

# EMBRACING THE JOY OF LOVE

A Pastoral Message to the People of the Diocese of San Diego

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Last month, Pope Francis issued an authoritative teaching document on marriage and family life which he entitled *The Joy of Love*. Reflecting the consensus of bishops at two separate international Synods during the past two years, *The Joy of Love* seeks to invite dioceses throughout the world to enhance their promotion of marriage and family life, precisely because family lies at the heart of the Christian life in the world.

For some time, I have been discussing with the Presbyteral Council, the Deans of the diocese, and lay pastoral leadership about how best to respond to Pope Francis' call to renew marriage and family life in our local church. It has become clear that the convening of a diocesan synod on this question would constitute a promising pathway to renewal in this area of Church life. A diocesan synod is the most significant level of dialogue, discernment and decision in the life of a diocese. It brings together the bishop, the priestly leadership and lay and religious representatives from throughout the diocese to wrestle with the most important questions that a diocese faces.

Thus in October of this year I will convene a diocesan synod which focuses exclusively on the topics of marriage and family life that Pope Francis has raised in *The Joy of Love*. Each of our one hundred parishes will have a representative in the Synod. The majority of the representatives will be lay men and women, which is particularly important on this topic of marriage and family. There will be preparatory sessions during the coming months.

A diocesan synod embraces the dimensions of theological reflection, pastoral insight, visioning and governing, all within the context of a deep spiritual orientation to the wider life of the Church. The Synod in October will focus on five major challenges contained in *The Joy of Love*: witnessing to the beauty and realism of the Catholic vision of marriage; the need to form a culture of invitation to unmarried couples; the nurturing of children; ministry to those who have been divorced; and bringing spiritual depth to family life in its various forms. It is my hope that our Synod will provide a moment of profound renewal and growth in our ecclesial support of the families in San Diego and Imperial Counties. And it is my hope that this Synod will be a genuine reflection of the Mercy and Compassion of God in this Jubilee Year of Mercy.

## AGENDA FOR THE SYNOD ON THE JOY OF LOVE

### I. **The Challenge to Witness to Both the Beauty and Realism of the Catholic Vision of Marriage and Family Life**

*The Joy of Love* is breathtaking in its portrait of the beauty of married love. Yet the apostolic exhortation also unceasingly points to the reality that the beauty of married love is not confined to an ideal world or exceptional relationships, but is realistic and attainable for most men and women. Both this beauty and this attainability are essential for understanding the role and contribution of married love in the world today.

The Church defines marriage as “a community of life and love,...placing love at the center of the family.” Such love “involves mutual self-giving, and includes and integrates the sexual and affective dimensions, in accordance with God’s plan.” Moreover, marriage is the greatest form of friendship. “It is a union possessing all the traits of a good friendship: concern for the good of the other, reciprocity, intimacy, warmth, stability and the resemblance born of a shared life.”

This friendship has such depth because it includes a life-time commitment and fidelity. Marriage displays “an indissoluble exclusivity expressed in the stable commitment to share and shape together the whole of life.” Pope Francis points to unmistakable signs in the real world that this is true, natural and attainable. “lovers do not see their relationship as merely temporary. Those who marry do not expect their excitement to fade....Children not only want their parents to love one another, but also to be faithful and remain together. These and similar signs show that it is in the very nature of conjugal love to be definitive. The lasting union expressed by the marriage vows is more than a formality or a traditional formula; it is rooted in the natural inclinations of the human person.” It is rooted in the heart of God.

Similarly, the orientation of committed, faithful love is to fruitfulness and new life. “Conjugal love does not end with the couple...The couple, in giving themselves to one another, give not just themselves, but also the reality of children, who are a living reflection of their love....” It is in the family that new life is welcomed into the world. “Each new life allows us to appreciate the utterly gratuitous dimension of love, which never ceases to amaze us. It is the beauty of being loved first: children are loved even before they arrive.”

It is easy to behold this magnificent vision of the nature of married love, and conclude that the Catholic conception of marriage is not in touch with the realities of marriage and family life. This is especially true in our own age, when individualism, consumerism, the notion that all relationships are temporary, distorted notions of freedom, poverty, and narcissism penetrate all layers of society. That is why the fourth chapter of *The Joy of Love* contains an immensely rich reflection on the need for realism in married love. Against the backdrop of Saint Paul's hymn to love in the First Letter to the Corinthians, Pope Francis forthrightly examines the loving relationship of marriage in all of its dimensions – patience, generosity, sacrifice, suffering, humility, endurance, hurt, renewal, and fruitfulness – with a penetrating sense of balance and humanity. In doing so, he demonstrates that the beauty of marriage is no less powerful because it will never be fully realized in perfection in this life.

The growing societal challenges to the Catholic vision of marriage make it all the more essential for the Church to witness to the reality and vision of married love, most effectively through the witness of family life itself.

#### Questions for Deliberation at the Diocesan Synod:

1. How can the local Church of San Diego witness most effectively to both the beauty and the realism of married life and family?
2. Which societal and cultural challenges to marriage are most powerful in our diocese?
3. What steps can parishes take to support the permanence of the commitment of married life?

## **II. The Challenge to Form a Culture of Invitation and Hospitality to Unmarried Couples**

The declining number of Catholics who marry in the Church is an enormous pastoral problem in the diocese of San Diego and throughout the nation. Thus it is essential for our parishes to reflect a deep culture of invitation and hospitality toward all couples who have not yet celebrated Catholic marriage.

The chief obstacle to building such a culture effectively is that most Catholic young adults are not involved in the life of the Church. Sometimes this results from active estrangement from the Church because of disagreements with Catholic doctrine or past hurts, but more often the lack of involvement of young adults in Catholic life is merely a

product of a gradual drift away from ecclesial life. The diminishing participation of young adults between twenty and forty constitutes the most significant pastoral challenge to the Church in the United States. Until we address it effectively, we will not be able to build effectively a strong culture of Catholic marriage in our nation or our diocese. Because of the importance of this question, in January I appointed a diocesan-wide task force consisting overwhelmingly of young adults to study the participation of young adults in the Church and to recommend radical changes to our approach in inviting young adults to fuller participation in Catholic life. By October, this task force will have made sufficient progress to be able to present directions to the diocesan synod on marriage and the family.

Another obstacle that the Church faces in effectively forming a Catholic culture of marriage is that immense numbers of young Catholic couples who fully intend to marry in the Church live together before their Catholic marriage. Many choose cohabitation as an experimental prelude to marriage, to test compatibility. Others have adopted the increasingly prevalent view in our culture that living together is merely an extension of dating. Still other couples have married civilly with the intention of having a Church wedding when they can afford a bigger celebration. Many undocumented couples in our own diocese are trapped in the limbo of their legal status and are afraid to be formally married out of fear that it might lead to their deportation. The obstacles of poverty, unemployment and past debt also lead couples to put off marriage in our society.

In approaching couples in all of these situations, Pope Francis states that we must be consistently clear that Catholic marriage in the fullness of its vision remains the moral requirement for all. But he also emphasizes that the Church's teaching and outreach should not ignore the love, sacrifice and commitment which is reflected in so many of these relationships which differ from marriage, because to do so is to ignore the presence of elements of God's grace in the hearts of these young men and women and to alienate many of them from the Church.

In order to achieve this balance toward the invitational outreach of the Church to couples in civil marriage or cohabiting, *The Joy of Love* states that such couples must be "welcomed and guided patiently and discretely." Whatever their situation, "all these situations require a constructive response seeking to transform them into opportunities that can lead to the full reality of marriage in conformity with the Gospel." Pope Francis points to the "law of gradualness" which the Synod on the Family of 1980 explored in depth, a principle which recognizes that men and women tend to accomplish moral good in stages of growth. This principle requires an outreach to couples who are living together or in civil marriage which reflects love more than judgment, which affirms the beautiful elements of love already present in the lives of such couples while constantly beckoning them to the permanent commitment of Catholic marriage.

The principle of gradualness reaches far beyond the question of marriage to embrace all elements of the Christian moral life, for it really is an embodiment of the pastoral method of the Lord himself. Pope Francis repeatedly cites the example of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan Woman at the Well as a prism through which to construct the Church's outreach to young couples, a prism which embraces them in their humanity and their love, rather than categorizing them as living in sin.

The challenge to build a culture of invitation and hospitality for couples who are not yet married requires us to examine practices which, while they have a certain legitimacy, alienate young couples and leave them feeling that they are unwanted in the life of the Church. Various rules about which churches will accept specific couples for marriage can leave Catholic couples feeling shut out. Diocesan rules about the setting for marriage are also often experienced by couples as a source of alienation. The lack of pastoral outreach and information for couples who are married civilly constitutes a barrier to their being married in the Church. During the diocesan synod in October, existing rules and practices which are alienating must be examined, and creative new pathways to inviting couples to the full commitment of Catholic married life must be explored.

In forming couples for marriage, Pope Francis challenges parishes to provide "a pedagogy of love, attuned to the feelings and needs of young people and capable of helping them to grow interiorly." This pedagogy must help couples to communicate more effectively with each other, view each other ever more realistically yet with profound charity, and to come to understand more fully the expectations of marriage which each partner brings to their relationship. The Church's preparation must emphasize that marriage is not something that happens all at once: "Their union is real and irrevocable....Yet in joining their lives the spouses assume an active and creative role in a lifelong project. Their gaze now has to be directed to the future that, with the help of God's grace, they are daily called to build."

For this very reason, Pope Francis calls upon parish communities to ponder more deeply how they may provide supportive structures and resources to couples to sustain their love and vows in the earliest years of their marriage. A central part of that support will involve moral accompaniment with young couples, which stresses the formation of mature consciences enlightened by the Gospel that are capable of navigating the enormously challenging ethical choices in today's world.

### Questions for Deliberation at the Diocesan Synod:

1. In the light of the work of the Task Force on Young Adults, what direction should be adopted to deepen the involvement of young adults in the life of the Church?
2. How can our local church truly embody the principle of graduality in reaching out to and supporting couples who are in civil marriages or cohabiting?
3. What practices in our parishes and diocese alienate or frustrate couples seeking to marry in the Church?
4. How can our diocesan and parish efforts to provide effective marriage preparation be enhanced?
5. Is there a realistic pathway to building structures of support for couples after they are married?

### **The Challenge to Welcome, Nurture and Form Children**

Marriage by its very nature contains a desire to bring children into the world, to love them, to sustain them, to educate them, to treasure them. Echoing the beautiful words of Pope John Paul II, *The Joy of Love* underscores this reality: “Love always gives life. Conjugal love “does not end with the couple...The couple, in giving themselves to one another, give not just themselves, but also the reality of children, who are a living reflection of their love, a permanent sign of their conjugal unity and a living and inseparable synthesis of their being a father and a mother.”

As every parent knows, the birth of a child fundamentally changes the lives of mothers and fathers and their marriages. At once a supreme joy and a source of challenge, children bring a new dimension to married love, as well as an increasing recognition by parents of the deepest realities of life that we come to take for granted as we grow to adulthood. Pope Francis says “Children, once born, begin to receive along with nourishment and care, the spiritual gift of knowing that they are loved. This love is shown to them through the gift of their personal name, the sharing of language, the looks of love and the brightness of a smile. In this way they learn that the beauty of human relationships touches our soul, seeks our freedom, accepts the difference of others....”

*The Joy of Love* points to the family as the first school of human values and to parents as the first teachers of their children in faith and morals. It contains an extremely balanced, realistic and inspiring outline of the major opportunities parents have to form their children in a Christlike and healthy manner. Parental love should be vigilant in safeguarding children, but not obsessive. It should instill a deep sense of mutual trust in a patient and realistic manner. It must not be domineering and should be geared to each child with the recognition that children within the same family generally

have differing temperaments and sensitivities. Parenting must take into account the serious challenges in our culture to the formation of children – consumerism, individualism, hypercompetitiveness, a distorted notion of sexuality, and secularism. Moreover, parents must struggle with the difficulties created “by current lifestyles, work schedules and the complexity of today’s world, where many people keep up a frenetic pace just to survive.”

One of the most splendid perspectives that *The Joy of Love* displays is the understanding that the nuclear family is embedded in wider familial relationships which can substantially assist the forming of children. Thus Pope Francis points out that wives and husbands are also daughters and sons, sisters and brothers, aunts and uncles in a web of relationships that brings much greater depth to the meaning of family. In a special way, this wider reality of family has a pivotal role to play in the nurturing of children, not only in the provision of unconditional love in all family settings, but also to those in more stressful moments of parenting. “This larger family should provide love and support to teenage mothers, children without parents, single mothers left to raise children, persons with disabilities needing particular affection and closeness, young people struggling with addiction...and the elderly and infirm.”

#### Questions for Deliberation at the Synod:

1. How can the Church in the diocese of San Diego more effectively communicate to our people the balanced sense of parenting expressed in *The Joy of Love*, while also helping parents to turn that balance into reality?
2. What are the principal cultural distortions which limit healthy parenting in Imperial and San Diego counties?
3. Specifically, how can we as a Church more effectively empower our parents as the first teachers in the ways of faith, hope and love?
4. How can the Church better support families in the absence of extended family?

#### **IV. The Challenge to Provide Authentic Pastoral Support for Those Who Are Divorced**

*The Joy of Love* makes clear that “special discernment is indispensable for the pastoral care of those who are separated, divorced or abandoned.” This care entails supporting reconciliation in marriages whenever possible and just, but also in

recognizing that there are all too many situations of abuse, selfishness and egregious immaturity where divorce is necessary for the protection of a spouse or of children. The Church is called to make more effective pastoral programs of caring, sensitive support available for those undergoing divorce. Special tenderness is prescribed for those who have been unjustly abandoned. Priests and parishes should make every effort to heal the wounds of divorced men and women through the sacraments, catechesis and social outreach. In particular, the Church is called to minister to children who have experienced the divorce of their parents, by bringing sensitivity, faith and hope.

Catholics who are divorced but have not remarried should clearly understand that the existence of a divorce does not preclude them in any way from full participation in the life of the Church and the Eucharist.

But what of Catholics who have remarried civilly after a divorce?

*The Joy of Love* powerfully asserts that the Church's pastoral care for those in second marriages must "allow them not only to realize that they belong to the Church as the body of Christ, but also to know that they can have a joyful and fruitful experience in it....Such persons need to feel not as excommunicated members of the Church, but instead as living members, able to live and grow in the church and experience her as a mother who welcomes them always, who takes care of them with affection and encourages them along the path of life and the Gospel."

A central pathway for the Church in providing such pastoral care lies in the ministry of the marriage tribunals in each diocese. Many times one or both parties to a marriage do not have the intention or capacity to live out the commitments to permanence, fidelity, an openness to children and forming a community of life and love which are essential for entering into a valid Catholic marriage. In such cases the Church can make a formal declaration that the marriage was never a valid Catholic marriage; this is popularly called an annulment. As a result of the efforts which the Church has taken to simplify procedural elements of the annulment process after the first Synod on marriage in 2014 the number of annulment cases in the diocese of San Diego has doubled. In addition, the diocese has eliminated all fees for annulments in order to remove any possible financial obstacles for Catholics in San Diego and Imperial counties. The granting of an annulment is the optimal step for Catholics who have been divorced and remarried, since it provides an official church declaration that an individual is free to marry in the Church.

But many Catholics who have been divorced and remarried conclude for a variety of legitimate reasons -- many of them arising out of caring concern for the effects that an annulment process might have on the feelings of adult children or former spouses -- that they cannot initiate the annulment process. What is their status in the Church?



*The Joy of Love* emphasizes that no abstract rule can embody the many complexities of the circumstances, intentions, levels of understanding and maturity which originally surrounded the action of a man or woman in entering their first marriage, or which surround the new moral obligations to a spouse or children which have already been produced by a second marriage. Thus, Pope Francis rejects the validity of any blanket assertion that “all those in any (second marriage without benefit of annulment) are living in a state of mortal sin and deprived of sanctifying grace.”

This does not mean that there is not a deep level of contradiction in the life of Catholics who are divorced and remarried, as the Lord himself noted in the Gospel of Matthew. But Pope Francis explains that even in the face of substantial contradictions between the Gospel and the existential life of a disciple, the inexorable logic of divine grace seeks ever more progressive reintegration into the full life of the Church. *The Joy of Love* says: “There are two ways of thinking which recur throughout the Church’s history: casting off and reinstating. The church’s way, from the time of the Council of Jerusalem, has always been the way of Jesus, the way of mercy and reinstatement.” Pope Francis, following the suggestion of the Synod, locates this way of mercy and reinstatement in the discerning conscience of the believer.

Catholic theology and law have long located a role for the discernment of conscience on the question of participation in the life of the Church and the reception of the Eucharist. But the sole question for discernment in this tradition of “the internal forum of conscience” revolved around whether one of the essential elements of the Catholic understanding of marriage had been missing at the time of the first marriage.

Pope Francis widens the focus for this internal reflection of conscience for a Catholic who is divorced and remarried by underscoring that the central question for conscience is “What is my situation before God?” In conversation with a priest, the believer with humility, discretion, and love for the Church and its teachings seeks to reflect upon their level of responsibility for the failure of the first marriage, their care and love for the children of that marriage, the moral obligations which have arisen in their new marriage, and possible harm which their returning to the sacraments might have by undermining the indissolubility of marriage. It is important to underscore that the role of the priest is one of accompaniment, meant to inform the conscience of the discernor on principles of Catholic faith. The priest is not to make decisions for the believer, for as Pope Francis emphasizes in *The Joy of Love*, the Church is “called to form consciences, not to replace them.”

Catholics participating authentically in this discernment of conscience should keep in mind both the permanence of marriage and the teaching of the Church that “the Eucharist is not a prize for the perfect, but medicine and nourishment for the weak.”

Most importantly, this discernment must always place at the very center the question “What is God asking of me now?”

Some Catholics engaging in this process of discernment will conclude that God is calling them to return to full participation in the life of the Church and the Eucharist. Others will conclude that they should wait, or that their return would hurt others.

In pointing to the pathway of conscience for the divorced and remarried, Pope Francis is not enlisting an element of the Christian moral life which is exceptional. For the realm of conscience is precisely where the Christian disciple is called to discern every important moral decision that he or she makes. Rules have an essential role in the life of the believer in conveying the wisdom and grace of the Church and providing a firm check on rationalization. But it is in the act of conscience, well-formed and profoundly considered, that the believer is most Christlike in carrying out his moral mission in the world.

#### Questions for Deliberation at the Synod

1. What are the elements necessary for a robust program of pastoral and spiritual support for those undergoing divorce, both during the process and afterward?
2. How can the diocese make the annulment process, especially the newly revised process, more accessible for our people?
3. How should we bring an understanding of the internal forum and conscience to our people, not only regarding the topic of participation for those who are divorced and remarried, but for all Catholics in their moral and spiritual lives?

#### The Challenge to Bring Spiritual Depth to Family Life

One of the great losses in family life during the past fifty years has been the diminishing role that family prayer and spirituality have in the home. The progressive loss of communal time spent together as a family leaves far fewer opportunities for reflecting upon the central elements of faith and grace. So many couples and families have lost the culture of prayer that enriched family life in the past. Parents find it harder to share with their children the traditions of faith which enriched their own childhood because in their young adult and early married years these prayers and traditions have come to seem distant and foreign to them. Moreover, increasing numbers of young couples are unable to build and sustain a spiritual dimension in their marriage.

The *Joy of Love* challenges the Church to renew and deepen the spiritual life of families in four ways.

The first is to integrate regular shared prayer into the life of the family. “A few minutes can be found each day to come together before the living God, to tell him our worries, to ask for the needs of our family, to pray for someone experiencing difficulty, to ask for help in sowing love, to give thanks for life and its blessings, and to ask Our Lady to protect us beneath her maternal mantle. With a few simple words, this moment of prayer can do immense good for our families.”

Pope Francis’ second spiritual challenge is for the family to integrate at its heart a spirituality of care and consolation. In all of its many activities and identities, the family is at its core called to be a reflection on the grace of God present as compassion and care in the lives of each member of the family and reaching far beyond it. “All family life is a ‘shepherding’ in mercy.”

The third spiritual challenge which Pope Francis finds in family life lies in insuring that the family does not become inward looking and insular. Rather the Catholic family must be an evangelizing family, inspired by a spirit of solidarity with the wider community, especially the poor and the marginalized.

The Pope’s final challenge is for families to seek constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love, while not seeking perfection in family life. We must “see in proper perspective the historical journey which we make as families and in this way to stop demanding of our interpersonal relationships a perfection, a purity of intentions and a consistency which we will only encounter in the Kingdom to come.” Such a spirituality preserves the beautiful aspirations of marriage while embracing the prudence which consoles and confirms family members in the recognition that the presence of shortcomings in our family life is not a sign of family failure, but rather a sign of our humanity.

#### Questions for Deliberation at the Diocesan Synod:

1. How can our parishes bring prayer more into the center of family life, with specific attention to the multi-cultural dimensions of this challenge?
2. What steps can our local church take to increase the participation of families at Mass, particularly in their identities as families?
3. What specific steps can the diocese take to build a spirituality of care, consolation, love and realism in our families?
4. How can we promote a substantial spiritual life shared between husbands and wives?
5. What can lead to a spirituality of evangelization and solidarity in family life rather than a spirituality of insularity?

### **Authentic Schools of the Gospel**

In the final page of *The Joy of Loving*, Pope Francis offers a prayer to the Holy Family which asks:

Holy Family of Nazareth

Grant that our Families too

May Be Places of Communion and Prayer

Authentic Schools of the Gospel

And Small Domestic Churches

As the diocese of San Diego moves toward a Synod on the Family this October to culminate our celebration of this year of Mercy, may we provide leadership in transforming our families ever more fully into authentic schools of the Gospel. May we identify new ways to witness to the beauty and realism of married life which is exclusive, permanent and fruitful. May we build a culture which lovingly invites and prepares men and women to accept ever more deeply in their lives a robust embrace of marriage in its fullness. May we build pathways to enhancing the spiritual depth of family life in San Diego and Imperial counties. And may we minister caringly, effectively and authentically to our brothers and sisters who have experienced divorce.

Holy Family of Nazareth, sustain us in this journey of faith and love.