

53. “Some societies still maintain the practice of polygamy; in other places, arranged marriages are an enduring practice... In many places, not only in the West, the practice of living together before marriage is widespread, as well as a type of cohabitation which totally excludes any intention to marry”.⁴⁰ In various countries, legislation facilitates a growing variety of alternatives to marriage, with the result that marriage, with its characteristics of exclusivity, indissolubility and openness to life, comes to appear as an old-fashioned and outdated option. Many countries are witnessing a legal deconstruction of the family, tending to adopt models based almost exclusively on the autonomy of the individual will. Surely it is legitimate and right to reject older forms of the traditional family marked by authoritarianism and even violence, yet this should not lead to a disparagement of marriage itself, but rather to the rediscovery of its authentic meaning and its renewal. The strength of the family “lies in its

⁴⁰ *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 25.

capacity to love and to teach how to love. For all a family's problems, it can always grow, beginning with love".⁴¹

54. In this brief overview, I would like to stress the fact that, even though significant advances have been made in the recognition of women's rights and their participation in public life, in some countries much remains to be done to promote these rights. Unacceptable customs still need to be eliminated. I think particularly of the shameful ill-treatment to which women are sometimes subjected, domestic violence and various forms of enslavement which, rather than a show of masculine power, are craven acts of cowardice. The verbal, physical, and sexual violence that women endure in some marriages contradicts the very nature of the conjugal union. I think of the reprehensible genital mutilation of women practiced in some cultures, but also of their lack of equal access to dignified work and roles of decision-making. History is burdened by the excesses of patriarchal cultures that considered women inferior, yet in our own day, we cannot overlook the use of surrogate mothers and "the exploitation and commercialization of the female body in the current media culture".⁴² There are those who believe that many of today's problems have arisen because of feminine eman-

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴² *Catechesis* (22 April 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 23 April 2015, p. 7.

cipation. This argument, however, is not valid, “it is false, untrue, a form of male chauvinism”.⁴³ The equal dignity of men and women makes us rejoice to see old forms of discrimination disappear, and within families there is a growing reciprocity. If certain forms of feminism have arisen which we must consider inadequate, we must nonetheless see in the women’s movement the working of the Spirit for a clearer recognition of the dignity and rights of women.

55. Men “play an equally decisive role in family life, particularly with regard to the protection and support of their wives and children... Many men are conscious of the importance of their role in the family and live their masculinity accordingly. The absence of a father gravely affects family life and the upbringing of children and their integration into society. This absence, which may be physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual, deprives children of a suitable father figure”.⁴⁴

56. Yet another challenge is posed by the various forms of an ideology of gender that “denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family. This ideology leads to educational programmes and

⁴³ *Catechesis* (29 April 2015): *L’Osservatore Romano*, 30 April 2015, p. 8.

⁴⁴ *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 28.

legislative enactments that promote a personal identity and emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female. Consequently, human identity becomes the choice of the individual, one which can also change over time”.⁴⁵ It is a source of concern that some ideologies of this sort, which seek to respond to what are at times understandable aspirations, manage to assert themselves as absolute and unquestionable, even dictating how children should be raised. It needs to be emphasized that “biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated”.⁴⁶ On the other hand, “the technological revolution in the field of human procreation has introduced the ability to manipulate the reproductive act, making it independent of the sexual relationship between a man and a woman. In this way, human life and parenthood have become modular and separable realities, subject mainly to the wishes of individuals or couples”.⁴⁷ It is one thing to be understanding of human weakness and the complexities of life, and another to accept ideologies that attempt to sunder what are inseparable aspects of reality. Let us not fall into the sin of trying to replace the Creator. We are creatures, and not omnipotent. Creation is prior to us and must be received as a gift. At the same time, we are called to protect

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

our humanity, and this means, in the first place, accepting it and respecting it as it was created.

57. I thank God that many families, which are far from considering themselves perfect, live in love, fulfil their calling and keep moving forward, even if they fall many times along the way. The Synod's reflections show us that there is no stereotype of the ideal family, but rather a challenging mosaic made up of many different realities, with all their joys, hopes and problems. The situations that concern us are challenges. We should not be trapped into wasting our energy in doleful laments, but rather seek new forms of missionary creativity. In every situation that presents itself, "the Church is conscious of the need to offer a word of truth and hope... The great values of marriage and the Christian family correspond to a yearning that is part and parcel of human existence".⁴⁸ If we see any number of problems, these should be, as the Bishops of Colombia have said, a summons to "revive our hope and to make it the source of prophetic visions, transformative actions and creative forms of charity".⁴⁹

⁴⁸ *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 11.

⁴⁹ COLOMBIAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCE, *A tiempos difíciles, colombianos nuevos* (13 February 2003), 3.

CHAPTER THREE

LOOKING TO JESUS:
THE VOCATION OF THE FAMILY

58. In and among families, the Gospel message should always resound; the core of that message, the kerygma, is what is “most beautiful, most excellent, most appealing and at the same time most necessary”.⁵⁰ This message “has to occupy the centre of all evangelizing activity”.⁵¹ It is the first and most important proclamation, “which we must hear again and again in different ways, and which we must always announce in one form or another”.⁵² Indeed, “nothing is more solid, profound, secure, meaningful and wise than that message”. In effect, “all Christian formation consists of entering more deeply into the kerygma”.⁵³

59. Our teaching on marriage and the family cannot fail to be inspired and transformed by this message of love and tenderness; otherwise, it becomes nothing more than the defence of a dry and lifeless doctrine. The mystery of the

⁵⁰ Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 35: AAS 105 (2013), 1034.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 164: AAS 105 (2013), 1088.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 165: AAS 105 (2013), 1089.

Christian family can be fully understood only in the light of the Father's infinite love revealed in Christ, who gave himself up for our sake and who continues to dwell in our midst. I now wish to turn my gaze to the living Christ, who is at the heart of so many love stories, and to invoke the fire of the Spirit upon all the world's families.

60. This brief chapter, then, will summarize the Church's teaching on marriage and the family. Here too I will mention what the Synod Fathers had to say about the light offered by our faith. They began with the gaze of Jesus and they spoke of how he "looked upon the women and men whom he met with love and tenderness, accompanying their steps in truth, patience and mercy as he proclaimed the demands of the Kingdom of God".⁵⁴ The Lord is also with us today, as we seek to practice and pass on the Gospel of the family.

JESUS RESTORES AND FULFILLS GOD'S PLAN

61. Contrary to those who rejected marriage as evil, the New Testament teaches that "everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected" (*1 Tim* 4:4). Marriage is "a gift" from the Lord (*1 Cor* 7:7). At the same time, precisely because of this positive understanding, the New Testament strongly emphasizes the need to safeguard God's gift: "Let marriage be held in honour

⁵⁴ *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 12.

among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled” (*Heb* 13:4). This divine gift includes sexuality: “Do not refuse one another” (*1 Cor* 7:5).

62. The Synod Fathers noted that Jesus, “in speaking of God’s original plan for man and woman, reaffirmed the indissoluble union between them, even stating that ‘it was for your hardness of heart that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so’ (*Mt* 19:8). The indissolubility of marriage – ‘what God has joined together, let no man put asunder’ (*Mt* 19:6) – should not be viewed as a ‘yoke’ imposed on humanity, but as a ‘gift’ granted to those who are joined in marriage... God’s indulgent love always accompanies our human journey; through grace, it heals and transforms hardened hearts, leading them back to the beginning through the way of the cross. The Gospels clearly present the example of Jesus who... proclaimed the meaning of marriage as the fullness of revelation that restores God’s original plan (cf. *Mt* 19:3)”.⁵⁵

63. “Jesus, who reconciled all things in himself, restored marriage and the family to their original form (cf. *Mt* 10:1-12). Marriage and the family have been redeemed by Christ (cf. *Eph* 5:21-32) and restored in the image of the Holy Trinity, the mystery from which all true love flows. The

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

spousal covenant, originating in creation and revealed in the history of salvation, takes on its full meaning in Christ and his Church. Through his Church, Christ bestows on marriage and the family the grace necessary to bear witness to the love of God and to live the life of communion. The Gospel of the family spans the history of the world, from the creation of man and woman in the image and likeness of God (cf. *Gen* 1:26-27), to the fulfilment of the mystery of the covenant in Christ at the end of time with the marriage of the Lamb (cf. *Rev* 19:9)".⁵⁶

64. "The example of Jesus is a paradigm for the Church... He began his public ministry with the miracle at the wedding feast of Cana (cf. *Jn* 2:1-11). He shared in everyday moments of friendship with the family of Lazarus and his sisters (cf. *Lk* 10:38) and with the family of Peter (cf. *Mk* 8:14). He sympathized with grieving parents and restored their children to life (cf. *Mk* 5:41; *Lk* 7:14-15). In this way he demonstrated the true meaning of mercy, which entails the restoration of the covenant (cf. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 4). This is clear from his conversations with the Samaritan woman (cf. *Jn* 1:4-30) and with the woman found in adultery (cf. *Jn* 8:1-11), where the consciousness of sin is awakened by an encounter with Jesus' gratuitous love".⁵⁷

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁷ *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 41.

65. The incarnation of the Word in a human family, in Nazareth, by its very newness changed the history of the world. We need to enter into the mystery of Jesus' birth, into that "yes" given by Mary to the message of the angel, when the Word was conceived in her womb, as well as the "yes" of Joseph, who gave a name to Jesus and watched over Mary. We need to contemplate the joy of the shepherds before the manger, the adoration of the Magi and the flight into Egypt, in which Jesus shares his people's experience of exile, persecution and humiliation. We need to contemplate the religious expectation of Zechariah and his joy at the birth of John the Baptist, the fulfilment of the promise made known to Simeon and Anna in the Temple and the marvel of the teachers of the Law who listened to the wisdom of the child Jesus. We then need to peer into those thirty long years when Jesus earned his keep by the work of his hands, reciting the traditional prayers and expressions of his people's faith and coming to know that ancestral faith until he made it bear fruit in the mystery of the Kingdom. This is the mystery of Christmas and the secret of Nazareth, exuding the beauty of family life! It was this that so fascinated Francis of Assisi, Theresa of the Child Jesus and Charles de Foucauld, and continues to fill Christian families with hope and joy.

66. "The covenant of love and fidelity lived by the Holy Family of Nazareth illuminates the

principle which gives shape to every family, and enables it better to face the vicissitudes of life and history. On this basis, every family, despite its weaknesses, can become a light in the darkness of the world. ‘Nazareth teaches us the meaning of family life, its loving communion, its simple and austere beauty, its sacred and inviolable character. May it teach how sweet and irreplaceable is its training, how fundamental and incomparable its role in the social order’ (Paul VI, *Address in Nazareth*, 5 January 1964).⁵⁸

THE FAMILY IN THE DOCUMENTS OF THE CHURCH

67. The Second Vatican Council, in its Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, was concerned “to promote the dignity of marriage and the family (cf. Nos. 47-52)”. The Constitution “defined marriage as a community of life and love (cf. 48), placing love at the centre of the family... ‘True love between husband and wife’ (49) involves mutual self-giving, includes and integrates the sexual and affective dimensions, in accordance with God’s plan (cf. 48-49)”. The conciliar document also emphasizes “the grounding of the spouses in Christ. Christ the Lord ‘makes himself present to the Christian spouses in the sacrament of marriage’ (48) and remains with them. In the incarnation, he assumes human love, purifies it and brings it to fulfilment. By his Spirit, he gives

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

spouses the capacity to live that love, permeating every part of their lives of faith, hope and charity. In this way, the spouses are consecrated and by means of a special grace build up the Body of Christ and form a domestic church (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 11), so that the Church, in order fully to understand her mystery, looks to the Christian family, which manifests her in a real way”.⁵⁹

68. “Blessed Paul VI, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, further developed the Church’s teaching on marriage and the family. In a particular way, with the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* he brought out the intrinsic bond between conjugal love and the generation of life: ‘Married love requires of husband and wife the full awareness of their obligations in the matter of responsible parenthood, which today, rightly enough, is much insisted upon, but which at the same time must be rightly understood... The exercise of responsible parenthood requires that husband and wife, keeping a right order of priorities, recognize their own duties towards God, themselves, their families and human society’ (No. 10). In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Paul VI highlighted the relationship between the family and the Church”.⁶⁰

69. “Saint John Paul II devoted special attention to the family in his catecheses on human love, in his Letter to Families *Gratissimam Sane* and

⁵⁹ *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 17.

⁶⁰ *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 43.

particularly in his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*. In these documents, the Pope defined the family as ‘the way of the Church’. He also offered a general vision of the vocation of men and women to love, and proposed basic guidelines for the pastoral care of the family and for the role of the family in society. In particular, by treating conjugal love (cf. No. 13), he described how spouses, in their mutual love, receive the gift of the Spirit of Christ and live their call to holiness”.⁶¹

70. “Pope Benedict XVI, in his Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, returned to the topic of the truth of the love of man and woman, which is fully illuminated only in the love of the crucified Christ (cf. No. 2). He stressed that ‘marriage based on an exclusive and definitive love becomes an icon of the relationship between God and his people, and vice versa. God’s way of loving becomes the measure of human love’ (11). Moreover, in the Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, he highlighted the importance of love as a principle of life in society (cf. 44), a place where we learn the experience of the common good”.⁶²

THE SACRAMENT OF MATRIMONY

71. “Scripture and Tradition give us access to a knowledge of the Trinity, which is revealed with

⁶¹ *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 18.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 19.

the features of a family. The family is the image of God, who is a communion of persons. At Christ's baptism, the Father's voice was heard, calling Jesus his beloved Son, and in this love we can recognize the Holy Spirit (cf. *Mk* 1:10-11). Jesus, who reconciled all things in himself and redeemed us from sin, not only returned marriage and the family to their original form, but also raised marriage to the sacramental sign of his love for the Church (cf. *Mt* 19:1-12; *Mk* 10:1-12; *Eph* 5:21-32). In the human family, gathered by Christ, 'the image and likeness' of the Most Holy Trinity (cf. *Gen* 1:26) has been restored, the mystery from which all true love flows. Through the Church, marriage and the family receive the grace of the Holy Spirit from Christ, in order to bear witness to the Gospel of God's love".⁶³

72. The sacrament of marriage is not a social convention, an empty ritual or merely the outward sign of a commitment. The sacrament is a gift given for the sanctification and salvation of the spouses, since "their mutual belonging is a real representation, through the sacramental sign, of the same relationship between Christ and the Church. The married couple are therefore a permanent reminder for the Church of what took place on the cross; they are for one another and for their children witnesses of the salvation in which they share through the

⁶³ *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 38.

sacrament”.⁶⁴ Marriage is a vocation, inasmuch as it is a response to a specific call to experience conjugal love as an imperfect sign of the love between Christ and the Church. Consequently, the decision to marry and to have a family ought to be the fruit of a process of vocational discernment.

73. “Mutual self-giving in the sacrament of matrimony is grounded in the grace of baptism, which establishes the foundational covenant of every person with Christ in the Church. In accepting each other, and with Christ’s grace, the engaged couple promise each other total self-giving, faithfulness and openness to new life. The couple recognizes these elements as constitutive of marriage, gifts offered to them by God, and take seriously their mutual commitment, in God’s name and in the presence of the Church. Faith thus makes it possible for them to assume the goods of marriage as commitments that can be better kept through the help of the grace of the sacrament... Consequently, the Church looks to married couples as the heart of the entire family, which, in turn, looks to Jesus”.⁶⁵ The sacrament is not a “thing” or a “power”, for in it Christ himself “now encounters Christian spouses... He dwells with them, gives them the strength to take up their crosses and so

⁶⁴ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (22 November 1981), 13: AAS 74 (1982), 94.

⁶⁵ *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 21.

follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another's burdens".⁶⁶ Christian marriage is a sign of how much Christ loved his Church in the covenant sealed on the cross, yet it also makes that love present in the communion of the spouses. By becoming one flesh, they embody the espousal of our human nature by the Son of God. That is why "in the joys of their love and family life, he gives them here on earth a foretaste of the wedding feast of the Lamb".⁶⁷ Even though the analogy between the human couple of husband and wife, and that of Christ and his Church, is "imperfect",⁶⁸ it inspires us to beg the Lord to bestow on every married couple an outpouring of his divine love.

74. Sexual union, lovingly experienced and sanctified by the sacrament, is in turn a path of growth in the life of grace for the couple. It is the "nuptial mystery".⁶⁹ The meaning and value of their physical union is expressed in the words of consent, in which they accepted and offered themselves each to the other, in order to share their lives completely. Those words give meaning to the sexual relationship and free it

⁶⁶ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1642.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Catechesis (6 May 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 7 May 2015, p. 8.

⁶⁹ LEO THE GREAT, *Epistula Rustico Narbonensi Episcopo*, Inquis. IV: PL 54, 1205A; cf. HINCMAR OF RHEIMS, *Epist.* 22: PL 126, 142.

from ambiguity. More generally, the common life of husband and wife, the entire network of relations that they build with their children and the world around them, will be steeped in and strengthened by the grace of the sacrament. For the sacrament of marriage flows from the incarnation and the paschal mystery, whereby God showed the fullness of his love for humanity by becoming one with us. Neither of the spouses will be alone in facing whatever challenges may come their way. Both are called to respond to God's gift with commitment, creativity, perseverance and daily effort. They can always invoke the assistance of the Holy Spirit who consecrated their union, so that his grace may be felt in every new situation that they encounter.

75. In the Church's Latin tradition, the ministers of the sacrament of marriage are the man and the woman who marry;⁷⁰ by manifesting their consent and expressing it physically, they receive a great gift. Their consent and their bodily union are the divinely appointed means whereby they become "one flesh". By their baptismal consecration, they were enabled to join in marriage as the Lord's ministers and thus to respond to God's call. Hence, when two non-Christian spouses receive baptism, they need not renew their marriage vows; they need

⁷⁰ Cf. PIUS XII, Encyclical Letter *Mystici Corporis Christi* (29 June 1943): AAS 35 (1943), 202: "*Matrimonio enim quo coniuges sibi invicem sunt ministri gratiae ...*"

simply not reject them, since by the reception of baptism their union automatically becomes sacramental. Canon Law also recognizes the validity of certain unions celebrated without the presence of an ordained minister.⁷¹ The natural order has been so imbued with the redemptive grace of Jesus that “a valid matrimonial contract cannot exist between the baptized without it being by that fact a sacrament”.⁷² The Church can require that the wedding be celebrated publicly, with the presence of witnesses and other conditions that have varied over the course of time, but this does not detract from the fact that the couple who marry are the ministers of the sacrament. Nor does it affect the centrality of the consent given by the man and the woman, which of itself establishes the sacramental bond. This having been said, there is a need for further reflection on God’s action in the marriage rite; this is clearly manifested in the Oriental Churches through the importance of the blessing that the couple receive as a sign of the gift of the Spirit.

SEEDS OF THE WORD AND IMPERFECT SITUATIONS

76. “The Gospel of the family also nourishes seeds that are still waiting to grow, and serves as the basis for caring for those plants that are

⁷¹ Cf. Code of Canon Law, cc. 1116; 1161-1165; Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches, 832; 848-852.

⁷² *Ibid.*, c. 1055 §2.

wilting and must not be neglected.”⁷³ Thus, building on the gift of Christ in the sacrament, married couples “may be led patiently further on in order to achieve a deeper grasp and a fuller integration of this mystery in their lives”.⁷⁴

77. Appealing to the Bible’s teaching that all was created through Christ and for Christ (cf. *Col* 1:16), the Synod Fathers noted that “the order of redemption illuminates and fulfils that of creation. Natural marriage, therefore, is fully understood in the light of its fulfilment in the sacrament of Matrimony: only in contemplating Christ does a person come to know the deepest truth about human relationships. ‘Only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light... Christ, the new Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to himself and makes his supreme calling clear’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22). It is particularly helpful to understand in a Christocentric key... the good of the spouses (*bonum coniugum*)”,⁷⁵ which includes unity, openness to life, fidelity, indissolubility and, within Christian marriage, mutual support on the path towards complete friendship with the Lord. “Discernment of the presence of ‘seeds of the Word’ in other cultures (cf. *Ad Gentes* 11) can also apply to the reality of

⁷³ *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 23.

⁷⁴ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (22 November 1981), 9: AAS 74 (1982), 90.

⁷⁵ *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 47.

marriage and the family. In addition to true natural marriage, positive elements exist in the forms of marriage found in other religious traditions”,⁷⁶ even if, at times, obscurely. We can readily say that “anyone who wants to bring into this world a family which teaches children to be excited by every gesture aimed at overcoming evil – a family which shows that the Spirit is alive and at work – will encounter our gratitude and our appreciation. Whatever the people, religion or region to which they belong!”⁷⁷

78. “The light of Christ enlightens every person (cf. *Jn* 1:9; *Gaudium et Spes*, 22). Seeing things with the eyes of Christ inspires the Church’s pastoral care for the faithful who are living together, or are only married civilly, or are divorced and remarried. Following this divine pedagogy, the Church turns with love to those who participate in her life in an imperfect manner: she seeks the grace of conversion for them; she encourages them to do good, to take loving care of each other and to serve the community in which they live and work... When a couple in an irregular union attains a noteworthy stability through a public bond – and is characterized by deep affection, responsibility towards the children and the ability to overcome trials – this can be seen as an opportunity,

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Homily for the Concluding Mass of the Eighth World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia* (27 September 2015): *L’Osservatore Romano*, 28-29 September 2015, p. 7.

where possible, to lead them to celebrate the sacrament of Matrimony”.⁷⁸

79. “When faced with difficult situations and wounded families, it is always necessary to recall this general principle: ‘Pastors must know that, for the sake of truth, they are obliged to exercise careful discernment of situations’ (*Familiaris Consortio*, 84). The degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases and factors may exist which limit the ability to make a decision. Therefore, while clearly stating the Church’s teaching, pastors are to avoid judgements that do not take into account the complexity of various situations, and they are to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience and endure distress because of their condition”.⁷⁹

THE TRANSMISSION OF LIFE AND THE REARING OF CHILDREN

80. Marriage is firstly an “intimate partnership of life and love”⁸⁰ which is a good for the spouses themselves,⁸¹ while sexuality is “ordered to the conjugal love of man and woman”.⁸² It

⁷⁸ *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 53-54.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁸⁰ SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 48.

⁸¹ Cf. Code of Canon Law, c. 1055 § 1: “*ad bonum coniugum atque ad prolis generationem et educationem ordinatum*”.

⁸² Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2360.

follows that “spouses to whom God has not granted children can have a conjugal life full of meaning, in both human and Christian terms”.⁸³ Nonetheless, the conjugal union is ordered to procreation “by its very nature”.⁸⁴ The child who is born “does not come from outside as something added on to the mutual love of the spouses, but springs from the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and fulfilment”.⁸⁵ He or she does not appear at the end of a process, but is present from the beginning of love as an essential feature, one that cannot be denied without disfiguring that love itself. From the outset, love refuses every impulse to close in on itself; it is open to a fruitfulness that draws it beyond itself. Hence no genital act of husband and wife can refuse this meaning,⁸⁶ even when for various reasons it may not always in fact beget a new life.

81. A child deserves to be born of that love, and not by any other means, for “he or she is not something owed to one, but is a gift”,⁸⁷ which is “the fruit of the specific act of the conjugal

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 1654.

⁸⁴ SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 48.

⁸⁵ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2366.

⁸⁶ Cf. PAUL VI, Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae* (25 July 1968), 11-12: AAS 60 (1968), 488-489.

⁸⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2378.

love of the parents”.⁸⁸ This is the case because, “according to the order of creation, conjugal love between a man and a woman, and the transmission of life are ordered to each other (cf. *Gen* 1:27-28). Thus the Creator made man and woman share in the work of his creation and, at the same time, made them instruments of his love, entrusting to them the responsibility for the future of mankind, through the transmission of human life”.⁸⁹

82. The Synod Fathers stated that “the growth of a mentality that would reduce the generation of human life to one variable of an individual’s or a couple’s plans is clearly evident”.⁹⁰ The Church’s teaching is meant to “help couples to experience in a complete, harmonious and conscious way their communion as husband and wife, together with their responsibility for procreating life. We need to return to the message of the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* of Blessed Pope Paul VI, which highlights the need to respect the dignity of the person in morally assessing methods of regulating birth... The choice of adoption or foster parenting can also express that fruitfulness which is a characteristic of married life”.⁹¹ With special gratitude the Church “supports families

⁸⁸ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Instruction *Donum Vitae* (22 February 1987), II, 8: AAS 80 (1988), 97.

⁸⁹ *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 63.

⁹⁰ *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 57.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

who accept, raise and surround with affection children with various disabilities”.⁹²

83. Here I feel it urgent to state that, if the family is the sanctuary of life, the place where life is conceived and cared for, it is a horrendous contradiction when it becomes a place where life is rejected and destroyed. So great is the value of a human life, and so inalienable the right to life of an innocent child growing in the mother’s womb, that no alleged right to one’s own body can justify a decision to terminate that life, which is an end in itself and which can never be considered the “property” of another human being. The family protects human life in all its stages, including its last. Consequently, “those who work in healthcare facilities are reminded of the moral duty of conscientious objection. Similarly, the Church not only feels the urgency to assert the right to a natural death, without aggressive treatment and euthanasia”, but likewise “firmly rejects the death penalty”.⁹³

84. The Synod Fathers also wished to emphasize that “one of the fundamental challenges facing families today is undoubtedly that of raising children, made all the more difficult and complex by today’s cultural reality and the powerful influence of the media”.⁹⁴ “The Church assumes a

⁹² *Ibid.*, 57.

⁹³ *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 64.

⁹⁴ *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 60.

valuable role in supporting families, starting with Christian initiation, through welcoming communities”.⁹⁵ At the same time I feel it important to reiterate that the overall education of children is a “most serious duty” and at the same time a “primary right” of parents.⁹⁶ This is not just a task or a burden, but an essential and inalienable right that parents are called to defend and of which no one may claim to deprive them. The State offers educational programmes in a subsidiary way, supporting the parents in their indeclinable role; parents themselves enjoy the right to choose freely the kind of education – accessible and of good quality – which they wish to give their children in accordance with their convictions. Schools do not replace parents, but complement them. This is a basic principle: “all other participants in the process of education are only able to carry out their responsibilities in the name of the parents, with their consent and, to a certain degree, with their authorization”.⁹⁷ Still, “a rift has opened up between the family and society, between family and the school; the educational pact today has been broken and thus the educational alliance between society and the family is in crisis”.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 61

⁹⁶ Code of Canon Law, c. 1136; cf. Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches, 627.

⁹⁷ PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE FAMILY, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* (8 December 1995), 23.

⁹⁸ Catechesis (20 May 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 21 May 2015, p. 8.

85. The Church is called to cooperate with parents through suitable pastoral initiatives, assisting them in the fulfilment of their educational mission. She must always do this by helping them to appreciate their proper role and to realize that by their reception of the sacrament of marriage they become ministers of their children's education. In educating them, they build up the Church,⁹⁹ and in so doing, they accept a God-given vocation.¹⁰⁰

THE FAMILY AND THE CHURCH

86. “With inner joy and deep comfort, the Church looks to the families who remain faithful to the teachings of the Gospel, encouraging them and thanking them for the testimony they offer. For they bear witness, in a credible way, to the beauty of marriage as indissoluble and perpetually faithful. Within the family ‘which could be called a domestic church’ (*Lumen Gentium*, 11), individuals enter upon an ecclesial experience of communion among persons, which reflects, through grace, the mystery of the Holy Trinity. ‘Here one learns endurance and the joy of work, fraternal love, generous – even repeated – forgiveness, and above all divine worship in prayer

⁹⁹ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (28 November 1981) 38: AAS 74 (1982), 129.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. *Address to the Diocesan Conference of Rome* (14 June 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 15-16 June 2015, p. 8.

and the offering of one's life' (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1657)".¹⁰¹

87. The Church is a family of families, constantly enriched by the lives of all those domestic churches. "In virtue of the sacrament of matrimony, every family becomes, in effect, a good for the Church. From this standpoint, reflecting on the interplay between the family and the Church will prove a precious gift for the Church in our time. The Church is good for the family, and the family is good for the Church. The safeguarding of the Lord's gift in the sacrament of matrimony is a concern not only of individual families but of the entire Christian community".¹⁰²

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

¹⁰¹ *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 23.

¹⁰² *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 52.

to seniors – are just a few of the fruits which make the response to the vocation of the family unique and irreplaceable”,¹⁰³ both for the Church and for society as a whole.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

lead people to think that the Church maintains a double standard.

MITIGATING FACTORS IN PASTORAL DISCERNMENT

301. For an adequate understanding of the possibility and need of special discernment in certain “irregular” situations, one thing must always be taken into account, lest anyone think that the demands of the Gospel are in any way being compromised. The Church possesses a solid body of reflection concerning mitigating factors and situations. Hence it is can no longer simply be said that all those in any “irregular” situation are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace. More is involved here than mere ignorance of the rule. A subject may know full well the rule, yet have great difficulty in understanding “its inherent values”,³³⁹ or be in a concrete situation which does not allow him or her to act differently and decide otherwise without further sin. As the Synod Fathers put it, “factors may exist which limit the ability to make a decision”.³⁴⁰ Saint Thomas Aquinas himself recognized that someone may possess grace and charity, yet not be able to exercise any one of the virtues well;³⁴¹ in other words, although someone may possess all the infused moral

³³⁹ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (22 November 1981), 33: AAS 74 (1982), 121.

³⁴⁰ *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 51.

³⁴¹ Cf. *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 65, art. 3 ad 2; *De Malo*, q. 2, art. 2.

virtues, he does not clearly manifest the existence of one of them, because the outward practice of that virtue is rendered difficult: “Certain saints are said not to possess certain virtues, in so far as they experience difficulty in the acts of those virtues, even though they have the habits of all the virtues”.³⁴²

302. The Catechism of the Catholic Church clearly mentions these factors: “imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors”.³⁴³ In another paragraph, the Catechism refers once again to circumstances which mitigate moral responsibility, and mentions at length “affective immaturity, force of acquired habit, conditions of anxiety or other psychological or social factors that lessen or even extenuate moral culpability”.³⁴⁴ For this reason, a negative judgment about an objective situation does not imply a judgment about the imputability or culpability of the person

³⁴² *Ibid.*, ad 3.

³⁴³ No. 1735.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2352; CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Declaration on Euthanasia *Intra et Bona* (5 May 1980), II: AAS 72 (1980), 546; John Paul II, in his critique of the category of “fundamental option”, recognized that “doubtless there can occur situations which are very complex and obscure from a psychological viewpoint, and which have an influence on the sinner’s subjective culpability” (Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* [2 December 1984], 17: AAS 77 [1985], 223).

involved.³⁴⁵ On the basis of these convictions, I consider very fitting what many Synod Fathers wanted to affirm: “Under certain circumstances people find it very difficult to act differently. Therefore, while upholding a general rule, it is necessary to recognize that responsibility with respect to certain actions or decisions is not the same in all cases. Pastoral discernment, while taking into account a person’s properly formed conscience, must take responsibility for these situations. Even the consequences of actions taken are not necessarily the same in all cases”.³⁴⁶

303. Recognizing the influence of such concrete factors, we can add that individual conscience needs to be better incorporated into the Church’s praxis in certain situations which do not objectively embody our understanding of marriage. Naturally, every effort should be made to encourage the development of an enlightened conscience, formed and guided by the responsible and serious discernment of one’s pastor, and to encourage an ever greater trust in God’s grace. Yet conscience can do more than recognize that a given situation does not correspond objectively to the overall demands of the Gospel. It can also recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which

³⁴⁵ Cf. PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR LEGISLATIVE TEXTS, *Declaration Concerning the Admission to Holy Communion of Faithful Who are Divorced and Remarried* (24 June 2000), 2.

³⁴⁶ *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 85.

can be given to God, and come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one's limits, while yet not fully the objective ideal. In any event, let us recall that this discernment is dynamic; it must remain ever open to new stages of growth and to new decisions which can enable the ideal to be more fully realized.

RULES AND DISCERNMENT

304. It is reductive simply to consider whether or not an individual's actions correspond to a general law or rule, because that is not enough to discern and ensure full fidelity to God in the concrete life of a human being. I earnestly ask that we always recall a teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas and learn to incorporate it in our pastoral discernment: "Although there is necessity in the general principles, the more we descend to matters of detail, the more frequently we encounter defects... In matters of action, truth or practical rectitude is not the same for all, as to matters of detail, but only as to the general principles; and where there is the same rectitude in matters of detail, it is not equally known to all... The principle will be found to fail, according as we descend further into detail".³⁴⁷ It is true that general rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded or neglected, but in their formulation they cannot provide absolutely for all

³⁴⁷ *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 94, art. 4.

particular situations. At the same time, it must be said that, precisely for that reason, what is part of a practical discernment in particular circumstances cannot be elevated to the level of a rule. That would not only lead to an intolerable casuistry, but would endanger the very values which must be preserved with special care.³⁴⁸

305. For this reason, a pastor cannot feel that it is enough simply to apply moral laws to those living in “irregular” situations, as if they were stones to throw at people’s lives. This would bespeak the closed heart of one used to hiding behind the Church’s teachings, “sitting on the chair of Moses and judging at times with superiority and superficiality difficult cases and wounded families”.³⁴⁹ Along these same lines, the International Theological Commission has noted that “natural law could not be presented as an already established set of rules that impose themselves *a priori* on the moral subject; rather, it is a source of objective inspiration for the deeply personal process of making decisions”.³⁵⁰ Because of

³⁴⁸ In another text, referring to the general knowledge of the rule and the particular knowledge of practical discernment, Saint Thomas states that “if only one of the two is present, it is preferable that it be the knowledge of the particular reality, which is closer to the act”: *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, VI, 6 (ed. Leonina, t. XLVII, 354.)

³⁴⁹ *Address for the Conclusion of the Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops* (24 October 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 26-27 October 2015, p. 13.

³⁵⁰ INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at Natural Law* (2009), 59.

forms of conditioning and mitigating factors, it is possible that in an objective situation of sin – which may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such – a person can be living in God’s grace, can love and can also grow in the life of grace and charity, while receiving the Church’s help to this end.³⁵¹ Discernment must help to find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of limits. By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God. Let us remember that “a small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order, but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties”.³⁵² The practical pastoral care of ministers and of communities must not fail to embrace this reality.

306. In every situation, when dealing with those who have difficulties in living God’s law to the full, the invitation to pursue the *via caritatis* must be clearly heard. Fraternal charity is the

³⁵¹ In certain cases, this can include the help of the sacraments. Hence, “I want to remind priests that the confessional must not be a torture chamber, but rather an encounter with the Lord’s mercy” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* [24 November 2013], 44: AAS 105 [2013], 1038). I would also point out that the Eucharist “is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak” (*ibid.*, 47: 1039).

³⁵² Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 44: AAS 105 (2013), 1038-1039.

first law of Christians (cf. *Jn* 15:12; *Gal* 5:14). Let us not forget the reassuring words of Scripture: “Maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins” (*1 Pet* 4:8); “Atone for your sins with righteousness, and your iniquities with mercy to the oppressed, so that your prosperity may be prolonged” (*Dan* 4:24[27]); “As water extinguishes a blazing fire, so almsgiving atones for sins” (*Sir* 3:30). This is also what Saint Augustine teaches: “Just as, at the threat of a fire, we would run for water to extinguish it... so too, if the flame of sin rises from our chaff and we are troubled, if the chance to perform a work of mercy is offered us, let us rejoice in it, as if it were a fountain offered us to extinguish the blaze”.³⁵³

THE LOGIC OF PASTORAL MERCY

307. In order to avoid all misunderstanding, I would point out that in no way must the Church desist from proposing the full ideal of marriage, God’s plan in all its grandeur: “Young people who are baptized should be encouraged to understand that the sacrament of marriage can enrich their prospects of love and that they can be sustained by the grace of Christ in the sacrament and by the possibility of participating fully in the

³⁵³ *De Catechizandis Rudibus*, I, 14, 22: PL 40, 327; cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 194: AAS 105 (2013), 1101.

life of the Church”.³⁵⁴ 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.

308. At the same time, from our awareness of the weight of mitigating circumstances – psychological, historical and even biological – it follows that “without detracting from the evangelical ideal, there is a need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively appear”, making room for “the Lord’s mercy, which spurs us on to do our best”.³⁵⁵ I understand those who prefer a more rigorous pastoral care which leaves no room for confusion. But I sincerely believe that Jesus wants a Church attentive to the goodness which the Holy Spirit sows in the midst of human weakness, a Mother who, while clearly expressing her objective teaching, “always does what good she can, even if in the process, her

³⁵⁴ *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 26.

³⁵⁵ Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 44: AAS 105 (2013), 1038.

shoes get soiled by the mud of the street”.³⁵⁶ The Church’s pastors, in proposing to the faithful the full ideal of the Gospel and the Church’s teaching, must also help them to treat the weak with compassion, avoiding aggravation or unduly harsh or hasty judgements. The Gospel itself tells us not to judge or condemn (cf. *Mt* 7:1; *Lk* 6:37). Jesus “expects us to stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune, and instead to enter into the reality of other people’s lives and to know the power of tenderness. Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated”.³⁵⁷

309. It is providential that these reflections take place in the context of a Holy Year devoted to mercy, because also in the variety of situations affecting families “the Church is commissioned to proclaim the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel, which in its own way must penetrate the mind and heart of every person. The Bride of Christ must pattern her behaviour after the Son of God who goes out to everyone without exception”.³⁵⁸ She knows that Jesus himself is the shepherd of the hundred, not just of the ninety-nine. He loves them all. On the basis of this realization, it will become possible for “the

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 270.

³⁵⁸ Bull *Misericordiae Vultus* (11 April 2015), 12: AAS 107 (2015): 407.

balm of mercy to reach everyone, believers and those far away, as a sign that the kingdom of God is already present in our midst”.³⁵⁹

310. We cannot forget that “mercy is not only the working of the Father; it becomes a criterion for knowing who his true children are. In a word, we are called to show mercy because mercy was first shown to us”.³⁶⁰ This is not sheer romanticism or a lukewarm response to God’s love, which always seeks what is best for us, for “mercy is the very foundation of the Church’s life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness which she shows to believers; nothing in her preaching and her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy”.³⁶¹ It is true that at times “we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems”.³⁶²

311. The teaching of moral theology should not fail to incorporate these considerations, for although it is quite true that concern must be shown for the integrity of the Church’s moral teaching, special care should always be shown to emphasize and encourage the highest and most

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 5: 402.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 9: 405.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 10: 406.

³⁶² Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 47: AAS 105 (2013), 1040.

central values of the Gospel,³⁶³ particularly the primacy of charity as a response to the completely gratuitous offer of God's love. At times we find it hard to make room for God's unconditional love in our pastoral activity.³⁶⁴ We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance. That is the worst way of watering down the Gospel. It is true, for example, that mercy does not exclude justice and truth, but first and foremost we have to say that mercy is the fullness of justice and the most radiant manifestation of God's truth. For this reason, we should always consider "inadequate any theological conception which in the end puts in doubt the omnipotence of God and, especially, his mercy".³⁶⁵

312. This offers us a framework and a setting which help us avoid a cold bureaucratic morality in dealing with more sensitive issues. Instead, it sets us in the context of a pastoral discernment

³⁶³ Cf. *ibid.*, 36-37: AAS 105 (2013), 1035.

³⁶⁴ Perhaps out of a certain scrupulosity, concealed beneath a zeal for fidelity to the truth, some priests demand of penitents a purpose of amendment so lacking in nuance that it causes mercy to be obscured by the pursuit of a supposedly pure justice. For this reason, it is helpful to recall the teaching of Saint John Paul II, who stated that the possibility of a new fall "should not prejudice the authenticity of the resolution" (*Letter to Cardinal William W. Baum on the occasion of the Course on the Internal Forum organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary* [22 March 1996], 5: *Insegnamenti* XIX/1 [1996], 589).

³⁶⁵ INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptized* (19 April 2007), 2.

filled with merciful love, which is ever ready to understand, forgive, accompany, hope, and above all integrate. That is the mindset which should prevail in the Church and lead us to “open our hearts to those living on the outermost fringes of society”.³⁶⁶ I encourage the faithful who find themselves in complicated situations to speak confidently with their pastors or with other lay people whose lives are committed to the Lord. They may not always encounter in them a confirmation of their own ideas or desires, but they will surely receive some light to help them better understand their situation and discover a path to personal growth. I also encourage the Church’s pastors to listen to them with sensitivity and serenity, with a sincere desire to understand their plight and their point of view, in order to help them live better lives and to recognize their proper place in the Church.

³⁶⁶ Bull *Misericordiae Vultus* (11 April 2015), 15: AAS 107 (2015), 409.