

Sixth Sunday of Easter May 1, 2016 C

Nine more couples share reflections on Pope Francis' "The Joy of the Gospel"

Last weekend I shared with you nine reflections on the nine chapters of Pope Francis's *Exhortation on Marriage and the Family*. This week, we hear from nine other couples who have been married 28 or more years. If you wonder why I didn't invite you to share your reflections, please know the following couples just came to mind. I saw some of them at Mass and just asked them. In a month or so, I may invite some more of you to share your reflections. If you would like to be one of those couples, let me know.

Chapter 1. In the Light of the Word

Maureen & Dennis Vouglas, married 43 years, write:

The first chapter offers much to digest, beginning with the title itself, which drives the entire Exhortation. Love in the Family is inseparable from Jesus, the Light that shines from the Word, God. And the message is clear – follow the Word and your family will be blessed with love, peace, and prosperity.

When a man and woman marry and build a family, their union represents the divine family, Father, Son, and Love, the Holy Spirit. Traditional family is the essence of God Himself who is not solitude, but a family. Fruitful marital love is more than just a means of perpetuating the species. It's shared giving mystically bonds two complementary genders and mirrors God's being. The two become "one flesh" in body and spirit and bring forth a child sharing the genetics and spirit of both parents. This symbolizes God's creative movement from the beginning.

Parents are the foundation of the established home and children its living stones. It's grounded in God and filled with His presence. ***The family takes pride in raising children in the Faith, and preserving it for the next generations.*** If they obey God, they enjoy harmony and peace from self-giving and avoid the turmoil of selfishness. The family is the lampstand from which their brilliant love light beams. Conversely, when relationships produce children whom parents regard as mere afterthoughts or accidents, God is absent from "building of the house." Pain, suffering, violence, and even the breakup of the family can be likely outcomes.

Respectful children are attentive and obedient to their parents. They are doing God's will and helping to preserve an ordered society. ***Parents can learn from a child's innocent humility and trusting nature, and should value a child's individual identity and purpose.*** Similarly, Jesus presents children of His era as models for our own behavior – an expectation to be humbly subject to a higher authority.

Jesus expressed sympathy and compassion for the anxieties and tensions in families. Throughout scripture God's Word is a source of comfort and companionship for all families that experience any difficulty and suffering.

For a family to sustain itself in a healthy, vibrant state it must keep God at the center, or sincerely reconcile with God through humble prayer. The family that shares genuine, tender affection within demonstrates its desire to remain in union with God.

Chapter 2. The Experiences and Challenges of Families Mike & Christy Marzec, married 35 years, write:

The experiences and challenges of families – the pervasive theme seems to be that many in today's society are more interested in self: self-fulfillment, self-aggrandizement, self-accomplishment – rather than in acting as part of the Christian family. ***People in the first-world tend to spend more time involved with work or endeavors that promote themselves, rather than promoting their nuclear family or their spiritual family. They tend to want to do what is convenient and supportive of their preconceived ideas of happiness. As a people, we have become the me first generation, and forgotten what it means to serve the community at large.*** A lot of people have a married existence, but don't put the effort into creating a family within that marriage. One spouse or the other is more concerned with building up their career than sharing in the responsibilities of a family. Trusting in themselves instead of God makes marriage a less desirable option than being about oneself. People that omit God from their marriage make it out to be a life-long burden as opposed to a way for personal development and fulfillment. Sharing the love between a man and woman along with the love of God brings a greater sense of achievement when it was not the main objective.

There seems to be a decline in the culture because of the lack of emphasis on self-giving. Those that always take as compared to those that give of themselves. There

is a want to be connected socially because it is “the” thing to do, but that doesn’t foster relationships. It is more of one-up-man-ship. Relationships then become treated more like objects, and not as individuals who share a love for each other, a love for their blood family and their human family, but also a love for God. This also leads to the delays of starting families. Not seeing a quick, tangible benefit gets in the way of the self-centered goals. Another contributor is the lack of financial security, or the lack of faith in working hard and sacrificing that delays people from entering into relationships. The influences of the modern world work against the thought of family – income disparity, lack of adequate housing, commercialization of the human body, forced prostitution, drug abuse and human trafficking, to name a few. These all stem from putting oneself first instead of God and His love.

A special love that is shown is that of parents when they have a special needs child. This takes great sacrifice on the part of both parents, but makes the family relationship stronger. Involvement with all children fosters this as well. Sharing one meal a day away from the distractions of daily life is a small but powerful step. Another form of special love is the care of the elderly. *Older persons are sometimes taken advantage of just to drain them of their resources, because the children find them too much of a burden.* Caring for one near the end of life is just as important as caring for those at the beginning of life. Euthanasia and assisted suicide are never to be considered options.

Many challenges are in store for all persons when it comes to love for family. We all think ourselves to be imperfect and therefore incapable of loving others in the way they should be loved, but reliance on God’s guidance can make this happen. *We need to direct our energies into raising up our spouse and our children ahead of ourselves, and the Church is there to foster that effort.* It is the responsibility of the Church to offer that word of truth and hope in a better tomorrow, a closer family, a stronger love.

[The above is Mike and Cindy’s summary of Chapter 2. Then they add the following.]

It may seem as a lot of this commentary is more negative than positive, but it hits home to the realities of the world we live in, or rather, the world we choose to live in. We can choose to be narcissistic, or we can choose to love others more than ourselves. If nothing else, that is the main takeaway from this chapter. If we go on as we are, we are being led down the path of self-destruction. The family will collapse, and we’ll be nothing more than a group of individuals. Or, we can choose to love our family more than ourselves and feed our hopes and aspirations that we’ve done what we can to ensure our family’s

salvation. If each person were fixated on making sure that someone else got to Heaven, then we’d all get there.

Chapter 3. Looking to Jesus: The Vocation of the Family

John & Cathy Miller, married 35 years, write:

Cathy: *The thought that spoke to me most is: 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.* In the incarnation God assumes human love and that is the love that fills the human heart of a man and woman to become one as God is one with His church. The fullness of that love is exemplified in the sacrament of marriage in which Christ makes Himself present to the spouses. *I was touched by the words stated in the chapter that marriage is a gift from the Lord and the mystery from which all true love flows.* It is amazing to think that the first “marriage” was established during the creation story with Adam and Eve.

The incarnation of the Word allowed for a human family to come into existence. The family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph are the example of loving communion each of us is called to. Love for God and love for each other must always be the center of the family. We are each born into a family and not meant to be alone, rather to be in community which starts in the family, known as the domestic church. This family of families that makes up the Body of Christ is the source of the Church and I am glad that the Synod met on this most important life-giving source. Marriage and the family are the true representation of God’s plan for man to live in love and community. Quoting from the chapter, *“The mystery of the 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 will continue to dwell in our midst.”*

John: *“Scripture and the Tradition give us access to a knowledge of the Trinity, which is revealed with the features of a family.”*

Any given Sunday you see many families share their love for God by being a part of the Mass. Then they go out and spread the good news. Couples smiling at each other show the sign of commitment to holy marriage. Some have been blessed with children. The family will grow with scripture and tradition in the Christian way.

Chapter 4. Love in Marriage

Ken & Kathy Jagdmann, married 49 years, write:

Our Pope Francis begins this chapter with the well-known verses of St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 13:4-7), which is often one of the scripture

readings used at wedding ceremonies. *“Love is patient, love is kind; love is not jealous or boastful....”*

Pope Francis then goes on to expand on each “love” description and how this should manifest itself in relationships, especially in marriage and families. He does a good job and also offers examples of what is not loving for each description.

He further describes and provides guidelines for loving relationships, including many of the virtues and difficulties of marital relationships.

*We were particularly taken with one of his remarks where he states that three words need to be used often in the family: **Please, Thank you, and Sorry.** He says, “Let us not be stingy using these words, but keep repeating them, day after day.”* This was an affirming statement for us. We use these words constantly in our relationship. **Please** and **thank you** are a big part of our daily vocabulary, showing loving respect for one another. The word **sorry** is the hardest and most important word for us. Recognizing we have erred in our relationship and seeking and receiving forgiveness strengthens our marital bond.

We also noted that when a loving person can do good for others, or sees that others are happy, they themselves live happily and in this way give glory to God, for “God loves a cheerful giver.” It is great to know that Our Lord especially appreciates those who find joy in the happiness of others.

Chapter 5. Love Made Fruitful

Phil & Barb Warwick, married 32 years, write:

Chapter Five may be summarized by, *“Love always gives life.”*

Each new life is a gift from God that should be welcomed by all no matter the circumstances or the timing of the baby’s birth. Women are *“co-creators with God”* of the miracle of children they carry in their wombs. Parents should make any sacrifice necessary to ensure that the child always feels accepted and protected, and *“has a place in God’s heart from all eternity.”* Mothers are to be the antidote to self-centeredness in our world, and should be *“witnesses to tenderness, dedication and moral strength.”* Pope Francis strongly admonishes us against a feminism that denies the unique roles of fathers and mothers.

“Respecting a child’s dignity means affirming his or her need and natural right to have a mother and a father.” *Fathers help guide children to see the “challenges of the world” and “to see the need for hard work and strenuous effort.”* Our society has lost its father figures, many having been caught up in their work or interests and neglecting their families. Pope Francis is, frankly, scolding us fathers for having abandoned our role as a Christian father.

The faith of Christian families—and our belief in the Eucharist—should draw them more into the world where they should reach out to the larger family, the poor and outcast. *“God has given the family the job of domesticating the world and helping each person to see fellow human beings as brothers and sisters.”* *“The larger family should provide love and support to teen mothers, orphans, single parents, the disabled who feel abandoned or ignored, those struggling with addiction, the separated or widowed who are alone, and the elderly and infirm who need support.”* Again, he strongly admonishes the Christian family: *“When those who receive the Eucharist turn a blind eye to the poor and suffering, or consent to various forms of division, contempt, and inequality, the Eucharist is received unworthily.”*

Finally, we must remain connected to our extended family, especially our parents and elderly relatives, while maintaining the relationship between husband and wife as primary. Knowing and loving them helps us to build stable relationships in the future. *“Memory is necessary for growth.”* They help us realize that life isn’t just all about me and roots our families in *“love that gives life.”*

Chapter 6. Some Pastoral Perspective

Tony & Jackie LaManna, married 30 years, write:

Pope Francis offers a fresh and common sense perspective regarding the local church and laity’s role in the pastoral care of engaged, newly married, and long-married couples. He emphasizes that marriage is a lifelong process beginning at birth rather than a focus on a single day. He offers pastoral care advice at every stage of the marriage experience and provides guidance on how the Church can support families when marriages fail or end due to death, particularly with attention to the emotional wellbeing of children. Pastors and laity must do more to reach out at every stage of the marriage process. Couples, even during times of adversity, are constantly “forming” one another.

Chapter 7. Towards a Better Education of Children

Andy & Joy Lee, married 33 years, write:

“Towards a Better Education of Children” discusses how children are a gift from God, entrusted to the parents for their development, and how parents therefore need to be very thoughtful, appropriate, and enthusiastic about this role. The chapter deals with parents as educators for development of children’s sense of freedom, good judgment, discipline, sex education, and faith formation.

Our call to be parents is a sacrificial gift of love for the care of the children God has entrusted to us. *As their first educators, and with the knowledge that time is a valuable gift, we must make it a priority to find time to devote to*

our children and help them find healthy ways to spend it, while being aware of who is providing their entertainment through media or electronic devices. However, obsession over our children is harmful, and we should lovingly help them grow in freedom, maturity, and discipline. Freedom is a great gift and our children should be taught how they can responsibly use their freedom to face issues with good judgment for themselves and the community. We need to instill in our children a natural inclination to goodness, and show loving respect for them and their decisions.

Children need to learn from parents that misbehavior has consequences. They should be encouraged to put themselves in other people's shoes and acknowledge the hurt that they have caused, and ask for forgiveness from those they have treated badly. Constant punishment though, is harmful, so discipline instead should be focused on making progress in the growth of the child.

Parents face many challenges today with social media and electronic communications. While such technology can be helpful for connecting family members who live apart from one another, it can also separate people that live together. Pope Francis notes quite accurately how such technology can lead to kids being "disconnected" from the real world. It is important to remember that electronic communication cannot replace personal dialog.

Parents should introduce sex education to their children at the proper time and in a way suited to their age. It should be done in a way that does not just fill them with facts, but also prepares them for dealing with the onslaught of improper sexual teaching that will come at them from the media. They should be helped to recognize and seek positive influences, while shunning things that cripple their capacity to love, not only one another, but themselves.

Pope Francis states that *"Faith is God's gift, received in baptism, and not our own work, yet parents are the means that God uses for it to grow and develop."* As parents, we need to pass on the faith to our children. By teaching them about God, they need to see parents having a relationship with God...speaking of Him, praying to Him and trusting in Him. We need to be a living, active example for our children to witness. We must also "ask God to act on their hearts, in places we cannot reach." We must teach and act upon our belief in the Father who sustains us in the love of Jesus Christ. It is thru Him that we, as family, are able to face every stage of life together.

Chapter 8. Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating Weakness

Deacon Chris & Pat Meehan, married 35 years, write:

This chapter speaks to those who are living "in situations that do not fully match what the Lord proposes." We are reminded of Jesus' encounter with the

Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4:1-42). In her life she had already had five husbands and was currently living with a man who was not her husband. When Jesus encountered her, he pointed out to her the irregularity of her situation but he did not condemn her for it. In fact, he offered to her living water, i.e., the grace that flowed from his divinity. With her mind opened to Jesus, she was empowered to grow in faith in him. Indeed, after her encounter with him, she evangelized the city where she was living, inviting the people to come and encounter the Messiah.

In the same way as the woman was called to life, the Church expresses through this exhortation her invitation to those living in complex or irregular situations (divorced, cohabiting, etc.) to come and examine their life in the light of Church teaching and seek to grow in grace. Pope Francis seeks that this be accomplished by guiding, discerning, and integrating. Just as the woman at the well was called by Jesus to discern how she was living, so the Church calls on us to examine honestly our current situation. This examination, guided by our pastor, compares our family life situation against the ideal proposed by the Church. Then helped along by our pastor, we are to seek ways to grow toward the ideal and be more fully integrated into the life of the Church—to live and grow in faith and grace as fully as our situation allows. *Pope Francis "encourages all the faithful who find themselves in complicated situations to speak confidently with their pastors," examining all the factors of their life situation with the aim of identifying "a path to personal growth" in the grace that the Church offers.* Thus equipped, they can go out and live fully the life they have been called to by Jesus Christ.

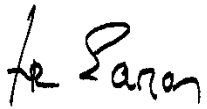
Chapter 9. The Spirituality of Marriage and Family **Dan & Teresa Romano, married 28 years, write:**

As we read this beautiful chapter, there was one key point in particular that stood out to both of us. For a marriage and family to thrive, God needs to be an intimate partner in the marriage. In paragraph 373 Pope Francis states *"If a family is centered in Christ, he will unify and illumine its entire life."* We found this to be so true in our own marriage. Early on, although we had a good marriage, we were not married in the Church and God was not a very big part of our lives. Things changed considerably when we had our marriage blessed in the Church. We both made the conscious decision to bring God to the center of our marriage and not on the periphery of our lives. As the Pope says: *"There comes a point where a couple's love attains the height of its freedom and becomes the basis of a healthy autonomy. This happens when each spouse realizes that the other is not his or her own, but has a much more important master, the one Lord."*

He also stresses the importance of family prayer to strengthen our faith and relationships, and most importantly, *“the family communal journey of prayer culminates by sharing together in the Eucharist.”* We both felt very strongly that some of the times we feel closest to each other are when we attend Mass together, and partake of the Eucharist with our Church family. Paragraph 378 states this so beautifully: *“For the food of the Eucharist offers the spouses the strength and incentive needed to live the marriage covenant each day as a domestic church.”*

This chapter reinforces our experiences that by including God in our lives, marriage and family relationships, a good marriage and family ties become even stronger. The Pope notes: *“No family comes down from heaven perfectly formed; families need to constantly grow and mature in the ability to love. This is a never ending vocation....”*

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Le Sarah". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the text "Have a blessed week,".