

## Fifth Sunday of Easter April 24, 2016 C

### ◆ Pope Francis's Exhortation on Marriage and the Family

#### ◆ Some reflections from Ascension parishioners

Recently, Pope Francis released his long awaited Apostolic Exhortation on Marriage and the Family, called *Amoris Laetitia, The Joy of Love*. It is a 250-page Exhortation divided into nine chapters. The book form of the Exhortation will be available in early May.

I found the *Exhortation* to be a beautiful read. It showed a shepherd very much in touch with the complexities of marriage and family life. It is a call to Church leaders to uphold the biblical ideal of marriage between one man and one woman until death do them part and, at the same time, to treat with mercy and love people living in a variety of situations. In the coming months, I am sure that there will be great resources available to help parishes and families to unpack the message of the Joy of Love.

To help us get started on our reading of this long *Exhortation*, I asked nine couples, seven of whom have young children, to read a chapter and share their reflections with me. I did not limit them on the number of words; hence, you will see some have written longer reflections than others.

#### Chapter One. In the Light of the Word

Katie & Jay Gander write:

*"The Bible is full of families, births, love stories and family crises."* (*The Joy of Love*, Chapter 1, paragraph 8).

Pope Francis breaks down the understanding of family, birth, love and family crisis in the Bible through the eyes of the 128<sup>th</sup> Psalm. The verse topics he focuses on are **You and Your Wife, Your children are the shoots of an olive Tree, A path suffering and blood, The works of your hands, and the Tenderness of an embrace.** In Paragraph 30, Pope Francis writes, *"Every family should look to the icon of the Holy Family of Nazareth."* In our point of view, this entire First Chapter embraces this statement. That we are to face our struggles with courage and grace like Mary the Mother of God, Joseph the Foster Parent of Jesus and the Spouse of His mother; and of course like Christ the Son of God. The Holy

Family is the greatest example of facing diversity, homelessness, poverty, hunger, compassion, forgiveness, Love, indifference, and hope. As well as so much more that gives all the faithful and those with the desire to be faithful courage and hope in the Lord. All of this was accomplished with the fruitful love that was made in 'God's image'. If we approach our family with love, commitment and faith, then compassion and mercy will follow in good times and in bad. This chapter prepares us for what is to come in the chapters ahead on looking to compassion and mercy. It is through this compassion and mercy that we come to know Jesus.

#### Chapter Two. The Experiences and Challenges of Families

John & Kari Stadelman write:

In chapter 2, Pope Francis discusses the numerous challenges that often threaten marriage and family life. The quote that stood out to us was from paragraph 35: *"What we need is a more responsible and generous effort to present the reasons and motivations for choosing marriage and the family, and in this way to help men and women better to respond to the grace that God offers them."*

We see this as a challenge. Some are led to complain and lament about our present culture that doesn't support marriage and family as the Church does. Some would prefer to lay down the rules and expect everyone to fall in line. However, we believe the Pope is calling us instead to be an authentic witness to family life. We are to lift up these truths by the way we live and always be willing to share with others the reasons and motivations for choosing this way of life. I am reminded of the words from 1 Peter 3:15-16: *"Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence, keeping your conscience clear."* Through our everyday relationships with others, we can share the "joy of love" and invite them to join us on this journey.

#### Chapter Three. Looking to Jesus: The Vocation of the Family

Mark & Teresa Kniepmann write:

The part of chapter 3 that really jumped out at us was *"The Church is a family of families, constantly enriched by the lives of all those domestic churches."*

Immediately all of the wonderful families of Ascension jumped to mind. The men and women we have gotten to know through CRHP, the couples we have met through Marriage Enrichment and all of the parents we have met through the school and youth ministry and the many trials and tribulations we have all faced raising children in a culture that does not appreciate marriage and family.

The chapter went on to say that *“The Church is good for the family, and the family is good for the Church.”* That is so true. Where else in our society is marriage and family celebrated? Where else do men and women gather and share the joys of marriage and family, and encourage each other to love our spouses? It reminded us that the Ascension community of families is a special place.

We also liked the statement: *“...in love, the couple experiences the beauty of fatherhood and motherhood, and shares plans, trials, expectations and concerns; they learn to care for one another and mutual forgiveness.”* We have found great joy in our family and have shared many important moments with other Ascension families. In our culture and even in our Ascension community we see many broken families. In many ways this has given us an even greater appreciation for the love that we share as family and motivates us to reach out to those who have to work through brokenness.

#### **Chapter Four. Love in Marriage**

Tino & Jen Cervantes write:

*“Marital love is not defended primarily by presenting indissolubility as a duty or by repeated doctrine, but by helping it to grow ever stronger under the impulse of grace”* (paragraph 134).

In marital love, we see the tangible effects of God’s grace. God’s grace gives us the ability to root our marriage in love, where there is no place for envy, injustice, boastfulness, rudeness, selfishness, resentment, or gossip. We express our love with self-giving, concern for one another, embracing their weaknesses, celebrating their victories, enduring all things with a positive attitude, trusting and being eternally hopeful. We are to love without ever losing hope or giving up. Pope Francis calls for us to increase our love for each other on a daily basis by acts of kindness and sacrifice that intensify our unity and blesses us with even more graces from God.

#### **Chapter Five. Love Made Fruitful**

Paul & Cristina Giammarinaro write:

**Paragraph 170 states:** *“...For ‘children are a gift. Each one is unique and irreplaceable... We love our children because they are children, not because they are*

*beautiful, or look or think as we do, or embody our dreams. We love them because they are children. A child is a child.’ The love of parents is the means by which God our Father shows his own love. He awaits the birth of each child, accepts that child unconditionally, and welcomes him or her freely.”*

**Reflection:** God calls us to love and accept all children through our marital bond - and Pope Francis acknowledges that children come to families in different ways. Whether biologically, through fostering or via adoption. How profound is it that our role as parents serve to be the first faces of God’s love to our children in this world?! Science and society tell us that we can pick and choose and mold our children to be exactly as they are “wanted,” but Our Father knows the immense value and worth of each and every child EXACTLY as they are as unique and irreplaceable, just as we are to Him. Our children and families are not an accessory to gain attention and accolades, but “to go forth from our homes in spirit of solidarity with others.”

**Paragraph 184 states:** *“By their witness as well as their words, families speak to others of Jesus. They pass on the faith, they arouse a desire for God and they reflect the beauty of the Gospel and its way of life....”*

#### **Chapter Six. Some Pastoral Perspectives**

Rebecca & Ashley Breaux write:

This chapter, “Some Pastoral Perspectives” was beautiful to read. It was not a “How-to” but more of what to be aware of as we proceed to minister to families. Every moment is an opportunity for evangelization. We need to evangelize families, and families need to evangelize each other and others’ families. Pope Francis used the term “missionary families”: families who would reach out to couples preparing for marriage, to newly marrieds, to families young and old. The sacrament of Reconciliation is stressed within this chapter. We would encourage everyone to read this chapter and be blessed by it.

A favorite quote from this chapter might be:

*“Nor would it be good for them to arrive at the wedding without ever having prayed together, one for the other, to seek God’s help in remaining faithful and generous, to ask the Lord together what he wants of them, and to consecrate their love before an image of the Virgin Mary. Those who help prepare them for marriage should help them experience these moments of prayer that can prove so beneficial.”*

We love that our Holy Father wants us all to consecrate our married love to Our Lady. We love that he wants prayer to be a priority of those helping to prepare the couple. Also, we are excited to see the idea of “Missionary families.”

## Chapter Seven. Toward a Better Education of Children

Chris & Deb Walden write:

As parents of young children this chapter on the love of education in the family was powerful in reminding us that the *“family is the first school of human values”*. Pope Francis goes on to say that certain inclinations develop in childhood and become so deeply rooted that they remain throughout life. We either return to them as adults or run from them based on how we remember them from our childhood. Therefore, it is important as parents that we are vigilant in raising our children and that our love is evident in all that we do as parents. It really stuck out to us that *Many people think and act in a certain way because they deem it to be right on the basis of what they learned, as if by osmosis, from their earliest years: “That’s how I was taught”. “That’s what I learned to do”*. The other thing that struck us in the letter was the Pope’s reminder that family is where we learn to coexist with other human beings. In his letter the Pope said: *“In the family, we learn closeness, care and respect for others. We break out of our fatal self-absorption and come to realize that we are living with and alongside others who are worthy of our concern, our kindness and our affection.”*

## Chapter Eight. Accompanying Discerning and Integrating Weakness

John & Kim Kelly write:

Paragraph 312: *“...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.’”*

**Kim:** It is a message of how we as a church can reach people and that it is the people that must come first. It recognizes that everyone’s journey is very different. I like that Pope Francis talks about entering into the reality of other peoples’ lives and not putting conditions on mercy so that we never close off their path to the church. I think that’s the message of the Gospels...gathering the people in, instead of casting aside.

I invited a neighbor to a CRHP retreat a couple of times and her response was, “I would love to be there, but the church decided that I don’t belong.” She was divorced and it was not her choice. It’s not what she wanted to happen, but it did and later she remarried. She felt excluded and judged. Jesus spent his time dining with sinners and the despised. They were welcomed to his table. So how can we say this group or that group is not welcome? Certainly, people who feel judged by the church are not going to be motivated to attend. We should be about including, instead of excluding.

**John:** Kim speaks beautifully of the ideal, and how the sacrament of marriage is so important to strong families that can raise strong children and create strong communities. Excluding people, particularly from the table of the Lord at Mass, doesn’t feel consistent with the Gospel message or bringing people closer to God. Pope Francis’ words felt more consistent with Jesus’ example of inclusion throughout his ministry and his challenge to his friends, the found of this Church to be about inclusion, mercy and love.

## Chapter Nine. The Spirituality of Marriage and Family

Chris & Cindy Kelly write:

We were really moved by the image of our Triune God being an intimate part of our marriage and family in this chapter. When we got married, we got a blanket that said, “Marriage takes 3”. A perfect reminder from the Pope that God is intimately with us in our marriage and family, and that nurturing that union with Him is so very important.

Also on this chapter, Chuck & Karen Mitchell write:

**Chuck:** Paragraph 317—*“Moments of pain and difficulty will be experienced in union with the Lord’s cross, and his closeness will make it possible to surmount them. In the darkest hours of a family’s life, union with Jesus in his abandonment can help avoid a breakup.”*

The late 1990’s were very difficult and brought much suffering on our family. In 1996, Karen passed out from internal hemorrhaging which we would later learn was from a tubal pregnancy. An ambulance was able to get her to the hospital where she had emergency surgery to save her life, but sadly we lost our unborn child. Later that same year Karen had a death experience while donating blood at the Patrick AFB chapel. Her heart had stopped and thank God was revived after several scary seconds. Our parish community and our faith helped us then and would be needed just several months later. My father died on March 16, 1998 after suffering from an abdominal aneurysm and poor blood circulation, which a few years earlier had also robbed him of his leg. On Veteran’s Day, 11 November 1998 we would face the news all parents fear. Our son, Ryan, died in a car wreck in Gainesville. He was the oldest of our 4 children and was attending school at the University of Florida. This was the darkest hours of our family’s life--we were devastated. In the span of 8 months I lost my father and my son. If it were not for our faith and having God in communion with our marriage and our family, I don’t know how we would have made it any further as a family. The Holy Spirit helped us keep our marriage and our family strong enough to endure the pain of our loss. Knowing that our son’s Catholic faith was strong also helped us to endure. Just a few days before he died,

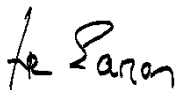
Ryan was a team leader on an Alpha Retreat sponsored by St. Augustine Catholic Church. Through the grace of the Holy Spirit our family and our marriage remains strong.

**Karen:** Paragraph 318—*“Family prayer is a special way of expressing and strengthening this paschal faith.”*

When our four children were living at home we constantly had to work at family prayer due to our busy schedules. We prayed before meals, went to Mass together on Sundays and prayed together on all our family vacations. But as our individual spirituality started to grow, we incorporated more prayer in our family time. We started family meetings when our children were very young, keeping a journal of all the discussions, logging prayer petitions for others, expressing our needs and our thankfulness for the many blessings we received. Praying together as a family also opened the opportunity of praying with our extended family. As we went to big family events, our family led prayers over meals, prayed over members that were sick, expecting a baby or had special intentions. Our little family became a witness to all our siblings and extended family. One of our family traditions, a personal prayer candle, has now spread to over 300 family and friends. One Christmas, Chuck and I prayed about giving our children a spiritual gift, their own prayer candle. We decorated votive candles with pictures, stickers and labeled with their names. We explained to them that Christ is our light and whenever they needed prayer we will light their candle. Our children are in their 30's now and we still light their candles whenever they are not well, going through difficult times, are traveling or celebrating a special blessing. Our son's candle has been burning almost every day since the day he died. Sharing prayer is just a way we can continue to pass on the faith in Jesus, just as it was passed onto us by our parents.

Next week, we will have nine more couples share. If you wish to share some reflections on a chapter, please do.

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Karen".