

THE FAMILY IN THE CHURCH'S SYNOD: PROSPECTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Address by Archbishop Bruno Forte

Archbishop of Chieti-Vasto

Family and youth ministry is vitally important for the whole Church, and particularly so for the followers of Don Bosco. In his dream at the age of nine, Mary indicated youth as the field in which he ought to work, or, more likely, in the language of the peasant culture to which young John belonged, as the field to be "ploughed". With this mandate, perceived as the source and inspiration of every future choice in his life, Don Bosco did not hesitate to say: "In matters which are for the benefit of young people at risk, or which serve to gain souls for God, I go forward to the point of temerity."¹ I will structure my reflection around these words. I would like first to examine the reality of the family today as a living environment in which there are challenges, opportunities and dangers for the new generation. Then I would like to outline the fundamental features of the Church's approach to the family that has been developing in recent years in order to draw "benefit" from it for the young and to "earn souls for God". Finally, I want to indicate some priority lines for pastoral action, especially from a Salesian perspective.

For this latter part, I will refer to the directives drawn from the two synodal assemblies of the Bishops dedicated to the family, presented to the whole people of God in the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis "*Amoris Laetitia*", in order to clarify which points I feel it is necessary to "go forward to the point of temerity" in the spirit of Don Bosco. In this context, I will also try to answer the question of how the Church is now inviting believers engaged in education to live their call as a gift for young people, trying to put together the indications that could enlighten and accompany the charismatic experience of the Salesian family and make it ever more ecclesial. At the same time, I will try to highlight the fundamental aspects that should be studied to encourage an experience of Church where the family finds a welcoming space and a reason to strengthen its identity, not only as the recipient of pastoral activity but also and especially as its subject and agent. I also want to emphasize how this attention to the family and to young people is in harmony with the decision made by Pope Francis to devote the next Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, to be held in 2018, to the theme of "Young people, faith and vocation discernment".²

This choice of theme is presented in the *Preparatory Document* of the forthcoming Synod as follows: "The Church has decided to examine herself on how she can lead young people to recognize and accept the call to the fullness of life and love, and to ask young people to help her in identifying the most effective ways to announce the Good News today. By listening to young people, the Church will once again hear the Lord speaking in today's world. As in the days of

¹ *Memorie biografiche* XIV, Cap. XXVIII, 662.

² This is the title of the *Preparatory Document for the Fifteenth Ordinary General Assembly*. It was published 13 January 2017 and sent to all the Bishops' Conferences of the world, with a large questionnaire attached. The answers are expected to contextualize the reflections of the synod in the present and in the concrete situation. The Third Part of the Document is dedicated to *Pastoral Action*. After a section titled "Walking with Young People", developed around three verbs "Go out", "See" and "Call", it presents the subjects, places, and tools of youth ministry with insights and stimuli in close harmony with what is proposed in these reflections.

Samuel (cf. *1 Sam* 3:1-21) and Jeremiah (cf. *Jer* 1:4-10), young people know how to discern the signs of our times, indicated by the Spirit. Listening to their aspirations, the Church can glimpse the world which lies ahead and the paths the Church is called to follow.³ It is significant that the Pope wanted to involve young people from the outset. They are not only the subject of reflection on how to deepen the ways of transmitting the gift of faith, and helping them to discern their response to the Lord's personal call to each one. They must be protagonists and important participants capable of helping pastors and the entire Church to recognize and interpret better the signs of the times and to respond to them with faith and love. This is a decision and a method that seems to me in complete harmony with the words of Don Bosco I quoted and in general with the Salesian charism.

1. *The reality of the family today*

In *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council on the Church in the Modern World, among the challenges that require more attention and commitment, the first one identified is the family which is the basis of human beings living together: "Thus the family, in which the various generations come together and help one another grow wiser and harmonize personal rights with the other requirements of social life, is the foundation of society."⁴ This attention to the family was particularly evident in the magisterium of John Paul II, who chose the Christian Family as the theme of the Fifth Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (26 September - 25 October 1980) and dedicated *Familiaris Consortio*, the Apostolic Exhortation which followed it, to the family.⁵ Among other things, it states: "The future of humanity passes by way of the family! ... Christians also have the mission of proclaiming with joy and conviction the Good News about the family, for the family absolutely needs to hear ever anew and to understand ever more deeply the authentic words that reveal its identity, its inner resources and the importance of its mission in the City of God and in that of man."⁶

The reasons for this importance of the family are recognizable in their very nature and mission, according to the divine plan for mankind: "The family finds in the plan of God the Creator and Redeemer not only its identity, what it is, but also its mission, what it can and should do. The role that God calls the family to perform in history derives from what the family is; its role represents the dynamic and existential development of what it is. Each family finds within itself a summons that cannot be ignored, and that specifies both its dignity and its responsibility: family, become what you are."⁷

In this light, we can understand why the family should be at the centre of the pastoral activity of the Church and, therefore, at the centre of the projects and initiatives taken at all levels by different ecclesial agents in the field of evangelization and catechesis. For this combined effort to be realized, we have to start with a clear and absolutely realistic look at the real situation of the family today, in the variety and complexity of the cultural contexts in which it is found.

³ *Preparatory Document Introduction*.

⁴ Second Vatican Council: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 52.

⁵ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio. Apostolic Exhortation, the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*, 22 November 1981.

⁶ *Ib.* 86.

⁷ *Ib.* 17.

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis writes: "The family is experiencing a profound cultural crisis, as are all communities and social bonds. In the case of the family, the weakening of these bonds is particularly serious because the family is the fundamental cell of society, where we learn to live with others despite our differences and to belong to one another; it is also the place where parents pass on the faith to their children. Marriage now tends to be viewed as a form of mere emotional satisfaction that can be constructed in any way or modified at will."⁸ At the root of these negative phenomena there frequently lies a corruption of the idea and the experience of freedom, conceived not as a capacity for realizing the truth of God's plan for marriage and the family, but as an autonomous power of self-affirmation, often against others, for one's own selfish well-being.⁹ The conditioning that weighs upon the family situation in different contexts must also be considered: Worthy of our attention also is the fact that, in the countries of the so-called Third World, families often lack both the means necessary for survival, such as food, work, housing and medicine, and the most elementary freedoms. In the richer countries, on the contrary, excessive prosperity and the consumer mentality, paradoxically joined to a certain anguish and uncertainty about the future, deprive married couples of the generosity and courage needed for raising up new human life: thus life is often perceived not as a blessing, but as a danger from which to defend oneself."¹⁰

There are, of course, positive aspects in the current situation of the family. The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* was signed by Pope Francis on 19 March 2016 and published on 8 April. In the second chapter dedicated to "The Experiences and Challenges of Families", Pope Francis notes the growing appreciation of the dignity and active participation of each of the components of family life, with due attention to the changed socio-cultural contexts where "individuals, in personal and family life ... receive less support from social structures than in the past."¹¹ On the one hand individualism and the fear of permanent commitment are on the increase in a widespread 'culture of the provisory'. On the other hand, there is also a desire for greater authenticity in interpersonal relations, challenging believers to a more responsible and generous effort to present the reasons and motivations for choosing marriage and the family, and in this way to help men and women better to respond to the grace that God offers them."¹²

With realism and concreteness, the Exhortation recalls the objective conditioning that affects the formation and life of families, due to the lack of work or the demands of work, housing problems, the phenomenon of migration, the needs of the elderly and the disabled, difficulties related to poverty, both material and moral, which often have a strong impact on the family and on its real possibilities of life. In such difficult situations "the Church must be particularly concerned to offer understanding, comfort and acceptance, rather than imposing straightaway a set of rules that only lead people to feel judged and abandoned by the very Mother called to show them God's mercy."¹³ With great sincerity, the Pope observes that "no union that is temporary or closed to the transmission of life can ensure the future of society." He goes on to ask: "But nowadays who is making an effort to strengthen marriages, to help married couples overcome their problems, to

⁸ *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 66.

⁹ Cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, cit., 6.

¹⁰ Ib.

¹¹ *Amoris Laetitia* 32.

¹² Ivi 35.

¹³ Ib. 49.

assist them in the work of raising children and, in general, to encourage the stability of the marriage bond?"¹⁴ In particular, Pope Francis defends the role and dignity of women which are fundamental to the life of family and society but are often devalued or trampled upon.

2. *The central points of the Church's teaching on the family*

The third chapter of *Amoris Laetitia* presents the vocation of the family in the light of the gospel message. Pope Francis says: "The mystery of the Christian family can be fully understood only in the light of the Father's infinite love revealed in Christ, who gave himself up for our sake and who continues to dwell in our midst. I now wish to turn my gaze to the living Christ, who is at the heart of so many love stories, and to invoke the fire of the Spirit upon all the world's families."¹⁵ The Pope gives a rapid presentation of the Church's teaching on marriage and the family. Indissolubility "should not be viewed as a 'yoke' imposed on humanity, but as a 'gift' granted to those who are joined in marriage."¹⁶ Pope Francis also points out that "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 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". 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.¹⁷ This discernment is illuminated by the conviction that "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."¹⁸

We can therefore speak of a "gospel of the family" to be proclaimed. This good news, according to the faith and the experience of the Church, embraces four key aspects which should always be present and proposed as a unity. The family is the school of mankind, of social life, of the life of the Church and holiness. The family is first of all a *school of humanity*, that is, a school of love for the life and growth of the person.¹⁹ This happens especially in the relationship that marriage demands and establishes between spouses: "This love is an eminently human one since it is directed from one person to another through an affection of the will; it involves the good of the whole person, and therefore can enrich the expressions of body and mind with a unique dignity, ennobling these expressions as special ingredients and signs of the friendship distinctive of marriage. This love God has judged worthy of special gifts, healing, perfecting and exalting gifts

¹⁴ Ib. 52.

¹⁵ Ib. 59.

¹⁶ Ib. 62.

¹⁷ Ib. 72.

¹⁸ Ib. 73.

¹⁹ Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 52: "The family is a kind of school of deeper humanity."

of grace and of charity."²⁰ *Familiaris Consortio* rightly placed the bond of love at the centre of family life: "Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being... The institution of marriage is not an undue interference by society or authority, nor the extrinsic imposition of a form. Rather it is an interior requirement of the covenant of conjugal love which is publicly affirmed as unique and exclusive, in order to live in complete fidelity to the plan of God, the Creator."²¹

It is an essential task of believers to recognize the value of conjugal love and to insist continually on its necessity: "To bear witness to the inestimable value of the indissolubility and fidelity of marriage is one of the most precious and most urgent tasks of Christian couples in our time."²² Benedict XVI devoted his Encyclical *Deus caritas est* to the love that is born from above and is at the basis of every true love, especially that of the family. In the distinction that he makes between 'eros' and 'agape', between passionate love and love of self-giving, there is an echo of the twentieth-century debate which started in the research done by Anders Nygren.²³ Pope Benedict states that Christian love "far from rejecting or 'poisoning' eros, ... heals it and restores its true grandeur."²⁴ This happens through a greater love given from above. It is the experience of God who is Love that makes possible the completely gratuitous gift of self to one other and to others. "Love is indeed 'ecstasy', not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God."²⁵ This is an inescapable programme if family life is to be authentic and humanizing, moulded by the model of eternal love: "Marriage based on exclusive and definitive love becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people and vice versa. God's way of loving becomes the measure of human love."²⁶ Through love, enlightened and nourished by faith, the family can thus become a genuine, healthy, happy school of humanity.²⁷

Because it is a unique school of love, the family is also a *school of social living*. It enables the person to grow in his or her capacity for the skills of socialization and in building society. *Familiaris Consortio* says: "The family is the first and fundamental school of social living: as a community of love, it finds in self-giving the law that guides it and makes it grow. The self-giving that inspires the love of husband and wife for each other is the model and norm for the self-giving that must be practised in the relationships between brothers and sisters and the different generations living together in the family. And the communion and sharing that are part of everyday life in the home at times of joy and at times of difficulty are the most concrete and effective pedagogy for the active, responsible and fruitful inclusion of the children in the wider horizon of society."²⁸ Thus, "In matrimony and in the family a complex of interpersonal relationships is set up - married life, fatherhood and motherhood, filiation and fraternity - through which each human

²⁰ Ib. 49.

²¹ *Familiaris Consortio*, 11.

²² Ib. 20.

²³ Cf. A. Nygren, *Eros e agape. La nozione cristiana dell'amore e le sue trasformazioni*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1971 (Original Swedish Edition Stockholm 1930).

²⁴ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est* (25 Dicembre 2005), 5.

²⁵ Ib. 6.

²⁶ Ib. 11.

²⁷ For a further study of the motive of love that makes life fruitful, see the fourth chapter of *Amoris Laetitia*, which offers a wonderful application to family life of the exhortation to charity of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 13: especially vv 4-7).

²⁸ *Familiaris Consortio*, 37.

person is introduced into the "human family" and into the "family of God," which is the Church"²⁹ and learns to establish fruitful relationships with parents and grandparents, as well as with brothers and sisters.

Similarly, the family becomes the *womb of ecclesial life*, where the members learn to live in communion with the Church: "Christian marriage and the Christian family build up the Church: for in the family the human person is not only brought into being and progressively introduced by means of education into the human community, but by means of the rebirth of baptism and education in the faith the child is also introduced into God's family, which is the Church"³⁰ Here we find the idea of the family as a 'small-scale church': In *Familiaris Consortio* we read: "Insofar as it is a 'small-scale Church', the Christian family is called upon, like the 'large-scale Church', to be a sign of unity for the world and in this way to exercise its prophetic role by bearing witness to the Kingdom and peace of Christ, towards which the whole world is journeying."³¹ In this way, the active participation of the family in the life of the Church is highlighted: "The Christian family is called upon to take part actively and responsibly in the mission of the Church in a way that is original and specific, by placing itself, in what it is and what it does 'as an intimate community of life and love', at the service of the Church and of society."³² On the other hand, the Church can look to the family as a model from which to draw inspiration: "Thanks to love within the family, the Church can and ought to take on a more homelike or family dimension, developing a more human and fraternal style of relationships."³³

The family is also called to be a *school of faith and holiness* in which the path of holiness of spouses and children is lived and nourished: "Christian spouses have a special sacrament by which they are fortified and receive a kind of consecration in the duties and dignity of their state. By virtue of this sacrament, as spouses fulfil their conjugal and family obligation, they are penetrated with the spirit of Christ, which suffuses their whole lives with faith, hope and charity. Thus they increasingly advance the perfection of their own personalities, as well as their mutual sanctification, and hence contribute jointly to the glory of God."³⁴ The sacrament of marriage is the specific source and original means of sanctification for Christian married couples and families.³⁵ The realization of this call to marital and family holiness is nourished by the sacramental gifts of the Lord and by docile and prayerful correspondence to them: "The baptismal priesthood of the faithful, exercised in the sacrament of marriage, constitutes the basis of a priestly vocation and mission for the spouses and family by which their daily lives are transformed into "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." This transformation is achieved not only by celebrating the Eucharist and the other sacraments and through offering themselves to the glory of God, but also through a life of prayer, through prayerful dialogue with the Father, through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit."³⁶

²⁹ lb. 15.

³⁰ lb.

³¹ lb. 48.

³² lb. 50.

³³ lb. 64.

³⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, 48.

³⁵ Cf. *Familiaris consortio*, 56.

³⁶ lb. 59.

3. Lines of action in the educational field, in relation to the Salesian charism and the growth of ecclesial life

In the light of this, we understand the centrality of the family in the life of the Church, and thus also in the apostolic service of the Salesian family. This centrality has two aspects. Firstly, the family is a privileged agent in the transmission of faith, and therefore in the education of children and young people to Christian life and in the aid to be offered to them in vocational discernment. Secondly, the family has prior place in the pastoral care of the Church and of the followers of Don Bosco.

a) As the *Frame of Reference of Salesian Youth Ministry* observes: "human life falls under the sign of vocation, which calls for great openness of spirit and responsibility in taking on a faithful commitment: responsibility means literally taking on the beauty of responding".³⁷ Thus the question arises as to how the Church today is inviting believers involved in education to accept their call as a gift for the younger generation, their growth in faith, and their vocational discernment. The answer proposed in the preparation for the Synod on the Family and in the subsequent Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* can be summarized in the notion of *the decisive role of the family in education to faith*:³⁸ "In the view of the Christian community, the family remains the first and indispensable educational community. For parents, education is an essential task because it is connected to the transmission of life. Their task is original and primary compared to the educational task of other subjects. It is irreplaceable and inalienable, in the sense that it cannot be delegated or replaced."³⁹ This task must be undertaken with courage and foresight: "It is more important to start processes than to dominate spaces. If parents are obsessed with always knowing where their children are and controlling all their movements, they will seek only to dominate space. But this is no way to educate, strengthen and prepare their children to face challenges. What is most important is the ability lovingly to help them grow in freedom, maturity, overall discipline and real autonomy."⁴⁰ A prudent gradual approach is recommended here: "In proposing values, we have to proceed slowly, taking into consideration the child's age and abilities, without presuming to apply rigid and inflexible methods. The valuable contributions of psychology and the educational sciences have shown that changing a child's behaviour involves a gradual process, but also that freedom needs to be channelled and stimulated, since by itself it does not ensure growth in maturity."⁴¹

The family is valued as a primary and fundamental agent of education: "The family is the primary setting for socialization, since it is where we first learn to relate to others, to listen and share, to be patient and show respect, to help one another and live as one. The task of education is to make us sense that the world and society are also our home; it trains us how to live together in this greater home. In the family, we learn closeness, care and respect for others. We break out of our fatal self-absorption and come to realize that we are living with and alongside others who are

³⁷ *Salesian Youth Ministry Frame of Reference*, Rome, 2014.

³⁸ This is one of the central aspects of the statement of the Italian Bishops in the document *Educare alla vita buona del Vangelo* (2010), which affirms clearly the primacy of the family in the field of education.

³⁹ *Educare alla vita buona del Vangelo* cit. n. 36.

⁴⁰ *Amoris Laetitia*, n. 261.

⁴¹ *Ib.*, n.273.

worthy of our concern, our kindness and our affection.⁴² This conviction cannot ignore the difficulties the family encounters in meeting its educational responsibility: "Family education is a very difficult art today. Many parents suffer, in fact, a sense of solitude, inadequacy, and even impotence. It is a social isolation first, because society privileges individuals and does not consider the family as its core cell. Fathers and mothers struggle to propose with passion deep reasons to live and, above all, to say 'no' with the necessary authority. The bond with the children is likely to oscillate between poor care and possessive attitudes that tend to suffocate creativity and perpetuate dependence."⁴³

Faced with their educational responsibilities and the difficulties confronting it today, the family is *endowed* at one and the same time *with strength and fragility*: "The family, is at one and the same time, both strong and fragile. Its weakness does not derive only from the internal motivation of the spouses and the relationship between parents and children. External influences are of far greater significance. These include inadequate support for the desire of parents to have children, despite the serious demographic problem; the difficulty of balancing the demands of work with family life; insufficient care for the weaker members of society; and difficulty in building happy relationships due to unfavourable housing in urban environments. To these can be added the growing number of those who live together without being married as well as the number of marital separations and divorces, together with the economic, fiscal and social obstacles that make it hard for parents to have children."⁴⁴ Among the destabilizing factors, particular attention should be given to the diffusion of lifestyles inspired by the culture of the provisional and the reluctance to establish stable ties. Despite these aspects of fragility, the family remains the primary subject for the transmission of faith and education in vocational discernment. The many educational agencies operating in the Church, beginning with Salesian works, need to bear in mind that the family is not only an agent of education but that it has unique quality and influence that it alone can bring. It is incumbent on the Christian community to assist parents in their role as educators, offering formation and mutual support.

The *original and natural environment* for education in faith is the family because it is there that it can be accomplished in a concrete and continuous way within the context of everyday relationships, which, especially in the first years of life, make the greatest impact on the formation of personality. Hence the importance of encouraging parents to reflect on their educational responsibility in terms of faith. Every pastoral effort therefore needs to be made in order to enhance the role of the family as the principal agent in the transmission of faith and catechesis of its members, and in particular of the children. Priests, catechists and pastoral animators must always refer to the family with a view to close collaboration, particularly in the journey of Christian initiation and the vocational journey of young people. It is, however, the duty of the whole Christian community to *educate the family and to support it* in carrying out its task of education and catechesis. To this end, preparation for marriage must be offered as a journey of rediscovery of faith and inclusion in the life of the ecclesial community. The care of young couples is also important. This means accompanying them in the initial stages of married life and laying the foundations for a journey of lifelong learning.

⁴² *Ib.*, n. 276.

⁴³ *Ib.*

⁴⁴ *Educare alla vita buona del Vangelo*, cit.

b) The family is to be recognized as the primary recipient of the pastoral care of the Christian community: "The family must be loved, supported and enabled to become an active agent of education not only for their children, but for the whole community. There needs to be a growing awareness of the ministerial role that comes from the sacrament of marriage and the calling of man and woman to be a sign of the love of God who takes care of all his children. It is the task of the entire community to support the family, with appropriate political and economic choices, paying particular attention to individual families.⁴⁵ How then do we accompany families so that they become fully agents of evangelization and catechesis for their children and for the entire Christian community? "To evangelize does not mean simply to teach a doctrine, but to proclaim Jesus Christ by one's words and actions, that is, to make oneself an instrument of his presence and action in the world."⁴⁶ Evangelizing families means accompanying them in the living experience of ecclesial faith, knowing that "evangelization is the result of a combined journey, a mission where consecrated and lay people are active subjects, agents of the evangelization of individuals and cultures."⁴⁷

What are the fundamental aspects that need to be studied in order to promote an experience of Church in which the family feels accepted and finds a reason to strengthen its identity and its mission as a Christian family? The sixth chapter of the Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* – dealing with "Some Pastoral Perspectives" – examines exactly how to "proclaim the Gospel of the Family today". Among other things, it says: "Pastoral care for families needs to make it clear that the Gospel of the family responds to the deepest expectations of the human person: a response to each one's dignity and fulfilment in reciprocity, communion and fruitfulness. This consists not merely in presenting a set of rules, but in proposing values that are clearly needed today, even in the most secularized of countries. The Synod Fathers also highlighted the fact that evangelization needs unambiguously to denounce cultural, social, political and economic factors – such as the excessive importance given to market logic – that prevent authentic family life and lead to discrimination, poverty, exclusion, and violence."⁴⁸ To get families involved in pastoral activity, they must be trained for it even before they prepare for marriage. "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 lifelong calling based on a firm and realistic decision to face all trials and difficult moments together."⁴⁹

An examination of the various causes of crisis in family life enriches this reflection on family ministry by highlighting that even in the most critical times there are positive developments to be valued: "When crises come, they are unafraid to get to the root of it, to renegotiate basic terms, to achieve a new equilibrium and to move forward together to a new stage."⁵⁰ The attitude of pastors towards families in crisis or those whose marriage has broken down must always be welcoming and accepting: "It is important that the divorced who have entered a new union should be made to feel part of the Church. They are not excommunicated and they should not be treated as such, since they remain part of the ecclesial community. These situations require careful

⁴⁵ *Ib.*, n. 38.

⁴⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. *Doctrinal note on some aspects of evangelization*, 3 December 2007, No.2.

⁴⁷ Cf. *Christifideles Laici* 55-56; 24th General Chapter of Salesians of Don Bosco n.96.

⁴⁸ *Amoris Laetitia*, n. 201.

⁴⁹ *Ib.*, n. 211.

⁵⁰ *Ib.*, n. 238.

discernment and respectful accompaniment. Language or conduct that might lead them to feel discriminated against should be avoided, and they should be encouraged to participate in the life of the community. The Christian community's care of such persons is not to be considered a weakening of its faith and testimony to the indissolubility of marriage; rather, such care is a particular expression of its charity." (n. 243) Welcoming, accompanying, discerning, and *integrating* are four words that summarize the pastoral attitude required by the Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* towards all families, especially those wounded by failure in love.⁵¹

Pope Francis says: "The Church must accompany with attention and care the weakest of her children, who show signs of a wounded and troubled love, by restoring in them hope and confidence, like the beacon of a lighthouse in a port or a torch carried among the people to enlighten those who have lost their way or who are in the midst of a storm. Let us not forget that the Church's task is often like that of a field hospital."⁵² Referring to cohabitation and *de facto* unions, the Exhortation clearly reaffirms Christ's call upon married couples to be firmly united in the marriage bond. "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".⁵³ In this line, Pope Francis relies on St John Paul II's teaching about the "Law of Gradualness", which "is not a "gradualness of law" but rather a gradualness in the prudential exercise of free acts on the part of subjects who are not in a position to understand, appreciate, or fully carry out the objective demands of the law."⁵⁴ Concerning the discernment of these "irregular" situations, the Exhortation proposes a choice between the logic of marginalization and the logic of integration, the only one that conforms to the mercy revealed in Christ: "It is a matter of reaching out to everyone, of needing to help each person find his or her proper way of participating in the ecclesial community and thus to experience being touched by an "unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous" mercy. No one can be condemned for ever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel!"⁵⁵ And this - Pope Francis insists - applies not only to divorced people who are in a new union, but to everyone, in whatever situation they find themselves.

Welcoming, accompanying and discerning in view of the appropriate integration of each one in the life of the ecclesial community is the pastoral choice that the Exhortation proposes for the whole Church. Rather than offering a new general canonical norm – which would be impossible in the face of the variety and complexity of situations – Pope Francis encourages a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of special cases inspired by mercy. There is here a singular correspondence between what Francis tells the Church and what Don Bosco recommended to his Salesians: "The preventive system is really ours. No hurtful punishments! No humiliating words! No serious correction in the presence of others! Rather kindness, charity, and patience ... Make sure that those who are corrected become our friends more than they were before, and never let them leave us feeling hurt."⁵⁶ This kind of pastoral approach will also be careful to recognize that the degree of responsibility is not the same in all cases, and the consequences or effects of a rule

⁵¹ Cf. *ib.*, nn. 247 ff. Chapter 8 is entitled precisely: "Accompanying, discerning and integrating weakness".

⁵² *Ib.*, n. 291.

⁵³ *Ib.*, n. 294.

⁵⁴ *Ib.*, n. 295.

⁵⁵ *Ib.*, n. 297.

⁵⁶ *Letter of Don Bosco to Don Giacomo Costamagna*, 10 August 1885.

do not necessarily have to be the same for all. Discernment is especially the task of pastors. It must combine fidelity to the Church's doctrine and attention to the concrete situations and the weight of the attenuating circumstances: "Discernment must help to find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of limits. By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God. Let us remember that "a small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order, but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties". The practical pastoral care of ministers and of communities must not fail to embrace this reality."⁵⁷

Conclusion

This talk is a good occasion to highlight three characteristics that sum up the fundamental inspiration of the pastoral action of Pope Francis, as expressed in particular in the two synodal assemblies on the family: first of all, marked attention to pluralism and inculturation of the faith, with a view to overcoming any form of Eurocentrism or "Roman centralism". Right from the beginning of the Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, Francis affirms: "Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. *Jn 16:13*), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does. Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs."⁵⁸

Secondly, in the whole journey of the synod and in the indications offered by the Apostolic Exhortation that followed it, we are struck by the constant combining of realism in the understanding of problems and of mercy in the directives for dealing with them and overcoming them: "Our contemplation of the fulfilment which we have yet to attain also allows us to see in proper perspective the historical journey which we make as families, and in this way to stop demanding of our interpersonal relationships a perfection, a purity of intentions and a consistency which we will only encounter in the Kingdom to come. It also keeps us from judging harshly those who live in situations of frailty. All of us are called to keep striving towards something greater than ourselves and our families, and every family must feel this constant impulse."⁵⁹

Finally, I think it is right to draw attention to the language used by Pope Francis. It is concrete and colloquial, and can also be evocative and poetic, as in the words he uses to speak about love. He uses literary quotes such as those of Jorge Luis Borges,⁶⁰ and Mario Benedetti.⁶¹

In *Amoris Laetitia* we find a mixture of realism and imagination, concreteness and evocation. We get a sense of Francis as the pastor who has been speaking for years about love

⁵⁷ *Amoris Laetitia*, n. 305.

⁵⁸ *Ib.* n. 3.

⁵⁹ *Ib.*, n. 325.

⁶⁰ In n. 8 of the Exhortation: "every home is a lampstand": in "Calle desconocida", *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, Buenos Aires 2011, 23: tr. it. *Fervore di Buenos Aires*, Adelphi, Milano 2010, 29.

⁶¹ In n. 181 of *Amoris Laetitia*: "Te quiero", in *Poemas de otros*, Buenos Aires 1993, 316: "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".

and with love to people who needed to love and be loved. "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."⁶²

The word of the Pastor is interspersed with examples from daily life, which is the only place where love is properly expressed: "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."⁶³ The voice that is speaking here is one of great experience, illuminated by living faith and tender caring love for young people and for families, the womb where they are formed and grow.

This is the kind of charity that inspired Don Bosco to devote himself entirely to young people as summarized in the words: "It is enough that you are young for me to love you very much ... It would be hard to find anyone who loves you more than I do in Jesus Christ and who desires your happiness more."⁶⁴

In family ministry, from marriage preparation to support for families in difficulty, we seek to have this kind of love alive and working in us.

I conclude my reflection by asking the whole Salesian family some questions that will help in reviewing their life in the footsteps of Don Bosco. In our pastoral ministry to the young and to families, do we pay proper attention to their experience of faith and to cultural sensitivity to the context in which we operate? Do we try to combine realism in understanding the problems with mercy in the way we face them, following the example of charity that burned in the heart of the Saint of the Young? Is our language such that the young can understand us and they and their families can feel touched by our sympathy and our love? May Don Bosco intercede for us, that we may respond to these questions with eloquence of life and ardour of charity. May Mary Help of Christians accompany us on our journey. May she obtain for us an increase in enthusiasm in serving families and young people wherever we meet them, spending ourselves totally in love for them and, together with them, building the city of God among men, the sign and foretaste of the new Jerusalem in heaven.

⁶² *Amoris Laetitia*, n. 212.

⁶³ *Ib.*, 226.

⁶⁴ *Il giovane proveduto*, (Companion of Youth) *Introduction "To the Young"* first edition Paravia, Torino 1847, 7.