

## *The Family: God's Dream for Humanity*

Dearest Sisters,

The World Meeting of Families that was held in Dublin, Ireland on August 21-26, 2018, at which Pope Francis participated for two days, inspired the choice of theme for this Circular on the family. It is a well-known topic, approached and studied in many circumstances and with diverse and qualified skills.

However, I am aware of the need to share with you some reflections on the family starting with its beauty, its 'points of light' and also the difficulties it is living. The fundamental reference is the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia* with the emphases taken from the Dublin event. They are ideas that can be useful to share with the young people and with the members of the Educating Communities as well.

We are grateful to Pope Francis who invites the families to rediscover how the Gospel continues to be joy for the world: in fact, the family is 'good news' for today's reality; it is God's dream for the whole of humanity.

With his presence and his words, the Holy Father courageously and decisively launches a clear message: the vision of the family as the generator of life and of hope in society and in the Church, even where there are fragility and weakness, conflicts and crises that seem to impede the full understanding of its original identity.

It is my wish that with the parents, children, elder custodians of memory, with all those who are searching, we can look at the family with the same eyes with which God has thought of it: with hope and trust.

### **The Beauty of the Family**

All the Popes have dedicated great attention to the family, the living cell of society and of the Church. The Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia* and the various messages of Pope Francis, up to the World Meeting of Families in Dublin, reaffirms the fundamental value of the family, almost as a hymn to the beauty of love.

And yet, we ask ourselves: can we speak of the beauty of the family today? What is the foundation of our trust in it? Does speaking of beauty does mean we are distant from a reality which instead, often shows us much suffering, wounds, incurable conflicts, to the point of thinking that the family has run its course?

Pope Francis says we can speak of beauty because the family remains good news for today's world. 'Good News', that is, Word of God and design of love that embraces all of creation and in it, the human person, apex of creation.

The beauty of the family finds its foundation in the 'yes' of God to the union between a man and a woman, in openness and at the service of life in all its stages. It is the 'yes' of God's commitment for a humanity that is often wounded, mistreated, marked by a lack of love. And it is only starting from God's 'yes' that the family can manifest, spread, and regenerate love in the world. Without love we cannot live as God's children, as spouses, parents, brothers and sisters (cf. Letter to Card. Kevin Joseph Farrell for the IX World Meeting of Families, 25 March 2017).

To express its intrinsic beauty, the family must rediscover itself as the original place of listening, of witness, and of the narration of the Word. In this sense, it means returning to the *initial proclamation*:

for the family and in its midst, there must always newly resound what is most beautiful, greatest, most appealing, and at the same time, most necessary, and it must occupy the center of evangelizing activity, “nothing is more solid, profound, secure, meaningful and wise than that message” (cf. *AI* 58).

The prayerful reading of God’s Word is the source of life and of love for the family because it acts in hearts with an ‘artisan’s work’ that shapes spousal and family spirituality and supports its fidelity. Pope Francis reaffirmed in Dublin “The family that prays together, stays together”.

God’s love is not only the foundation but also the vocation of the human person who cannot live without love. “Human beings cannot live without love. They remain beings incomprehensible to themselves; life is senseless, if love is not revealed to them, if they do not encounter love, if they do not experience it and make it their own, if they do not participate intimately in it” (*Redemptor hominis* 10).

The family’s vocation to love is at the same time a vocation to life. “The couple that loves and begets life is a true, living icon...capable of revealing God the Creator and Savior. Seen this way, the couple’s fruitful relationship becomes an image for understanding and describing the mystery of God Himself, because in the Christian vision of the Trinity, God is contemplated as Father, Son, and Spirit of love” ... (*AI* 11) and of the Church herself.

St. Paul affirms: “For this reason a man shall leave father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church!” (*Ep* 5,31-32). The beauty of the Christian family is therefore rooted in the mystery of God-Trinity and in the relationship of love between Christ and His Church. Thus, matrimony cannot be understood as a social contract, and empty rite, or simply the external sign of a commitment.

The Sacrament is a gift for the sanctification and salvation of the couple because their reciprocal belonging, through the sacramental sign, manifests the same relationship of Christ with the Church (cf. *AI* 72). In matrimony, Jesus assumes human love, purifies it, brings it to fullness, and gives the couple, with His Spirit, the ability to live it through a life 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” (*AL* 67). Without Jesus human love loses its original beauty.

Attention to the family on the part of the ecclesial community must therefore awaken the announcement of which it is the custodian: the family is an icon of the Trinity, an icon of the Church. “The Church, in order fully to understand her mystery, looks to the Christian family, which manifests her in a real way” (*AL* 67). By saving the family, not only does the Church become herself, but God shows His Face to the world in the human fabric of family relationships, realizes His dream for humanity, reveals the genuine beauty of being brothers and sisters in Christ, despite the challenges that can mark it. The family, in fact, is an Easter reality between difficulties and hopes.

### **The Family amid difficulties and hope**

The beauty of the family in God’s dream does not erase the reality of fragility, crisis, and problems that concern it. There are numerous societies that do not defend it or seek to destroy it in every way possible, encouraging unprecedented forms of social co-habitation.

The culture of the provisional, consumerism, hedonism and waste present in many societies does not, of course, encourage the family founded on marriage in its journey of openness to life and relationships and in generating the future and hope

The tensions arising from an individualistic culture of possession and enjoyment lead to intolerance, aggression, violence; without referring to some theories that are spreading, including that of gender.

Yet the family remains the first point of reference for every person and for every social reality, even if we must note that it is often left alone by the same institutions that should protect it, both at the economic level and especially at the level of accompaniment along the path of human and spiritual growth.

I will not enter into the specific difficulties that you can find in your reality in contact with children and young people, and that take many forms impossible to list in the short space of a circular. Instead, I want to emphasize the testimony of many families on the ‘points of light’ that Pope Francis highlighted in Dublin. In the General Audience of 29 August 2018, he defined this *IX World Meeting of Families* as

a “a prophetic, comforting experience, shared by many families committed to the Gospel way of marriage and to family life; disciple and missionary families, leaven of goodness, holiness, justice, and peace”.

The testimonies of conjugal love are narrated by couples of diverse age, culture, experiences. Families who have faced significant challenges and difficulties and who, thanks to solidarity, forgiveness, and the love of other families are ‘reborn’, have discovered the love of the Father, because God loves through our gestures of love.

The world urgently needs a ‘revolution of love’, of tenderness, and this revolution begins in the heart of the family. It is not a spectacular revolution, but one within everyone's reach, and is expressed through small gestures of goodness, of humanity that illumine the daily *routine*. Gestures and words that build, create communion, *put people back on their feet*, shape ‘next door’ holiness.

The testimonies presented in Dublin with humility and transparency in their reality of lights and shadows, confirm how love and faith in the family can be sources of strength and peace even in the midst of the destruction caused by wars and persecutions, and also in the means of violence caused by forms of *child abuse*. The Pope shared the reasons for hope and joy and took upon himself the pain and bitterness due to the suffering caused by the abuse and sins in which some members of the Church are also involved.

The Church is a *family of families* where one rejoices with those who are in joy and suffers with those who are in pain or feel ‘overcome by life’.

Individual people and families have found peace in the love of Christ. The same public request for forgiveness expressed several times by Pope Francis was a caress of God on the suffering face of so many brothers and sisters who can believe that life can be rebuilt, and hope can be reborn in the power of love, of welcome, of forgiveness. Together we can build a great ‘network’ of solidarity, support, participation that expands to the ends of the world! The ‘revolution of love and tenderness’ begins in the heart of the human family, the Pope reiterated.

I perceived these words as addressed to us as well. Each of our communities can experience this ‘revolution’ through words and gestures that weave love into daily life and clothe it with benevolence, mutual blessing, forgiveness. In this way we can offer a testimony of how relationships are lived in the family spirit, permeated by Salesian kindness and reciprocal accompaniment.

I invite you, dear sisters, to discover in your life, in your community, the ‘points of light’ that can activate the ‘revolution of love’ that brings ‘fresh air’ where we are called to witness to the joy of the Gospel with humility and love, so as to feel we are ‘family’ in the great ‘universal family’.

It may help us to take up again in prayer and reflection, the hymn to charity of Saint Paul (1 Cor 13: 4-7) that *Amoris Laetitia* in the fourth chapter presents and applies in a concrete way to the family.

Returning spiritually to Valdocco and Mornese remains for us a school of great relevance: we will feel immersed in that ‘family spirit’ that is capable of transmitting life, joy, hope, even amid challenges and difficulties.

### **Take Care of the Family**

A first dimension of caring is not giving, but recognition, full of understanding and gratitude. The family, in fact, reveals an original way of life and expresses the dream of God for humanity: it is the dream of unity and communion that gives form and content to the vocation of the family, ‘domestic church’ where everyone is desired, received as a gift, accompanied on the journey to be themselves, and to give their best to society and to the Church.

The vocation of the family is to make the world a ‘home’ where no one is alone, unwanted or excluded. The family paints reality, which is sometimes gray and opaque, with the colors of fraternity, of the defense of the fragile person, of radiant faith, of active hope, of solidarity, and of social openness (cf. AL 184).

The Church, *family of families*, chooses to be alongside the family, is interested in it, takes care of the family, and learns how 'to be family' from it. In fact, the family guards the most original and profound meaning of the human being. In God's dream, it is a beacon that radiates and witnesses to joy and the fruitfulness of its love in the world. To live spreading light and love in daily life is an expression of *holiness*.

Taking care of the family requires a deep pastoral and missionary conversion. According to Pope Francis, it is not enough to insert a generic concern into pastoral planning: the family is an active and dynamic pastoral subject and every evangelizing and catechetical effort must be directed to allow it to experience that the Gospel of the family is joy that fills the heart and life (cf. AL 200) because it responds to its deepest expectations. It is a message that challenges family life (cf. AL 201) and enhances its resources also for missionary proclamation to other families.

A fundamental aspect of caring is to accompany families to recognize themselves as places of tenderness, of relationships that regenerate each day with a gesture, a caress, a glance towards one's own spouse and towards one's own children that makes everything new, heals wounds, reconciles, opens a path of forgiveness and mutual acceptance.

Solidarity among families, especially in times of difficulty and crisis, can help them taste the 'new wine' of mercy. An attitude of solidarity among families, and feeling close as a community, renews in them the certainty that they are not left alone and makes them rediscover the courage to start again.

Always committed to the education of the young generations, our Institute reaches families especially through the education of children, a mission that remains fundamental. GC XXIII has offered us a further stimulus, asking us to commit ourselves to knowing the diverse family realities and to let ourselves be challenged by them. It invited us to involve the same families in *family pastoral* in harmony with the Church's guidelines to accompany young people to mature a vision of life and the family in line with Christian values (cf. Acts GC XXIII 60,11).

Together with families it will be possible to find educational paths of 'generative fruitfulness', of an alliance between generations in a relationship where it is possible to share credible experiences that open to hope, trust, the desire for high ideals, which transmit the treasure of the faith. Family ministry commits us to take an interest in the family not only starting with the young, but also through specific initiatives. We can, for example, provide formation and prayer moments designed to nurture conjugal and family spirituality, encourage the formation of solidarity networks of 'families for families', make ourselves available to offer a discreet accompaniment that starts from the testimony of our 'feeling as a family' in the community.

We, as groups of the Salesian Family and as educating communities, are a network of families. We share the treasure that weaves relationships called the 'family spirit', a constitutive element of our being and of our actions *in* the family and *with* families, as the Rector Major reminded us in Strenna 2017.

Taking care of the family is a responsibility that sees us as allies, in synergy with the journey that the whole Church is making in preparation for the Synod on young people. Together we are committed to be a 'home', a living space where young people *can learn the art of life and love*; a 'home' where the family climate reigns in all its significance, especially today when the family is subject to external attacks and internal fragilities that weaken it. Together we accompany the family to live their vocation of welcoming life, a space for socializing, taking responsibility for others, evangelical and missionary proclamation and witness.

In particular, we feel the responsibility of accompanying the young people of the Salesian Youth Movement (SYM) to open ourselves the value of the family, to cultivate the desire to form family according to God's plan.

In fact, it is the first 'school' where we learn the gratuitous dimension of love, where the affective dimension is matured starting from feeling welcomed as people, where relationships are not functional, and we can experience the joy of the gift and the preciousness of faith. In this sense, a first way to support the family is to help them to enjoy the sacredness of the human person by avoiding possessing or controlling it. The temptation to possess can be overcome through a journey of detachment to 'let be' and 'let go'.

By dedicating ourselves to the education of young people, we do not substitute ourselves for families, but we recognize their irreplaceable mission as the original place of welcome, space for authentic relationships, and the first resource that establishes the harmonious development of the growing person. Moreover, the young people themselves, in their responses to the Questionnaire of the forthcoming Synod of October, reaffirmed the importance of the family, and even more, a nostalgia for the family.

We want to keep this desire in them, helping them to be 'pilgrims on the path of their dreams', accompanying them to transform them into the reality of the future, so as to form families according to the mind of God (cf. Pope Francis, 11 August 2018); families that renew the choice of fidelity every day as a way of human maturity and true happiness.

Many of you, dear sisters are in daily contact with many families, know beautiful families who can offer simple and touching testimonies. Families that help with exquisite humanity those who are suffering due to divorce, separation, illness, economically unsustainable situations.

All of us, however, are called to be at the 'front lines' in taking care of the family, even you, ill or elderly sisters.

To you who for various situations, are physically prevented from being 'alongside', to find yourselves 'among' the families, as certainly you would wish to be, I pray that your testimony, your prayer, and daily offering will be a 'fruitful presence' that reaches many people and becomes a source of good, even without your knowledge. This is your mission, this is the *family pastoral* that, in full gratuity, you take on every day in the spirit of the *da mihi animas cetera tolle*.

I end with an invitation for everyone: to commit ourselves to our communities to make the 'family spirit' alive and contagious, so that it is possible to experience 'the Gospel of the family as joy for the world'. Accompanying the family in its journey is a great gift: from it, even when it is fragile and imperfect, we can *learn to be 'family'*, not to lose touch with reality, to understand each other and support each other, to build ourselves as a family open to a missionary perspective.

May the Lord see His dream come true in every community for the authentic happiness of His sons and daughters. This is why we confidently entrust ourselves to the Family of Nazareth.

God bless you!

Rome, 24 September .2018

Aff.ma Madre