

ABRIDGED VERSION OF AMORIS LAETITIA (AL):
Focusing on those paragraphs specifically relating to Marriage
(Please note that footnote numbers quoted follow after the final paragraph and full index of the UN-ABRIDGED version)

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.

7...It is likely, for example, that married couples will be more concerned with Chapters Four and Five...while everyone should feel challenged by Chapter Eight.

9...At the centre we see the father and mother, a couple with their personal story of love. They embody the primordial divine plan clearly spoken of by Christ himself: "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female?" (Mt 19:4). We hear an echo of the command found in the Book of Genesis: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh"(Gen 2:24).

10... The first, which Jesus paraphrases, says that "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27). It is striking that the "image of God" here refers to the couple, "male and female".

11. The couple that loves and begets life is a true, living icon – not an idol like those of stone or gold prohibited by the Decalogue – capable of revealing God the Creator and Saviour. For this reason, fruitful love becomes a symbol of God's inner life (cf. Gen 1:28; 9:7; 17:2-5, 16; 28:3; 35:11; 48:3-4)...Seen this way, the couple's fruitful relationship becomes an image for understanding and describing the mystery of God himself...This Trinitarian dimension finds expression in the theology of Saint Paul, who relates the couple to the "mystery" of the union of Christ and the Church (cf. Eph 5:21-33)

12...as the woman of the Song of Solomon will sing in a magnificent profession of love and mutual self-bestowal: "My beloved is mine and I am his... I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine" (2:16; 6:3).

13...The marital union is thus evoked not only in its sexual and corporal dimension, but also in its voluntary self-giving in love. The result of this union is that the two "become one flesh", both physically and in the union of their hearts and lives...[and] The Tenderness of an embrace.

36. We also need to be humble and realistic, acknowledging that at times the way we present our Christian beliefs and treat other people has helped contribute to today's problematic situation. We need a healthy dose of self-criticism. Then too, we often present marriage in such a way that its unitive meaning, its call to grow in love and its ideal of mutual assistance are overshadowed by an almost exclusive insistence on the duty of

procreation. Nor have we always provided solid guidance to young married couples, understanding their timetables, their way of thinking and their concrete concerns. At times we have also proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families. This excessive idealisation, especially when we have failed to inspire trust in God's grace, has not helped to make marriage more desirable and attractive, but quite the opposite.

37...We find it difficult to present marriage more as a dynamic path to personal development and fulfilment than as a lifelong burden. We also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them.

38... Nowadays we are grateful too for the witness of marriages that have not only proved lasting, but also fruitful and loving. All these factors can inspire a positive and welcoming pastoral approach capable of helping couples to grow in appreciation of the demands of the Gospel. Yet we have often been on the defensive, wasting pastoral energy on denouncing a decadent world without being proactive in proposing ways of finding true happiness.

40... We need to find the right language, arguments and forms of witness that can help us reach the hearts of young people, appealing to their capacity for generosity, commitment, love and even heroism, and in this way inviting them to take up the challenge of marriage with enthusiasm and courage.

41... Marital problems are "often confronted in haste and without the courage to have patience and reflect, to make sacrifices and to forgive one another."¹⁷

Jesus Restores and Fulfils 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 emphasises the need to safeguard God's gift: "Let marriage be held in honour 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 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.

63... The spousal covenant, originating in creation and revealed in the history of salvation, takes on its full meaning in Christ and his Church.

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 emphasises “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...By his Spirit, he gives 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)...

68... In a particular way, with the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* he (Pope Paul VI) 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, recognise their own duties towards God, themselves, their families and human society’ (No. 10).

69... in his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*... Pope [JPII]...offered a general vision of the vocation of men and women to love...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

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 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.

71... Jesus, who reconciled all things in himself and redeemed us from sin... 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).

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 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 recognises 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 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 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 simply not reject them, since by the reception of baptism their union automatically becomes sacramental.

76... 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

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 characterised by deep affection, responsibility towards the children and the ability to overcome trials – this can be seen as an opportunity, where possible, to lead them to celebrate the sacrament of Matrimony”.⁷⁸

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 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

...[any children do] not appear at the end of a process, but [are] 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.

88. ... “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...

CHAPTER FOUR

89... the grace of the sacrament of marriage is intended before all else “to perfect the couple’s love”.¹⁰⁴

90... (1 Cor 13:4-7)...Love is experienced and nurtured in the daily life of couples

92... Love always has an aspect of deep compassion that leads to accepting the other person as part of this world, even when he or she acts differently than I would like.

93... love benefits and helps others. For this reason it (*chrestéuetai*) is translated as “kind”; love is ever ready to be of assistance.

94. Throughout the text, it is clear that Paul wants to stress that love is more than a mere feeling. Rather, it should be understood along the lines of the Hebrew verb “to love”; it is “to do good”. As Saint Ignatius of Loyola said, “Love is shown more by deeds than by words”.¹⁰⁶ It thus shows its fruitfulness and allows us to experience the happiness of giving, the nobility and grandeur of spending ourselves unstintingly, without asking to be repaid, purely for the pleasure of giving and serving.

95...love makes us rise above ourselves, envy closes us in on ourselves. True love values the other person’s achievements. It does not see him or her as a threat. It frees us from the sour taste of envy. It recognises that everyone has different gifts and a unique path in life. So it strives to discover its own road to happiness, while allowing others to find theirs.

99... Indeed, the deeper love is, the more it calls for respect for the other’s freedom and the ability to wait until the other opens the door to his or her heart”.¹⁰⁹

101. We have repeatedly said that to love another we must first love ourselves. ... [however] The Bible makes it clear that generously serving others is far more noble than loving ourselves. Loving ourselves is only important as a psychological prerequisite for being able to love others: “If a man is mean to himself, to whom will he be generous? No one is meaner than the man who is grudging to himself ” (Sir 14:5-6).

109. The expression *chaírei epì te adikía* has to do with a negativity lurking deep within a person’s heart...The following phrase expresses its opposite: *sygchaírei te aletheía*: “it rejoices in the right”...but this is impossible for those who must always be comparing and competing, even with their spouse, so that they secretly rejoice in their failures.

113. Married couples joined by love speak well of each other; they try to show their spouse’s good side, not their weakness and faults. In any event, they keep silent rather than speak ill of them. This is not merely a way of acting in front of others; it springs from an interior attitude. Far from ingenuously claiming not to see the problems and weaknesses of others, it sees those weaknesses and faults in a wider context. It recognises that these failings are a part of a bigger picture. We have to realise that all of us are a complex mixture of light and shadows. The other person is much more than the sum of the little things that annoy me. Love does not have to be perfect for us to value it. The other person loves me as best they can, with all their limits, but the fact that love is imperfect does not mean that it is untrue or unreal. It is real, albeit limited and earthly. If I expect too much, the other person will let me know, for he or she can neither play God nor serve all my needs. Love coexists with imperfection. It “bears all things” and can hold its peace before the limitations of the loved one.

115... Love trusts, it sets free, it does not try to control, possess and dominate everything. This freedom, which fosters independence, an openness to the world around us and to new experiences, can only enrich and expand relationships. The spouses then share with one another the joy of all they have received and learned outside the family circle. At the same time, this freedom makes for sincerity and transparency, for those who know that they are trusted and appreciated can be open and hide nothing. Those who know that their spouse is always suspicious, judgmental and lacking unconditional love, will tend to keep secrets,

conceal their failings and weaknesses, and pretend to be someone other than who they are. On the other hand...loving trust, come what may, helps its members to be themselves and spontaneously to reject deceit, falsehood, and lies.

120. Our reflection on Saint Paul's hymn to love has prepared us to discuss conjugal love. This is the love between husband and wife,¹¹⁵ a love sanctified, enriched and illuminated by the grace of the sacrament of marriage. It is an "affective union",¹¹⁶ spiritual and sacrificial, which combines the warmth of friendship and erotic passion, and endures long after emotions and passion subside. Pope Pius XI taught that this love permeates the duties of married life and enjoys pride of place.¹¹⁷ Infused by the Holy Spirit, this powerful love is a reflection of the unbroken covenant between Christ and humanity that culminated in his self-sacrifice on the cross. "The Spirit which the Lord pours forth gives a new heart and renders man and woman capable of loving one another as Christ loved us. Conjugal love reaches that fullness to which it is interiorly ordained: conjugal charity."¹¹⁸

121. Marriage is a precious sign, for "when a man and a woman celebrate the sacrament of marriage, God is, as it were, 'mirrored' in them; he impresses in them his own features and the indelible character of his love. Marriage is the icon of God's love for us. Indeed, God is also communion: the three Persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit live eternally in perfect unity. And this is precisely the mystery of marriage: God makes of the two spouses one single existence".¹¹⁹ This has concrete daily consequences, because the spouses, "in virtue of the sacrament, are invested with a true and proper mission, so that, starting with the simple ordinary things of life they can make visible the love with which Christ loves his Church and continues to give his life for her".¹²⁰

122. We should not however confuse different levels: there is no need to lay upon two limited persons the tremendous burden of having to reproduce perfectly the union existing between Christ and his Church, for marriage as a sign entails "a dynamic process..., one which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God".¹²¹

Lifelong sharing

123. After the love that unites us to God, conjugal love is the "greatest form of friendship".¹²² 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. Marriage joins to all this an indissoluble exclusivity expressed in the stable commitment to share and shape together the whole of life. Let us be honest and acknowledge the signs that this is the case. Lovers do not see their relationship as merely temporary. Those who marry do not expect their excitement to fade. Those who witness the celebration of a loving union, however fragile, trust that it will pass the test of time. 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. For believers, it is also a covenant before God that calls for fidelity: "The Lord was witness to the covenant between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is

your companion and your wife by covenant... Let none be faithless to the wife of his youth. For I hate divorce, says the Lord" (Mal 2:14-16).

124. A love that is weak or infirm, incapable of accepting marriage as a challenge to be taken up and fought for, reborn, renewed and reinvented until death, cannot sustain a great commitment. It will succumb to the culture of the ephemeral that prevents a constant process of growth. Yet "promising love for ever is possible when we perceive a plan bigger than our own ideas and undertakings, a plan which sustains us and enables us to surrender our future entirely to the one we love".¹²³ If this love is to overcome all trials and remain faithful in the face of everything, it needs the gift of grace to strengthen and elevate it. In the words of Saint Robert Bellarmine, "the fact that one man unites with one woman in an indissoluble bond, and that they remain inseparable despite every kind of difficulty, even when there is no longer hope for children, can only be the sign of a great mystery".¹²⁴

125. Marriage is likewise a friendship marked by passion, but a passion always directed to an ever more stable and intense union. This is because "marriage was not instituted solely for the procreation of children" but also that mutual love "might be properly expressed, that it should grow and mature".¹²⁵ This unique friendship between a man and a woman acquires an all-encompassing character only within the conjugal union. Precisely as all-encompassing, this union is also exclusive, faithful and open to new life. It shares everything in constant mutual respect. The Second Vatican Council echoed this by stating that "such a love, bringing together the human and the divine, leads the partners to a free and mutual self-giving, experienced in tenderness and action, and permeating their entire lives".¹²⁶

Joy and beauty

126. In marriage, the joy of love needs to be cultivated. When the search for pleasure becomes obsessive, it holds us in thrall and keeps us from experiencing other satisfactions. Joy, on the other hand, increases our pleasure and helps us find fulfilment in any number of things, even at those times of life when physical pleasure has ebbed. Saint Thomas Aquinas said that the word "joy" refers to an expansion of the heart.¹²⁷ Marital joy can be experienced even amid sorrow; it involves accepting that marriage is an inevitable mixture of enjoyment and struggles, tensions and repose, pain and relief, satisfactions and longings, annoyances and pleasures, but always on the path of friendship, which inspires married couples to care for one another: "they help and serve each other".¹²⁸

127. The love of friendship is called "charity" when it perceives and esteems the "great worth" of another person.¹²⁹ Beauty – that "great worth" which is other than physical or psychological appeal – enables us to appreciate the sacredness of a person, without feeling the need to possess it. In a consumerist society, the sense of beauty is impoverished and so joy fades. Everything is there to be purchased, possessed or consumed, including people. Tenderness, on the other hand, is a sign of a love free of selfish possessiveness. It makes us approach a person with immense respect and a certain dread of causing them harm or taking away their freedom. Loving another person involves the joy of contemplating and appreciating their innate beauty and sacredness, which is greater than my needs. This enables me to seek their good even when they cannot belong to me, or when they are no

longer physically appealing but intrusive and annoying. For “the love by which one person is pleasing to another depends on his or her giving something freely”.¹³⁰

128. The aesthetic experience of love is expressed in that “gaze” which contemplates other persons as ends in themselves, even if they are infirm, elderly or physically unattractive. A look of appreciation has enormous importance, and to begrudge it is usually hurtful. How many things do spouses and children sometimes do in order to be noticed! Much hurt and many problems result when we stop looking at one another. This lies behind the complaints and grievances we often hear in families: “My husband does not look at me; he acts as if I were invisible”. “Please look at me when I am talking to you!”. “My wife no longer looks at me, she only has eyes for our children”. “In my own home nobody cares about me; they do not even see me; it is as if I did not exist”. Love opens our eyes and enables us to see, beyond all else, the great worth of a human being.

129. The joy of this contemplative love needs to be cultivated. Since we were made for love, we know that there is no greater joy than that of sharing good things: “Give, take, and treat yourself well” (Sir 14:16). The most intense joys in life arise when we are able to elicit joy in others, as a foretaste of heaven. We can think of the lovely scene in the film *Babette’s Feast*, when the generous cook receives a grateful hug and praise: “Ah, how you will delight the angels!” It is a joy and a great consolation to bring delight to others, to see them enjoying themselves. This joy, the fruit of fraternal love, is not that of the vain and self-centred, but of lovers who delight in the good of those whom they love, who give freely to them and thus bear good fruit.

130. On the other hand, joy also grows through pain and sorrow. In the words of Saint Augustine, “the greater the danger in battle the greater is the joy of victory”.¹³¹ After suffering and struggling together, spouses are able to experience that it was worth it, because they achieved some good, learned something as a couple, or came to appreciate what they have. Few human joys are as deep and thrilling as those experienced by two people who love one another and have achieved something as the result of a great, shared effort.

Marrying for love

131. I would like to say to young people that none of this is jeopardised when their love finds expression in marriage. Their union encounters in this institution the means to ensure that their love truly will endure and grow. Naturally, love is much more than an outward consent or a contract, yet it is nonetheless true that choosing to give marriage a visible form in society by undertaking certain commitments shows how important it is. It manifests the seriousness of each person’s identification with the other and their firm decision to leave adolescent individualism behind and to belong to one another. Marriage is a means of expressing that we have truly left the security of the home in which we grew up in order to build other strong ties and to take on a new responsibility for another person. This is much more meaningful than a mere spontaneous association for mutual gratification, which would turn marriage into a purely private affair. As a social institution, marriage protects and shapes a shared commitment to deeper growth in love and commitment to one another, for the good of society as a whole. That is why marriage is more than a fleeting

fashion; it is of enduring importance. Its essence derives from our human nature and social character. It involves a series of obligations born of love itself, a love so serious and generous that it is ready to face any risk.

132. To opt for marriage in this way expresses a genuine and firm decision to join paths, come what may. Given its seriousness, this public commitment of love cannot be the fruit of a hasty decision, but neither can it be postponed indefinitely. Committing oneself exclusively and definitively to another person always involves a risk and a bold gamble. Unwillingness to make such a commitment is selfish, calculating and petty. It fails to recognise the rights of another person and to present him or her to society as someone worthy of unconditional love. If two persons are truly in love, they naturally show this to others. When love is expressed before others in the marriage contract, with all its public commitments, it clearly indicates and protects the “yes” which those persons speak freely and unreservedly to each other. This “yes” tells them that they can always trust one another, and that they will never be abandoned when difficulties arise or new attractions or selfish interests present themselves.

A love that reveals itself and increases

133. The love of friendship unifies all aspects of marital life...This love must be freely and generously expressed in words and acts... “three words need to be used. I want to repeat this! Three words: ‘Please’, ‘Thank you’, ‘Sorry’. Three essential words!”.¹³² “...when we are not overbearing and ask: ‘May I?’; ...when we are not selfish and can say: ‘Thank you!’; and...when someone realises that he or she did something wrong and is able to say ‘Sorry!’, [we] experience peace and joy”.¹³³ Let us not be stingy about using these words, but keep repeating them, day after day. For “certain silences are oppressive, even at times...between husbands and wives...”.¹³⁴ The right words, spoken at the right time, daily protect and nurture love.

134. All this occurs through a process of constant growth. The very special form of love that is marriage is called to embody what Saint Thomas Aquinas said about charity in general. “Charity”, he says, “by its very nature, has no limit to its increase, for it is a participation in that in finite charity which is the Holy Spirit... Nor on the part of the subject can its limit be fixed, because as charity grows, so too does its capacity for an even greater increase”.¹³⁵ Saint Paul also prays: “May the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another” (1 Th 3:12), and again, “concerning fraternal love... we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more” (1 Th 4:9-10). More and more! Marital love is not defended primarily by presenting indissolubility as a duty, or by repeating doctrine, but by helping it to grow ever stronger under the impulse of grace. A love that fails to grow is at risk. Growth can only occur if we respond to God’s grace through constant acts of love, acts of kindness that become ever more frequent, intense, generous, tender and cheerful. Husbands and wives “become conscious of their unity and experience it more deeply from day to day”.¹³⁶ The gift of God’s love poured out upon the spouses is also a summons to constant growth in grace.

135. It is not helpful to dream of an idyllic and perfect love needing no stimulus to grow. A celestial notion of earthly love forgets that the best is yet to come, that fine wine matures with age...It is much healthier to be realistic about our limits, defects and imperfections, and

to respond to the call to grow together, to bring love to maturity and to strengthen the union, come what may.

Dialogue

136. Dialogue is essential for experiencing, expressing and fostering love in marriage...Yet it can only be the fruit of a long and demanding apprenticeship. Men and women, young people and adults, communicate differently. They speak different languages and they act in different ways. Our way of asking and responding to questions, the tone we use, our timing and any number of other factors condition how well we communicate. We need to develop certain attitudes that express love and encourage authentic dialogue.

137. Take time, quality time. This means being ready to listen patiently and attentively to everything the other person wants to say. It requires the self-discipline of not speaking until the time is right. Instead of offering an opinion or advice, we need to be sure that we have heard everything the other person has to say. This means cultivating an interior silence that makes it possible to listen to the other person without mental or emotional distractions. Do not be rushed, put aside all of your own needs and worries, and make space. Often the other spouse does not need a solution to his or her problems, but simply to be heard, to feel that someone has acknowledged their pain, their disappointment, their fear, their anger, their hopes and their dreams. How often we hear complaints like: "He does not listen to me." "Even when you seem to, you are really doing something else." "I talk to her and I feel like she can't wait for me to finish." "When I speak to her, she tries to change the subject, or she gives me curt responses to end the conversation".

138. Develop the habit of giving real importance to the other person. This means appreciating them and recognising their right to exist, to think as they do and to be happy. Never downplay what they say or think, even if you need to express your own point of view. Everyone has something to contribute, because they have their life experiences, they look at things from a different standpoint and they have their own concerns, abilities and insights. We ought to be able to acknowledge the other person's truth, the value of his or her deepest concerns, and what it is that they are trying to communicate, however aggressively. We have to put ourselves in their shoes and try to peer into their hearts, to perceive their deepest concerns and to take them as a point of departure for further dialogue.

139. Keep an open mind. Don't get bogged down in your own limited ideas and opinions, but be prepared to change or expand them. The combination of two different ways of thinking can lead to a synthesis that enriches both. The unity that we seek is not uniformity, but a "unity in diversity", or "reconciled diversity". Fraternal communion is enriched by respect and appreciation for differences within an overall perspective that advances the common good. We need to free ourselves from feeling that we all have to be alike. A certain astuteness is also needed to prevent the appearance of "static" that can interfere with the process of dialogue. For example, if hard feelings start to emerge, they should be dealt with sensitively, lest they interrupt the dynamic of dialogue. The ability to say what one is thinking without offending the other person is important. Words should be carefully chosen so as not to offend, especially when discussing difficult issues. Making a point should never involve venting anger and inflicting hurt. A patronising tone only serves to hurt, ridicule,

accuse and offend others. Many disagreements between couples are not about important things. Mostly they are about trivial matters. What alters the mood, however, is the way things are said or the attitude with which they are said.

140. Show affection and concern for the other person. Love surmounts even the worst barriers. When we love someone, or when we feel loved by them, we can better understand what they are trying to communicate. Fearing the other person as a kind of “rival” is a sign of weakness and needs to be overcome. It is very important to base one’s position on solid choices, beliefs or values, and not on the need to win an argument or to be proved right.

141. Finally, let us acknowledge that for a worthwhile dialogue we have to have something to say. This can only be the fruit of an interior richness nourished by reading, personal reflection, prayer and openness to the world around us. Otherwise, conversations become boring and trivial. When neither of the spouses works at this, and has little real contact with other people...life becomes stifling and dialogue impoverished.

Passionate Love

142. The Second Vatican Council teaches that this conjugal love “embraces the good of the whole person; it can enrich the sentiments of the spirit and their physical expression with a unique dignity and ennoble them as the special features and manifestation of the friendship proper to marriage”.¹³⁸ For this reason, a love lacking either pleasure or passion is insufficient to symbolise the union of the human heart with God: “All the mystics have affirmed that supernatural love and heavenly love find the symbols which they seek in marital love, rather than in friendship, filial devotion or devotion to a cause. And the reason is to be found precisely in its totality”.¹³⁹ Why then should we not pause to speak of feelings and sexuality in marriage?

The World of Emotions

143. Desires, feelings, emotions, what the ancients called “the passions”, all have an important place in married life. They are awakened whenever “another” becomes present and part of a person’s life. It is characteristic of all living beings to reach out to other things, and this tendency always has basic affective signs: pleasure or pain, joy or sadness, tenderness or fear. They ground the most elementary psychological activity. Human beings live on this earth, and all that they do and seek is fraught with passion.

144. As true man, Jesus showed his emotions. He was hurt by the rejection of Jerusalem (cf. Mt 23:27) and this moved him to tears (cf. Lk 19:41). He was also deeply moved by the sufferings of others (cf. Mk 6:34). He felt deeply their grief (cf. Jn 11:33), and he wept at the death of a friend (cf. Jn 11:35). These examples of his sensitivity showed how much his human heart was open to others.

145. Experiencing an emotion is not, in itself, morally good or evil.¹⁴⁰ The stirring of desire or repugnance is neither sinful nor blameworthy. What is morally good or evil is what we do on the basis of, or under the influence of, a given passion. But when passions are aroused or sought, and as a result we perform evil acts, the evil lies in the decision to fuel them and in

the evil acts that result. Along the same lines, my being attracted to someone is not automatically good. If my attraction to that person makes me try to dominate him or her, then my feeling only serves my selfishness. To believe that we are good simply because “we feel good” is a tremendous illusion. There are those who feel themselves capable of great love only because they have a great need for affection, yet they prove incapable of the effort needed to bring happiness to others. They remain caught up in their own needs and desires. In such cases, emotions distract from the highest values and conceal a self-centredness that makes it impossible to develop a healthy and happy...life.

146. This being said, if passion accompanies a free act, it can manifest the depth of that act. Marital love strives to ensure that one’s entire emotional life benefits [others]...

God loves the joy of his children

147. This calls for a pedagogical process that involves renunciation. This conviction on the part of the Church has often been rejected as opposed to human happiness. Benedict XVI summed up this charge with great clarity: “Doesn’t the Church, with all her commandments and prohibitions, turn to bitterness the most precious thing in life? Doesn’t she blow the whistle just when the joy which is the Creator’s gift offers us a happiness which is itself a certain foretaste of the Divine?”¹⁴² He responded that, although there have been exaggerations and deviant forms of asceticism in Christianity, the Church’s official teaching, in fidelity to the Scriptures, did not reject “eros as such, but rather declared war on a warped and destructive form of it, because this counterfeit divination of eros... actually strips it of divine dignity and dehumanises it”.¹⁴³

149. Some currents of spirituality teach that desire has to be eliminated as a path to liberation from pain. Yet we believe that God loves the enjoyment felt by human beings: he created us and “richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy” (1 Tim 6:17). Let us be glad when with great love he tells us: “My son, treat yourself well... Do not deprive yourself of a happy day” (Sir 14:11-14). Married couples likewise respond to God’s will when they take up the biblical injunction: “Be joyful in the day of prosperity” (Ec 7:14). What is important is to have the freedom to realise that pleasure can find different expressions at different times of life, in accordance with the needs of mutual love. In this sense, we can appreciate the teachings of some Eastern masters who urge us to expand our consciousness, lest we be imprisoned by one limited experience that can blinker us. This expansion of consciousness is not the denial or destruction of desire so much as its broadening and perfection.

The erotic dimension of love

150. All this brings us to the sexual dimension of marriage. God himself created sexuality, which is a marvellous gift to his creatures. If this gift needs to be cultivated and directed, it is to prevent the “impoverishment of an authentic value”.¹⁴⁶ Saint John Paul II rejected the claim that the Church’s teaching is “a negation of the value of human sexuality”, or that the Church simply tolerates sexuality “because it is necessary for procreation”.¹⁴⁷ Sexual desire is not something to be looked down upon, and “there can be no attempt whatsoever to call into question its necessity”.¹⁴⁸

151... Sexuality is not a means of gratification or entertainment; it is an interpersonal language wherein the other is taken seriously, in his or her sacred and inviolable dignity. As such, "the human heart comes to participate, so to speak, in another kind of spontaneity".¹⁵¹ In this context, the erotic appears as a specifically human manifestation of sexuality. It enables us to discover "the nuptial meaning of the body and the authentic dignity of the gift".¹⁵² ... sexual differentiation not only is "a source of fruitfulness and procreation", but also possesses "the capacity of expressing love: that love precisely in which the human person becomes a gift".¹⁵³ A healthy sexual desire, albeit closely joined to a pursuit of pleasure, always involves a sense of wonder, and for that very reason can humanise the impulses.

152. ...the erotic dimension of love...must be seen as gift from God that enriches the relationship of the spouses. As a passion sublimated by a love respectful of the dignity of the other, it becomes a "pure, unadulterated affirmation" revealing the marvels of which the human heart is capable. In this way, even momentarily, we can feel that "life has turned out good and happy".¹⁵⁴

153. ...sex often becomes depersonalised and unhealthy; as a result, "it becomes the occasion and instrument for self-assertion and the selfish satisfaction of personal desires and instincts".¹⁵⁵

154. We also know that, within marriage itself, sex can become a source of suffering and manipulation. Hence it must be clearly reaffirmed that "a conjugal act imposed on one's spouse without regard to his or her condition, or personal and reasonable wishes in the matter, is no true act of love, and therefore offends the moral order in its particular application to the intimate relationship of husband and wife".¹⁵⁶ The acts proper to the sexual union of husband and wife correspond to the nature of sexuality as willed by God when they take place in "a manner which is truly human".¹⁵⁷

155. ...When reciprocal belonging turns into domination, "the structure of communion in interpersonal relations is essentially changed".¹⁵⁹ It is part of the mentality of domination that those who dominate end up negating their own dignity.¹⁶⁰

156. Every form of sexual submission must be clearly rejected. This includes all improper interpretations of the passage in the Letter to the Ephesians where Paul tells women to "be subject to your husbands" (Eph 5:22). ... "Love excludes every kind of subjection whereby the wife might become a servant or a slave of the husband... The community or unity which they should establish through marriage is constituted by a reciprocal donation of self, which is also a mutual subjection".¹⁶² Hence Paul goes on to say that "husbands should love their wives as their own bodies" (Eph 5:28). ... "Be subject to one another" (Eph 5:21). In marriage, this reciprocal "submission" takes on a special meaning, and is seen as a freely chosen mutual belonging marked by fidelity, respect and care. Sexuality is inseparably at the service of this conjugal friendship, for it is meant to aid the fulfilment of the other.

157. ...The ideal of marriage cannot be seen purely as generous donation and self-sacrifice, where each spouse renounces all personal needs and seeks only the other's good without concern for personal satisfaction. We need to remember that authentic love also needs to

be able to receive the other, to accept one's own vulnerability and needs, and to welcome with sincere and joyful gratitude the physical expressions of love found in a caress, an embrace, a kiss and sexual union... "man cannot live by oblation, descending love alone. He cannot always give, he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift".164

159...Saint John Paul II noted that the biblical texts "give no reason to assert the 'inferiority' of marriage, nor the 'superiority' of virginity or celibacy"166 based on sexual abstinence. Rather than speak absolutely of the superiority of virginity, it should be enough to point out that the different states of life complement one another, and consequently that some can be more perfect in one way and others in another. Alexander of Hales, for example, stated that in one sense marriage may be considered superior to the other sacraments, inasmuch as it symbolises the great reality of "Christ's union with the Church, or the union of his divine and human natures".167

160. Consequently, "it is not a matter of diminishing the value of matrimony in favour of continence".168 "There is no basis for playing one off against the other..."

161...Each spouse becomes "one flesh" with the other as a sign of willingness to share everything with him or her until death...Virginity and marriage are, and must be, different ways of loving.

162... Many married couples remain faithful when one of them has become physically unattractive, or fails to satisfy the other's needs, despite the voices in our society that might encourage them to be unfaithful or to leave the other. A wife can care for her sick husband and thus, in drawing near to the Cross, renew her commitment to love unto death. ...Today, secularisation has obscured the value of a life-long union and the beauty of the vocation to marriage. For this reason, it is "necessary to deepen an understanding of the positive aspects of conjugal love".173

The Transformation of Love

163. Longer life spans now mean that close and exclusive relationships must last for four, five or even six decades; consequently, the initial decision has to be frequently renewed. While one of the spouses may no longer experience an intense sexual desire for the other, he or she may still experience the pleasure of mutual belonging and the knowledge that neither of them is alone but has a "partner" with whom everything in life is shared. ...It is a deeper love, a lifelong decision of the heart. Even amid unresolved conflicts and confused emotional situations, they daily reaffirm their decision to love, to belong to one another, to share their lives and to continue loving and forgiving. Each progresses along the path of personal growth and development. On this journey, love rejoices at every step and in every new stage.

164. In the course of every marriage physical appearances change, but this hardly means that love and attraction need fade. We love the other person for who they are, not simply for their body...a spouse continues to see it with the eyes of love and so his or her affection does not diminish. He or she reaffirms the decision to belong to the other and expresses

that choice in faithful and loving closeness...Indeed, love "is a single reality, but with different dimensions; at different times, one or other dimension may emerge more clearly".¹⁷⁵ The marriage bond finds new forms of expression and constantly seeks new ways to grow in strength. These both preserve and strengthen the bond. They call for daily effort. None of this, however, is possible without praying to the Holy Spirit for an outpouring of his grace, his supernatural strength and his spiritual fire, to confirm, direct and transform our love in every new situation.

CHAPTER FIVE

Love Made Fruitful

Welcoming a new Life

167. Large families are a joy for the Church. They are an expression of the fruitfulness of love. At the same time, Saint John Paul II rightly explained that responsible parenthood does not mean "unlimited procreation or lack of awareness of what is involved in rearing children, but rather the empowerment of couples to use their inviolable liberty wisely and responsibly, taking into account social and demographic realities, as well as their own situation and legitimate desires".¹⁸²

178. Some couples are unable to have children. We know that this can be a cause of real suffering for them. At the same time, we know that "marriage was not instituted solely for the procreation of children... Even in cases where, despite the intense desire of the spouses, there are no children, marriage still retains its character of being a whole manner and communion of life, and preserves its value and indissolubility".¹⁹⁹

181...Married couples should have a clear awareness of their social obligations. With this, their affection does not diminish but is flooded with new light. As the poet says:

"Your hands are my caress, the harmony that fills my days. I love you because your hands
Work for justice.

If I love you, it is because you are my love, my companion and my all, and on the street, side
by side,
We are much more than just two".²⁰⁴

183. A married couple who experience the power of love know that this love is called to bind the wounds of the outcast, to foster a culture of encounter and to fight for justice.

190...As the word of God tells us, "a man leaves his father and his mother" (Gen 2:24). This does not always happen, and a marriage is hampered by the failure to make this necessary sacrifice and surrender. Parents must not be abandoned or ignored, but marriage itself demands that they be "left", so that the new home will be a true hearth, a place of security, hope and future plans, and the couple can truly become "one flesh" (ibid.)...Marriage challenges husbands and wives to find new ways of being sons and daughters.

CHAPTER SIX

Some Pastoral Perspectives

200...Married couples are grateful that their pastors uphold the high ideal of a love that is strong, solid, enduring and capable of sustaining them through whatever trials they may have to face.

203. Seminarians should receive a more extensive interdisciplinary, and not merely doctrinal, formation in the areas of engagement and marriage.

207...the need for specific programmes of marriage preparation aimed at giving couples a genuine experience of participation in ecclesial life...Marriage preparation should be a kind of "initiation" to the sacrament of matrimony, providing couples with the help they need to receive the sacrament worthily and to make a solid beginning of life [together].

208...For every couple, marriage preparation begins at birth. What they received from their family should prepare them to know themselves and to make a full and definitive commitment. Those best prepared for marriage are probably those who learned what Christian marriage is from their own parents, who chose each other unconditionally and daily renew this decision.

209...The decision to marry should never be encouraged unless the couple has discerned deeper reasons that will ensure a genuine and stable commitment.

210..couples need to be able to detect danger signals in their relationship and to find, before the wedding, effective ways of responding to them. Sadly, many couples marry without really knowing one another. They have enjoyed each other's company and done things together, but without facing the challenge of revealing themselves and coming to know who the other person truly is.

211. Both short-term and long-term marriage preparation should ensure that the couple do not view the wedding ceremony as the end of the road, but instead embark upon marriage as a life-long calling based on a firm and realistic decision to face all trials and difficult moments together. The pastoral care of engaged and married couples should be centred on the marriage bond, assisting couples not only to deepen their love but also to overcome problems and difficulties. This involves not only helping them to accept the Church's teaching and to have recourse to her valuable resources, but also offering practical programmes, sound advice, proven strategies and psychological guidance. All this calls for a pedagogy of love, attuned to the feelings and needs of young people and capable of helping them to grow interiorly. Marriage preparation should also provide couples with the names of places, people and services to which they can turn for help when problems arise. It is also important to remind them of the availability of the sacrament of Reconciliation, which allows them to bring their sins and past mistakes, and their relationship itself, before God, and to receive in turn his merciful forgiveness and healing strength.

212...Here let me say a word to fiancés. Have the courage to be different. Don't let yourselves get swallowed up by a society of consumption and empty appearances. What is important is the love you share, strengthened and sanctified by grace. You are capable of opting for a more modest and simple celebration in which love takes precedence over everything else.

213. In their preparation for marriage, the couple should be encouraged to make the liturgical celebration a profound personal experience and to appreciate the meaning of each of its signs.

215...[couples] need to be encouraged to see the sacrament not as a single moment that then becomes a part of the past and its memories, but rather as a reality that permanently influences the whole of married life.²⁴⁵ The procreative meaning of sexuality, the language of the body, and the signs of love shown throughout married life, all become an "uninterrupted continuity of liturgical language" and "conjugal life becomes in a certain sense liturgical".²⁴⁶

216. The couple can also meditate on the biblical readings and the meaningfulness of the rings they will exchange and the other signs that are part of the rite. 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...Those who help prepare them for marriage should help them experience these moments of prayer that can prove so beneficial.

217. It is important that marriage be seen as a matter of love, that only those who freely choose and love one another may marry. When love is merely physical attraction or a vague affection, spouses become particularly vulnerable once this affection wanes or physical attraction diminishes.

218. Another great challenge of marriage preparation is to help couples realise that marriage is not something that happens once for all. Their union is real and irrevocable, confirmed and consecrated by the sacrament of matrimony. 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, neither spouse can expect the other to be perfect. Each must set aside all illusions and accept the other as he or she actually is: an unfinished product, needing to grow, a work in progress...This fact needs to be realistically presented to newly married couples from the outset, so that they can grasp that the wedding is "just the beginning". By saying "I do", they embark on a journey that requires them to overcome all obstacles standing in the way of their reaching the goal. The nuptial blessing that they receive is a grace and an incentive for this journey. They can only benefit from sitting down and talking to one another about how, concretely, they plan to achieve their goal.

219...Hope is the leaven that, in those first years of engagement and marriage, makes it possible to look beyond arguments, conflicts and problems and to see things in a broader perspective. It harnesses our uncertainties and concerns so that growth can take place.

Hope also bids us live fully in the present...for the best way to prepare a solid future is to live well in the present.

220...The pleasure of belonging to one another leads to seeing life as a common project, putting the other's happiness ahead of my own, and realising with joy that this marriage enriches society. As love matures, it also learns to "negotiate". Far from anything selfish or calculating, such negotiation is an exercise of mutual love, an interplay of give and take, for the good of the [relationship].

221...Each marriage is a kind of "salvation history", which from fragile beginnings – thanks to God's gift and a creative and generous response on our part – grows over time into something precious and enduring. Might we say that the greatest mission of two people in love is to help one another become, respectively, more a man and more a woman? Fostering growth means helping a person to shape his or her own identity. Love is thus a kind of craftsmanship. When we read in the Bible about the creation of man and woman, we see God first forming Adam (cf. Gen 2:7); he realises that something essential is lacking and so he forms Eve and then hears the man exclaim in amazement, "Yes, this one is just right for me!" We can almost hear the amazing dialogue that must have taken place when the man and the woman first encountered one another. In the life of married couples, even at difficult moments, one person can always surprise the other, and new doors can open for their relationship, as if they were meeting for the first time. At every new stage, they can keep "forming" one another. Love makes each wait for the other with the patience of a craftsman, a patience which comes from God.

222. The pastoral care of newly married couples must also involve encouraging them to be generous in bestowing life. "In accord with the personal and fully human character of conjugal love, family planning fittingly takes place as the result a consensual dialogue between the spouses, respect for times and consideration of the dignity of the partner...Decisions involving responsible parenthood presupposes the formation of conscience, which is 'the most secret core and sanctuary of a person. There each one is alone with God, whose voice echoes in the depths of the heart' (*Gaudium et Spes*, 16). The more the couple tries to listen in conscience to God and his commandments (cf. Rom 2:15), and is accompanied spiritually, the more their decision will be profoundly free of subjective caprice and accommodation to prevailing social mores".²⁴⁸ The clear teaching of the Second Vatican Council still holds: "(The couple) will make decisions by common counsel and effort. Let them thoughtfully take into account both their own welfare and that of their children, those already born and those which the future may bring. For this accounting they need to reckon with both the material and the spiritual conditions of the times as well as of their state in life...The parents themselves and no one else should ultimately make this judgment in the sight of God".²⁴⁹

Some resources

223. The Synod Fathers observed that "the initial years of marriage are a vital and sensitive period during which couples become more aware of the challenges and meaning of married life. Consequently, pastoral accompaniment needs to go beyond the actual celebration of the sacrament (*Familiaris Consortio*, Part III). In this regard, experienced couples have an

important role to play. The parish is a place where such experienced couples can help younger couples, with the eventual cooperation of associations, ecclesial movements and new communities...Liturgies, devotional practices and the Eucharist celebrated for [married couples], especially on the wedding anniversary, were mentioned as vital factors in fostering evangelisation...".251

224. This process takes time. Love needs time and space; everything else is secondary. Time is needed to talk things over, to embrace leisurely, to share plans, to listen to one other and gaze in each other's eyes, to appreciate one another and to build a stronger relationship. Sometimes the frenetic pace of our society and the pressures of the workplace create problems. At other times, the problem is the lack of quality time together, sharing the same room without one even noticing the other. Pastoral workers and groups of married people should think of ways to help young or vulnerable couples to make the most of those moments, to be present to one another, even by sharing moments of meaningful silence.

225. Couples who have learned how to do this well can share some practical suggestions which they have found useful: planning free time together, moments of recreation with the children, different ways of celebrating important events, shared opportunities for spiritual growth. They can also provide resources that help young married couples to make those moments meaningful and loving, and thus to improve their communication.

226. Young married couples should be encouraged to develop a routine that gives a healthy sense of closeness and stability through shared daily rituals. These could include a morning kiss, an evening blessing, waiting at the door to welcome each other home, taking trips together and sharing household chores. Yet it also helps to break the routine with a party, and to enjoy [couple and] family celebrations of anniversaries and special events. We need these moments of cherishing God's gifts and renewing our zest for life. As long as we can celebrate, we are able to rekindle our love, to free it from monotony and to colour our daily routine with hope.

227. We pastors have to encourage [couples] to grow in faith. This means encouraging frequent confession, spiritual direction and occasional retreats...It is also helpful to encourage each of the spouses to find time for prayer alone with God, since each has his or her secret crosses to bear...The Synod Fathers noted that "the word of God is the source of life and spirituality...All pastoral work...must allow people to be interiorly fashioned and formed as members of the domestic church through the Church's prayerful reading of sacred Scripture. The word of God is not only good news in a person's private life but also a criterion of judgement and a light in discerning the various challenges that married couples...encounter".252

228. In some cases, one of the spouses is not baptised or does not want to practice the faith. This can make the other's desire to live and grow in the Christian life difficult and at times painful. Still, some common values can be found and these can be shared and relished. In any event, showing love for a spouse who is not a believer, bestowing happiness, soothing hurts and sharing life together represents a true path of sanctification. Love is always a gift of God. Wherever it is poured out, it makes its transforming presence felt, often in mysterious ways, even to the point that "the unbelieving husband is

consecrated through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is consecrated through her husband” (1 Cor 7:14).

229. Parishes, movements, schools and other Church institutions can help in a variety of ways to support...and help them grow. These might include: meetings of couples living in the same neighbourhood, brief retreats for couples; talks by experts on concrete issues...marriage counselling, home missionaries who help couples discuss their difficulties and desires...programmes of spiritual growth...There is also the contribution made by groups of married couples that provide assistance as part of their commitment to service, prayer, formation and mutual support. Such groups enable couples to be generous, to assist other[s] and to share the faith; at the same time they strengthen marriages and help them to grow.

230. It is true that many couples, once married, drop out of the Christian community. Often, however, we ourselves do not take advantage of those occasions when they do return, to remind them of the beautiful ideal of Christian marriage and the support that our parishes can offer them. I think, for example, of the Baptism and First Holy Communion of their children, or the funerals or weddings of their relatives or friends. Almost all married couples reappear on these occasions, and we should take greater advantage of this...It could also be helpful to ask older married couples to help younger couples in the neighbourhood by visiting them and offering guidance in the early years of marriage. Given the pace of life today, most couples cannot attend frequent meetings; still, we cannot restrict our pastoral outreach to small and select groups...We can no longer be like a factory, churning out courses that for the most part are poorly attended.

Casting Light on Crises, Worries and Difficulties

231. A word should also be said about those whose love, like a fine wine, has come into its own. Just as a good wine begins to “breathe” with time, so too the daily experience of fidelity gives married life richness and “body”. Fidelity has to do with patience and expectation. Its joys and sacrifices bear fruit as the years go by and the couple rejoices to see their children’s children. The love present from the beginning becomes more conscious, settled and mature as the couple discover each other anew day after day, year after year. Saint John of the Cross tells us that “old lovers are tried and true”. They “are outwardly no longer a fire with powerful emotions and impulses, but now taste the sweetness of the wine of love, well-aged and stored deep within their hearts”.²⁵³ Such couples have successfully overcome crises and hardships without fleeing from challenges or concealing problems.

The challenge of crises

232...Couples should be helped to realise that surmounting a crisis need not weaken their relationship; instead, it can improve, settle and mature the wine of their union. Life together should not diminish but increase their contentment; every new step along the way can help couples find new ways to happiness. Each crisis becomes an apprenticeship in growing closer together or learning a little more about what it means to be married. There is no need for couples to resign themselves to an inevitable downward spiral or a tolerable mediocrity. On the contrary, when marriage is seen as a challenge that involves overcoming

obstacles, each crisis becomes an opportunity to let the wine of their relationship age and improve. Couples will gain from receiving help in facing crises, meeting challenges and acknowledging them as part of...life. Experienced and trained couples should be open to offering guidance, so the couples will not be unnerved by these crises or tempted to hasty decisions. Each crisis has a lesson to teach us; we need to learn how to listen for it with the ear of the heart.

233. Faced with a crisis, we tend first to react defensively...resort to denying the problem, hiding or downplaying it, and hoping that it will go away...[leading them to] grow apart and lose their ability to communicate. When problems are not dealt with, communication is the first thing to go.

234. Crises need to be faced together...Communication is an art learned in moments of peace in order to be practised in moments of difficulty. Spouses need help in discovering their deepest thoughts and feelings and expressing them. Like childbirth, this is a painful process that brings forth a new treasure. The answers given to the pre-synodal consultation showed that most people in difficult or critical situations do not seek pastoral assistance, since they do not find it sympathetic, realistic or concerned for individual cases. This should spur us to try to approach marriage crises with greater sensitivity...

235. Some crises are typical of almost every marriage...[various] demanding situations that can cause apprehension, feelings of guilt, depression and fatigue, with serious repercussions on a marriage.

236. Then there are those personal crises that affect the life of couples, often involving finances, problems in the workplace, emotional, social and spiritual difficulties. Unexpected situations present themselves, disrupting family life and requiring a process of forgiveness and reconciliation. In resolving sincerely to forgive the other, each has to ask quietly and humbly if he or she has not somehow created the conditions that led to the other's mistakes.

237...These, and so many other things, rather than threatening love, are so many occasions for reviving and renewing it.

238...after all...every crisis can be a new "yes", enabling love to be renewed, deepened and inwardly strengthened...With this kind of constant openness [married couples] are able to face any number of difficult situations. In any event, while realising that reconciliation is a possibility, we also see that "what is urgently needed today is a ministry to care for those whose marital relationship has broken down".²⁵⁶

240...Unresolved issues need to be dealt with and a process of liberation must take place. When problems emerge in a marriage, before important decisions are made it is important to ensure that each spouse has come to grips with his or her own history. This involves recognising a need for healing, insistent prayer for the grace to forgive and be forgiven, a willingness to accept help, and the determination not to give up but to keep trying. A sincere self-examination will make it possible to see how one's own shortcomings and immaturity affect the relationship. Even if it seems clear that the other person is at fault, a

crisis will never be overcome simply by expecting him or her to change. We also have to ask what in our own life needs to grow or heal if the conflict is to be resolved.

Accompaniment after breakdown and divorce

241. In some cases, [justifiable reasons for separation exist, nevertheless]...“separation must be considered as a last resort, after all other reasonable attempts at reconciliation have proved vain”.²⁵⁸

242. The Synod Fathers noted that “special discernment is indispensable for the pastoral care of those who are separated, divorced or abandoned. Respect needs to be shown especially for the sufferings of those who have unjustly endured separation, divorce or abandonment, or those who have been forced by maltreatment from a husband or a wife to interrupt their life together...Pastoral care must necessarily include efforts at reconciliation and mediation, through the establishment of specialised counselling centres in dioceses”.²⁵⁹

247...Marriages between Catholics and other baptised persons ‘have their own particular nature, but they contain numerous elements that could well be made good use of and developed, both for their intrinsic value and for the contribution that they can make to the ecumenical movement’. For this purpose, ‘an effort should be made to establish cordial cooperation between the Catholic and the non-Catholic ministers from the time that preparations begin for the marriage and the wedding ceremony’ (*Familiaris Consortio*, 78).

248. “Marriages involving disparity of cult represent a privileged place for interreligious dialogue in everyday life...married couples with disparity of cult, on the rise in mission territories, and even in countries of long Christian tradition, urgently requires providing a differentiated pastoral care according to various social and cultural contexts.

249. “Particular problems arise when persons in a complex marital situation wish to be baptised. These persons contracted a stable marriage at a time when at least one of them did not know the Christian faith. In such cases, bishops are called to exercise a pastoral discernment which is commensurate with their spiritual good”.²⁷⁴

CHAPTER SEVEN

Towards a Better Education of Children

287...For [many] reason[s], “couples and parents should be properly appreciated as active agents in catechesis

CHAPTER EIGHT

Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating Weakness

292. Christian marriage, as a reflection of the union between Christ and his Church, is fully realised in the union between a man and a woman who give themselves to each other in a

free, faithful and exclusive love, who belong to each other until death and are open to the transmission of life, and are consecrated by the sacrament, which grants them the grace to become a domestic church and a leaven of new life for society...

293...it is a source of concern that many young people today distrust marriage and live together, putting off indefinitely the commitment of marriage...Entering into pastoral dialogue with these persons is needed to distinguish elements in their lives that can lead to a greater openness to the Gospel of marriage in its fullness".317

294...We know that there is "a continual increase in the number of those who, after having lived together for a long period, request the celebration of marriage in Church...Whatever the case, "all these situations require a constructive response seeking to transform them into opportunities that can lead to the full reality of marriage and family in conformity with the Gospel. These couples need to be welcomed and guided patiently and discreetly".322

299. I am in agreement with the many Synod Fathers who observed that "the baptised who are divorced and civilly remarried need to be more fully integrated into Christian communities in the variety of ways possible, while avoiding any occasion of scandal..."334

300...Priests have the duty to "accompany (the divorced and remarried) in helping them to understand their situation according to the teaching of the Church and the guidelines of the bishop..."337

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 baptised 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 life of the Church".354...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.

CHAPTER NINE

The Spirituality of Marriage and the Family

A Spirituality of Supernatural Communion

314. We have always spoken of how God dwells in the hearts of those living in his grace. Today we can add that the Trinity is present in the temple of marital communion. Just as God dwells in the praises of his people (cf. Ps 22:3), so he dwells deep within the marital love that gives him glory.

315...mutual concern “brings together the human and the divine”,³⁶⁹ for it is filled with the love of God. In the end, marital spirituality is a spirituality of the bond, in which divine love dwells.

317...Gradually, “with the grace of the Holy Spirit, [couples] grow in holiness through married life, also by sharing in the mystery of Christ’s cross, which transforms difficulties and sufferings into an offering of love”.³⁷⁴ Moreover, moments of joy, relaxation, celebration, and even sexuality can be experienced as a sharing in the full life of the resurrection. Married couples shape with different daily gestures a “God-enlightened space in which to experience the hidden presence of the risen Lord”.³⁷⁵

318... Jesus knocks on the door...to share with [married couples] the Eucharistic supper (cf. Rev 3:20). There, spouses can always seal anew the paschal covenant which united them and which ought to reflect the covenant which God sealed with mankind in the cross.³⁷⁷ The Eucharist is the sacrament of the new covenant, where Christ’s redemptive work is carried out (cf. Lk 22:20). The close bond between married life and the Eucharist thus becomes all the more clear.³⁷⁸ 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”.³⁷⁹

A Spirituality of Exclusive and Free Love

319. Marriage is also the experience of belonging completely to another person. Spouses accept the challenge and aspiration of supporting one another, growing old together, and in this way reflecting God’s own faithfulness. This firm decision, which shapes a style of life, is an “interior requirement of the covenant of conjugal love”,³⁸⁰ since “a person who cannot choose to love for ever can hardly love for even a single day”.³⁸¹ At the same time, such fidelity would be spiritually meaningless were it simply a matter of following a law with obedient resignation.

320. 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 realises that the other is not his or her own, but has a much more important master, the one Lord. No one but God can presume to take over the deepest and most personal core of the loved one; he alone can be the ultimate centre of their life. At the same time, the principle of spiritual realism requires that one spouse not presume that the other can completely satisfy his or her needs. The spiritual journey of each – as Dietrich Bonhoeffer nicely put it – needs to help them to a certain “disillusionment” with regard to the other,³⁸² to stop expecting from that person something which is proper to the love of God alone. This demands an interior divestment. The space which each of the spouses makes exclusively for their personal relationship with God not only helps heal the hurts of life in common, but also enables the spouses to find in the love of God the deepest source of meaning in their own lives. Each day we have to invoke the help of the Holy Spirit to make this interior freedom possible.

A Spirituality of Care Consolation and Incentive

321. “Christian couples are, for each other, [and for others] cooperators of grace and witnesses of the faith”.³⁸³ God calls them to bestow life and to care for life...Life as a couple is a daily sharing in God’s creative work, and each person is for the other a constant

challenge from the Holy Spirit. God's love is proclaimed "through the living and concrete word whereby a man and the woman express their conjugal love".³⁸⁵ The two are thus mutual reflections of that divine love which comforts with a word, a look, a helping hand, a caress, an embrace.

322...Marital fruitfulness involves helping others, for "to love anybody is to expect from him something which can neither be defined nor foreseen; it is at the same time in some way to make it possible for him to fulfil this expectation".³⁸⁷

325. The teaching of the Master (cf. Mt 22:30) and Saint Paul (cf. 1 Cor 7:29-31) on marriage is set – and not by chance – in the context of the ultimate and definitive dimension of our human existence. We urgently need to rediscover the richness of this teaching. By heeding it, married couples will come to see the deeper meaning of their journey through life.

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