

MEDITATIONS ON FAMILY LIFE

Ancestral Heritage

For the Christian community the family is far more than a “theme”: it is life, it is the daily fabric of life, it is the journey of generations who pass on the faith together with love and with the basic moral values. It is concrete solidarity, effort, patience, and also a project, hope, a future. All this which the Christian community lives out in the light of faith, hope and charity, should never be kept to oneself but must become, every day, the leaven in the dough of the whole of society for its greater common good.

Hope and a future presuppose memory. The memory of our elderly people sustains us as we journey on. The future of society ... is rooted in the elderly and in the young: the latter, because they have the strength and are of the age to carry history ahead; the former, because they are a living memory. A people that does not take care of its elderly, its children and its youth has no future, because it abuses both memory and promise.

Pope Francis

Message to Participants in the 47th Social Week of Italian Catholics

1. Who is one person in my family whose faith shaped my own faith?
2. What are some ways our family tries to live out belief in God and his Church?
3. Which virtue seems to be particularly strong in our family — faith, hope or charity?
4. Why is memory important to the future?
5. What strengths do the children in our family have?

Family and the Sabbath Rest

In the Gospel we do not find discourses on the family but an event which is worth more than any words: *God wanted to be born and to grow up in a human family.* In this way he consecrated the family as the first and ordinary means of his encounter with humanity.

In his life spent at Nazareth, Jesus honored the Virgin Mary and the righteous Joseph, remaining under their authority throughout the period of his childhood and his adolescence. In this way he shed light on the primary value of the family in the education of the person.

Jesus was introduced by Mary and Joseph into the religious community and frequented the synagogue of Nazareth. With them, he learned to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, as the Gospel passage offered for our meditation by today’s liturgy tells us.

When he was 12 years old, he stayed behind in the Temple and it took his parents all of three days to find him. With this act he made them understand that he “had to see to his Father’s affairs,” in other words, to the mission that God had entrusted to him.

This Gospel episode reveals the most authentic and profound vocation of the family: that is, to accompany each of its members on the path of the discovery of God and of the plan that he has prepared for him or her.

Mary and Joseph taught Jesus primarily by their example: in his parents he came to know the full beauty of faith, of love for God and for his Law, as well as the demands of justice, which is totally fulfilled in love.

From them he learned that it is necessary first of all to do God’s will, and that the spiritual bond is worth more than the bond of kinship.

The Holy Family of Nazareth is truly the “prototype” of every Christian family which, united in the sacrament of marriage and nourished by the Word and the Eucharist, is called to carry out the wonderful vocation and mission of being the living cell not only of society but also of the Church, a sign and instrument of unity for the entire human race.

Let us now invoke for every family, especially families in difficulty, the protection of Mary Most Holy and of St. Joseph. May they sustain such families so that they can resist the disintegrating forces of a certain contemporary culture which undermines the very foundations of the family institution.

May they help Christian families to be, in every part of the world, living images of God’s love.

Pope Benedict XVI

Angelus Address, Dec. 31, 2006

1. What does it mean to me to see the rest of the family pray or attend Mass with me?
2. Why might God want me to be a part of this particular family, giving me these people to love and care for?
3. What is one thing about Mary or Joseph that I admire?
4. How can I allow others to help me discover God’s plan for me? How can I encourage others to be open to God’s plan for them?

Family Prayer

Prayer needs to become a regular habit in the daily life of each family. Prayer is thanksgiving, praise of God, asking for forgiveness, supplication and invocation. In all of these forms the prayer of the family has much to say to God.

St. John Paul II

Letter to Families, 10

Mary appears therefore as the supreme model of personal participation in the divine mysteries. She guides the Church in meditating on the mystery celebrated and in participating in the saving event, by encouraging the faithful to desire an intimate, personal relationship with Christ in order to cooperate with the gift of their own life in the salvation of all. ...

We could add that for the people of God, Mary represents the model of every expression of their prayer life. In particular, she teaches Christians how to turn to God to ask for his help and support in the various circumstances of life.

Her motherly intercession at the wedding in Cana and her presence in the Upper Room at the Apostles' side as they prayed in expectation of Pentecost suggest that the prayer of petition is an essential form of cooperation in furthering the work of salvation in the world. By following her model, the Church learns to be bold in her asking, to persevere in her intercessions and, above all, to implore the gift of the Holy Spirit.

St. John Paul II

Audience, Sept. 10, 1997, 4-5

1. During my day, what are some times when I could take a minute to “touch base” with God through prayer, perhaps asking his help or simply thanking him for his love and his presence?
2. Just as talking can build a relationship, the different kinds of prayer mentioned are all ways to grow closer to God. What type makes me most aware that God is near and a part of this life he has given me?
3. How is our family touched and shaped by the prayers of all of its members?

Education of Children

The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion, and for this reason too it can and should be called “the domestic church.”

All members of the family, each according to his or her own gift, have the grace and responsibility of building, day by day, the communion of persons, making the family “a school of deeper humanity”: this happens where there is care and love for the little ones, the sick, the aged; where there is mutual service every day; when there is a sharing of goods, of joys and of sorrows.

A fundamental opportunity for building such a communion is constituted by the educational exchange between parents and children in which each gives and receives. By means of love, respect and obedience towards their parents, children offer their specific and irreplaceable contribution to the construction of an authentically human and Christian family. They will be aided in this if parents exercise their unrenounceable authority as a true and proper “ministry,” that is, as a service to the human and Christian well-being of their children, and in particular as a service aimed at helping them acquire a truly responsible freedom, and if parents maintain a living awareness of the “gift” they continually receive from their children.

St. John Paul II

Familiaris Consortio, 21

1. What are some similarities between how we learn to live in the family and how we learn to live in the Church?
2. What are some differences between living shallowly and living in a more deeply human way?
3. Realizing that God has given us our familial relationships, how do we each give and receive from each other?
4. What are some of the “graces and responsibilities” I have to contribute to make our family more Christian and more human?

The Love of Marriage

Analyzing the nature of marriage, both St. Augustine and St. Thomas [Aquinas] always identify it with an “indivisible union of souls,” a “union of hearts,” with “consent.” These elements are found in an exemplary manner in the marriage of Mary and Joseph. At the culmination of the history of salvation, when God reveals his love for humanity through the gift of the Word, it is precisely the marriage of Mary and Joseph that brings to realization in full “freedom” the “spousal gift of self” in receiving and expressing such a love. “In this great undertaking which is the renewal of all things in Christ, marriage — it too purified and renewed — becomes a new reality, a sacrament of the New Covenant. ... The Savior began the work of salvation by this virginal and holy union, wherein is manifested his all-powerful will to purify and sanctify the family — that sanctuary of love and cradle of life.”

How much the family of today can learn from this! “The essence and role of the family are in the final analysis specified by love. Hence the family has the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love, and this is a living reflection of and a real sharing in God’s love for humanity and the love of Christ the Lord for the Church His bride.” This being the case, it is in the Holy Family, the original “Church in miniature (*Ecclesia domestica*)” that every Christian family must be reflected. “Through God’s mysterious design, it was in that family that the Son of God spent long years of a hidden life. It is therefore the prototype and example for all Christian families.”

St. John Paul II

Familiaris Consortio, 17

God calls you to make definitive choices, and he has a plan for each of you: to discover that plan and to respond to your vocation is to move toward personal fulfillment. God calls each of us to be holy, to live his life, but he has a particular path for each one of us. Some are called to holiness through family life in the sacrament of marriage. Today, there are those who say that marriage is out of fashion. Is it out of fashion? In a culture of relativism and the ephemeral, many preach the importance of “enjoying” the moment. They say that it is not worth making a life-long commitment, making a definitive decision “forever,” because we do not know what tomorrow will bring. I ask you, instead, to be revolutionaries, I ask you to swim against the tide; yes, I am asking you to rebel against this culture that sees everything as temporary and that ultimately believes you are incapable of responsibility, that believes you are incapable of true love. I have confidence in you and I pray for you. Have the courage “to swim against the tide.”

Pope Francis

Meeting with volunteers, 28th World Youth Day

1. In what virtue(s) do I need to grow in order to give myself to another as a loving spouse and loving parent? What is one strength I have that would be helpful as a loving spouse and loving parent?
2. Do I share Pope Francis’ confidence in me, that I am capable of true love and responsibility?
3. How does our family complete its “mission” to guard love, reveal love or communicate love?
4. What is an “ephemeral love,” and how is it different from a lasting and life long committed love? How does lasting love affect other members of a family?

Work and Family Life

Work was the daily expression of love in the life of the Family of Nazareth. The Gospel specifies the kind of work Joseph did in order to support his family: he was a carpenter. This simple word sums up Joseph's entire life. For Jesus, these were hidden years, the years to which Luke refers after recounting the episode that occurred in the Temple: "And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them." This "submission" or obedience of Jesus in the house of Nazareth should be understood as a sharing in the work of Joseph. Having learned the work of his presumed father, he was known as "the carpenter's son." If the Family of Nazareth is an example and model for human families, in the order of salvation and holiness, so too, by analogy, is Jesus' work at the side of Joseph the carpenter. ...

What is crucially important here is the sanctification of daily life, a sanctification which each person must acquire according to his or her own state, and one which can be promoted according to a model accessible to all people: "St. Joseph is the model of those humble ones that Christianity raises up to great destinies; he is the proof that in order to be a good and genuine follower of Christ, there is no need of great things — it is enough to have the common, simple and human virtues, but they need to be true and authentic."

St. John Paul II

Redemptoris Custos, 22-24

1. How is work — whether breadwinning employment, chores or care — a "daily expression of love" in our family? Give an example.
2. Why do I work or do things for our family? How can I work more lovingly?
3. What are some "common, simple and human virtues"? What makes them "true and authentic" or false and inauthentic?
4. Are there ways that work is a source of tension for our family? How can I resolve the tension and make my work more a source of joy and love for the rest of the family?
5. Modeling Jesus' working with Joseph, how I can help others in our family with the ways they contribute or let them know that what they do matters?

Loving Our Neighbor

Jesus wanted to belong to a family who experienced these hardships, so that no one would feel excluded from the loving closeness of God. The flight into Egypt caused by Herod's threat shows us that God is present where man is in danger, where man is suffering, where he is fleeing, where he experiences rejection and abandonment; but God is also present where man dreams, where he hopes to return in freedom to his homeland and plans and chooses life for his family and dignity for

himself and his loved ones.

Today our gaze on the Holy Family lets us also be drawn into the simplicity of the life they led in Nazareth. It is an example that does our families great good, helping them increasingly to become communities of love and reconciliation, in which tenderness, mutual help, and mutual forgiveness is experienced.

Pope Francis

Angelus Address, Dec. 29, 2013

1. How is our family rich in companionship?
2. Who is one person or family who lacks the love of a close family? How can we reach out to help share our family with them?
3. Do material things and busy schedules isolate members of our family, perhaps taking people in different directions all the time or excluding a parent, spouse, child or sibling? Is there a way to imitate the Holy Family's "simplicity of life" to ensure that those in our family do not feel alone?
4. Do the elderly in our family feel lonely? What are some ways we could make them feel more included in the family's love?

Family and the Parish

Among the fundamental tasks of the Christian family is its ecclesial task: the family is placed at the service of the building up of the Kingdom of God in history by participating in the life and mission of the Church.

In order to understand better the foundations, the contents and the characteristics of this participation, we must examine the many profound bonds linking the Church and the Christian family and establishing the family as a "Church in miniature" (*Ecclesia domestica*) in such a way that in its own way the family is a living image and historical representation of the mystery of the Church.

It is, above all, the Church as Mother that gives birth to, educates and builds up the Christian family, by putting into effect in its regard the saving mission which she has received from her Lord. By proclaiming the word of God, the Church reveals to the Christian family its true identity, what it is and should be according to the Lord's plan; by celebrating the sacraments, the Church enriches and strengthens the Christian family with the grace of Christ for its sanctification to the glory of the Father; by the continuous proclamation of the new commandment of love, the Church encourages and guides the Christian family to the service of love, so that it may imitate and relive the same self-giving and sacrificial love that the Lord Jesus has for the entire human race.

St. John Paul II

Familiaris Consortio, 49

1. Pick a sacrament (penance, Eucharist, matrimony, etc.) or program in the parish and discuss how it has enriched our family.
2. How can we take advantage of the graces offered in the Church to make our family holy?
3. How can our family become more involved in the parish, shaping it with our love the way it shapes families with Christ's love?

Family and the Common Good

The civilization of love evokes joy: joy, among other things, for the fact that a man has come into the world (cf. Jn 16:21), and consequently because spouses have become parents. The civilization of love means "rejoicing in the right" (cf. 1 Cor 13:6). But a civilization inspired by a consumerist, anti-birth mentality is not and cannot ever be a civilization of love. If the family is so important for the civilization of love, it is because of the particular *closeness and intensity of the bonds* which come to be between persons and generations within the family.

St. John Paul II
Letter to Families, 13

How does Joseph exercise his role as protector? Discreetly, humbly and silently, but with an unflinching presence and utter fidelity, even when he finds it hard to understand. From the time of his betrothal to Mary until the finding of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple of Jerusalem, he is there at every moment with loving care. As the spouse of Mary, he is at her side in good times and bad, on the journey to Bethlehem for the census and in the anxious and joyful hours when she gave birth; amid the drama of the flight into Egypt and during the frantic search for their child in the Temple; and later in the day-to-day life of the home of Nazareth, in the workshop where he taught his trade to Jesus.

How does Joseph respond to his calling to be the protector of Mary, Jesus, and the Church? By being constantly attentive to God, open to the signs of God's presence and receptive to God's plans, and not simply to his own. ... God does not want a house built by men, but faithfulness to his word, to his plan. It is God himself who builds the house, but from living stones sealed by his Spirit. Joseph is a "protector" because he is able to hear God's voice and be guided by his will; and for this reason he is all the more sensitive to the persons entrusted to his safekeeping. He can look at things realistically, he is in touch with his surroundings, he can make truly wise decisions. In him, dear friends, we learn how to respond to God's call, readily and willingly, but we also see the core of the Christian vocation, which is Christ! Let us protect Christ in our lives, so that we can protect others, so that we can protect creation!

Pope Francis
Homily at his Papal Inauguration, March 19, 2013

Mary as the model of charity. In what way is Mary a living example of love for the Church? Let us think of the readiness she showed toward her cousin Elizabeth. In visiting her, the Virgin Mary brought not only material help — she brought this too — but she also brought Jesus, who was already alive in her womb. Bringing Jesus into that house meant bringing joy, the fullness of joy. Elizabeth and Zechariah were rejoicing at a pregnancy that had seemed impossible at their age, but it was the young Mary who brought them the fullness of joy, the joy which comes from Jesus and from the Holy Spirit, and is expressed by gratuitous charity, by sharing with, helping, and understanding others.

Our Lady also wants to bring the great gift of Jesus to us, to us all; and with him she brings us his love, his peace, and his joy. In this, the Church is like Mary: the Church is not a shop, she is not a humanitarian agency, the Church is not an NGO. The Church is sent to bring Christ and his Gospel to all. She does not bring herself — whether small or great, strong or weak, the Church carries Jesus and should be like Mary when she went to visit Elizabeth. What did Mary take to her? Jesus. The Church brings Jesus: this is the center of the Church, to carry Jesus! ... The Church must bring Jesus, the love of Jesus, the charity of Jesus.

Pope Francis

General Audience, Oct. 23, 2013

1. How is the family the root of society? How do families shape society and our communities?
2. In our family, each person is welcomed. How can I show that each person is lovable and a reason for happiness?
3. Where do I see Christ needing protection in my life? How can I protect him outside the home?
4. How can I “bring Jesus” with me in helping others? How do I think Mary would act in my community with its needs?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

These Church writings and documents may help your family grow in their faith and provide for a fuller understanding of the family as domestic church.

Catechism of the Catholic Church

A catechism is a text which explains fundamental Christian truths in such a way that they can be easily understood. As a “universal catechism,” the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is intended to be a point of reference for catechetical materials throughout the world, sharing the faith in a way that meets cultural, social and ecclesial conditions.

Amoris Laetitia (The Joy of Love)

Pope Francis wrote this apostolic exhortation following two meetings of bishops on marriage and the family. He addresses the serious and complex issues that many families face in today’s world, including individualism and selfishness, divorce and remarriage, and the need for greater pastoral care for families. He reflects that marriage — and by extension, family life — is a vital dimension of human existence and that as they grow together in love families can overcome their struggles and build their lives as a domestic church.

Deus Caritas Est (God is Love)

This encyclical, or papal letter, offers St. John Paul’s reflection on different dimensions of love and certain essential facts concerning God’s love for mankind, addressing how we should share this love with our neighbor.

Evangelii Nuntiandi (Evangelization in the Modern World)

Evangelii Nuntiandi outlines the importance of evangelization in our day. In it, Pope Paul VI explains the central role that every Christian (not only priests, members of religious communities or professional church staff) has in spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Gratissimam Sane (Letter to Families)

A wonderful pastoral document through which families may understand God’s plan for marriage and family life, St. John Paul II’s letter is a special encounter between the Universal Church and each Christian family.

Familiaris Consortio (The Family in the Modern World)

This apostolic exhortation, written by St. John Paul II, explains how the call to holiness is universal and can be realized within the lives of Catholic families through their commitment to marriage and family.