

The Joy of Being Family

Dearest Sisters,

With joy we received the post-synod apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis 'Amoris Laetitia', fruit of broad consultation at the world level and of the reflections of two Bishops' Synods. This document presents a true and proper *family identity* with the beauty and challenges that accompany it in the light of God's plan. I think that the challenge of education today involves us as Salesian Family and as educating communities to look at the concrete family with new eyes in the contexts in which we work. Pope Francis, as the father of a family, expresses his heart of Pastor and Father, valuing and integrating the rich contribution of the Synod Fathers.

At the Synod, as was desired, they spoke with humility and evangelical paresis. This method did not avoid divergences and discussions, but solicited them in view of greater richness for everything. *Amoris Laetitia* presents itself as a realistic document, positive and proactive. It strongly questions our Institute, the various Salesian Family groups, and the educating communities of the world.

This Circular offers only suggestions and perspectives that can help us to look at the family as a great gift for society and for the Church, even in the difficult times for these institutions. Following the method of Pope Francis who begins with the positive part, I will show the beauty of the family and also the challenges which it is called to face. Thus, I will present some journeys of accompaniment that closely call us to, not only to help families, but to be more and more community-families valuing the precious gift that is called the 'family spirit'. Then, I will pause on the dimension of the education of the young in the family and to family.

The beauty of the family and today's challenges

Pope Francis speaks of these in the first chapters of *Amoris Laetitia*. The beauty of the family has its source and its model in God. He is not solitude but the mystery of communion; a Trinity of Persons in reciprocal relationship, united by the bond of love. It is interesting to note in the Book of Genesis the restlessness of man who looks for a helper similar to himself, who can be before him like a questioning being, a face to contemplate. With this face who is called Eve, the man gives rise to the family. From now on, the two, according to God's command, will be one flesh, and the children will be considered as olive branches, full of energy and vitality. They are the bricks of the family, as the word son, 'ben' means to build. If the parents are the foundation of the family, the children are the fullness of this construction, held together by the Lord's grace. In vain, in fact, do the laborers work if the Lord does not build the house.

Thus, the image of the house is the image of the family. For this reason, even the Church is defined as 'the house and school of communion'. From the beginning, the house is the symbol of the domestic Church where the Christians gathered for the Eucharistic celebration. In the family, the children learn the alphabet of the faith. The first catechesis is enacted by the parents, teachers of the faith, which they transmit in a simple and familiar way 'from life to life'. The children are also teachers. Jesus proposes them as a model for conversion.

We know that God's original plan for the family was broken by sin. Reciprocal accusations begin; there is jealousy between brothers to the point of the violent elimination of Abel. The family, loved by God who spent time with them in the Garden of Eden, knows the fatigue of work, of suffering, of

death. In this context of limitations and suffering, God decides to dwell in the house of humans, to send His Son to us to share our condition. He is born into a poor and marginalized family. He becomes a migrant fleeing persecution; He earns His bread by working as a carpenter like His father. He is obedient to His parents, while at the same time, looking at other values. At twelve years of age, He makes His parents clearly understand that the interests of Kingdom of God have priority for Him. Still, He returns with His family. With His father and mother, He learns and shares life, work, and prayer.

At the beginning of His public ministry, He works His first miracle in a house for a new family. Nothing is lacking on the table. What is lacking is the fullness of joy because the wine was running out at the end. Precisely to restore joy, Jesus intervenes. He celebrates His Last Supper in a house. There, the Commandment of Love assumes its greatest value because there is no greater love than to give one's life for those we love. The strength of the family lies precisely in loving and teaching to love; in tending toward communion. No matter how badly a family is wounded, it can always grow beginning with love.

Unfortunately, never as in our times, has the family undergone external attacks and internal crises that weaken it. On one side, we find a patriarchal culture with excesses of male oppression and of unilateral submission by the woman. There are other cultures in which we assist at the juridical breakdown of the family. An emerging challenge is the ideology of gender that denies the difference between men and women, discarding the very basis of the family by promoting an affective identity unbound by the biological difference between male and female. Masculine and feminine characteristics would depend only on a cultural factor and could change biological identity according to individual tendencies and choices. Even biotechnologies represent a risk when they aim at manipulating the generative act almost as though parenthood can just be 'fitted' together.

It is true that there is much fragility, but many polls reveal that the majority of young people still place the family in first place. There are many who opt for a family founded on matrimony, one and indissoluble. For the two Synods, the families appeared like a mosaic that includes many different realities, full of joys, dramas, and dreams.

What can we do so that the family returns to carry out its specific mission of receiving, caring for with love, making life grow, and opening it to the world? Taking care of life is taking care of humanity. How can we accompany the families in this mission?

Guidelines for Accompaniment

I am convinced that being near families who entrust their children to us for education or whom we reach directly in contexts of human and cultural development and evangelization, it is important for us to offer a witness of unity and of communion. Our way of living together can become a sign that it is possible and beautiful to be a family although it is not easy. However, this is not enough, even though it is the first and most important journey of accompaniment. Neither is it enough to reach families through the young people. We need to be close to the families, know their challenges; listen to them and encourage them; and, as far as possible, accompany them in a journey of growth.

During my visits, I have seen specific attention given to be close to the families, to make a journey of reciprocity together and seek adequate educational roads, to share joys and difficulties. We already see the fruit of this attention.

It can be that we are not sufficiently prepared in this field. However, we can always develop certain sensitivities; network with those who have this explicit mission; collaborate with other organizations and institutions, with groups of the Salesian Family, especially with the Past Pupils, the Salesian Cooperators, the ADMA Association, with the parents and even the grandparents of the children and young people who frequent our environments, the families we go to in the villages and in the peripheries.

General Chapter XXIII asks us to let ourselves be questioned by today's challenges: "together with the families, targeting a family pastoral in synergy with ecclesial orientations to accompany the young to mature a vision of life and of family in line with Christian values". (GC XXIII Acts, no. 61:11) The Church magisterium contains a wealth to be discovered and used.

In *Amoris Laetitia* we find clear guidelines to accompany today's families. I invite you to share, even as an educating community, the marvelous comment of the Pope on the charity of St. Paul where we recognize interesting points of accompaniment both for the natural family and for our communities. Let us cultivate attitudes of "patience, benevolence, amiability, generous detachment from self, anger control, and a predisposition for peace: forgiveness, joy, capacity to excuse, support, hope, trust that the other person can change, avoiding envy and pride" (Cf. chap. IV). In this way, the family grows in communion and love.

Love is not something static, acquired once and for all. One grows in conjugal love. Affective, spiritual, and unselfish union is a sign of the indestructible covenant of Christ to the Cross and makes spouses able to love each other as He Himself has loved us: to the Cross! In the Christian vision that Pope Francis re-proposes, matrimonial love is indissoluble, total, and exclusive; faithful and open to generation. A weak and sick love more easily gives in to the culture of the provisory. If instead, it is lived in a vision of a covenant forever, it is able to struggle, be reborn, reinvent itself, and begin again (Cf. no. 124). Growth in love requires the cultivation of joy, going beyond the obsessive search for pleasure. It calls for respect for the dignity and freedom of another person; generosity and wideness of heart even in pain and suffering.

Love lived in joy is the fruit of a shared effort (Cf. no. 130). Limitations and risks are not absent and it requires vigilant attention. It needs us to recognize our own errors, to respect the other person, to be grateful for their presence. It is a realistic love, able to accept the limitations and poverty of the partner. In this way, it matures and grows in solidity (Cf. no. 135). Dialog in the family is the privileged way to keep love alive. It requires asceticism, patience in listening to the reasoning of the other. Meeting a different thought can give birth to a new synthesis, on the condition that we do not use moralizing language that blames or hurts, or considers the other as a competitor, but rather a language of participative listening, of respect and understanding (Cf. no. 140).

Authentic love in the family is not only good for the solidity of the marriage, but is also a symbol of supernatural love lived as a spousal covenant. It calls for the spouses to return each day to choose it and for a longer time, given the lengthening of existence. When love overcomes the emotion typical of youth, it becomes a sign of a deeper love, of a belonging forever that embraces the whole person, and is expressed with a faithful closeness, full of tenderness even in illness (Cf. no. 164).

Love cannot exhaust itself within the couple: fruitful love opens to life. It knows how to receive it, to care for it, and to make it grow. It is the love of a father and a mother, both cooperators of God in generating life. However, it is not enough to give birth to life; it must be cultivated and made to grow. The love of a father and a mother are indispensable, not only for the growth of children, but also for the future of a society that may be simply human. Today, we see children who are orphans although their parents are alive.

In the face of situations of fragility, of confusion to the point of theories that destabilize families, what can we do? We need to try to know them, but also to study the Christian vision of being human, so as to know how to give an account of the Church's point of view in this regard, entering into dialog with different ways of thinking.

It is important to propose with more conviction and testimony, the beauty of the family founded on matrimony; to be close to the wounded, distant, alone, and abandoned families. The Pope says that no one must be abandoned by the Church. How many families in difficulty we meet in our mission! We cannot help but think of the many families that are found along the roads of the world who are fleeing war and poverty, searching for a space that is more human and livable! How many are waiting to be listened to, to hear a word, to receive a gesture, a smile that could change their life! May our houses become more and more oases of welcome where relief and hope can be found and courage for life. Jesus needs us today to show that His heart is touched with compassion for all suffering.

It is good to acknowledge the existence of families that support other families, associations, or institutions that are a real balm for those who are wounded: a sign of the closeness of Jesus Himself. There are many families open to be volunteers: missionary families, families that receive migrants, who collaborate on the peripheries, and who teach us to be more welcoming and hospitable communities, to grow in the capacity to live together in joy.

As FMA in the Salesian Family we can highlight the importance of family spirituality, encourage families to grow in faith and in inter-religious dialog, to listen to each other, to share together a time of gratuity without hurry, letting ourselves be surprised by small gestures that can bring happiness in daily life. We ourselves learn from families how to humanize life and relationships; how to live the spousal gift even in difficult times.

Let us try to live the proposal of Pope Francis by valuing the family spirit, characteristic element of the Salesian charism. Article 50 of our Constitutions underlines the concrete elements to make this gift that requires everyone's effort, a reality. Surely we can draw on greater strength to live the joy of feeling ourselves communities able to generate life and hope for the new generations.

Education of the young in the family and to family

Amoris Laetitia dedicates the seventh chapter to the education of children: *Strengthen the education of the children*. Here we see emerge the sensitivity and experience of Pope Francis who presents pedagogical criteria rich in wisdom and great humanity. I would like to leave room for his word on the educative guidelines he indicates to the families, which I feel are important for us to keep in mind as well in our educational task.

He affirms that, notwithstanding the signs of crisis in matrimony, the desire for family remains alive, especially among the young (Cf. no. 1).

The family is the first educator, not only in a temporal sense, but also as a model of 'how to educate', from which even the Church learns (Cf. no. 66). For this reason, the Exhortation presents in a clear and forceful way, the responsibility of parents to educate their children in a way that is aware, enthusiastic, reasonable, and appropriate (Cf. no. 259). The indications offered are practical and doable by a family that assumes deeply its duty. It is the place for support, accompaniment, and guidance for the children. The time parents spend with them, speaking with simplicity and affection of important things, can create useful reference points and help them to orient themselves in life, defending themselves even from external invasions. However, the Pope notes that obsessive attention or control does not educate. More than anticipating the life of children, it regards generating processes for the maturation of their freedom so that they can act with wisdom and foresight even in difficult situations, furnishing them with the means to make their decisions with good sense.

A first important indication is ethical formation that cannot be delegated to the school, but is the overriding task of the parents (Cf. no. 263). Through educational dialog and without impositions, parents are called to educate their children in their freedom, offering them models and exhortations and by using positive sanctions (Cf. no. 264).

There are good attitudes to inculcate even from a tender age so that they are appreciated and practiced. Key words like; please, thank you, excuse me, frequently resound in the vocabulary of Pope Francis (Cf. no. 266). A patient realism leads us to ask proportionate sacrifices of children and gradually propose values that are accompanied by the good example of the adults. Freedom must be channeled and liberated, though always subject to a series of conditionings that, in some cases, makes its exercise difficult if not impossible (Cf. no 273).

In our times in which anxiety, hurry, and technological speed reign, it is important for the family to teach the ability to wait. 'Everything and right away' is a lie that does not favor freedom but rather poisons it. Responsible freedom knows how to respect that of the others (Cf. no. 275). The family becomes the first school of socialization where one learns to share, respect, help, and collaborate; where proximity and service are lived (Cf. no. 276).

Amoris Laetitia shows how the educational encounter can be facilitated or compromised by technology. Even when it is useful, it cannot substitute personal and deep dialog (Cf. no. 278). The family is also the protagonist of integral ecology; the place where communion and reciprocal care is experienced, especially in the case of illness. Often, there is the tendency to insulate children from human suffering but by doing this we dry up their heart and anesthetize them for the suffering of others (Cf. no. 277).

Pope Francis inserts the call to sexual education in the framework of education to love and to reciprocal giving so that it will not be treated with banality and thus impoverished. In this regard, it is important to make young people aware of the many messages that bombard them in a negative way. At the same time, we must help them to recognize the positive aspects of sexuality. Thus, education must be attentive to teach them how to safeguard a healthy modesty that protects their interior life. More than pointing out the negative, we must teach them the various expressions of love as reciprocal care and tenderness, respect and esteem for difference, helping them to accept their own body with its specific characteristics that can be developed in a differentiated way in both sexes, while keeping in mind the healthy interchange of roles (Cf. nos. 280-286).

In conclusion, the Christian family is the privileged place of evangelization. It is the place where the beauty of faith shines, where one learns to pray and serve one's neighbor. Faith is a gratuitous gift, but trust in God witnessed to by the parents, dedication to neighbors, and the times of family prayer can have more power than all catechesis. Children who grow up in a family open to others even in the transmission of the faith, often become missionaries themselves. It is important that they grow in a style of relationship with the world that helps them to be neighbor to the sick, the elderly, and the excluded. In this way, the family becomes the subject of pastoral action, opens to acceptance, and promotes the common good. If the Good News resounds in the very heart of the family, it becomes in its turn, an evangelizing ferment in society (Cf. nos. 287-290). Even when we work in contexts where other religions are the majority, we can collaborate together for the growth of human values and the building of a culture of encounter that is the basis of peace.

Dear Sisters, in what way do these indications call to us as an educative Institute? We are privileged to be able to reach daily a great number of families in the whole world. It is a gift to receive with joy and a sense of responsibility. I pray that the points for reflection may lead to a deep study of *Amoris Laetitia* in all its parts. I invite you to create opportune times to share experiences and studies, even with the laity with whom we live the Salesian charism.

The Holy Father offers us a great gift and we want it to become a good opportunity for pastoral and missionary conversion lived in the style of our Founder. In a reality in which the family founded on matrimony is little supported, we reaffirm the duty to educate the young to the beauty of the family according to the plan of God. The family is the natural place for the birth of vocations. Attention to the family, therefore, is also attention to the various vocations in the Church and in the world. It is the guarantee of a better world, able to live universal fraternity and peace.

"Let us walk, families, let us continue to walk". We receive these exhortations of the Pope as addressed to us as well and we ask Mary to be our companion on the journey for our communities and to help families to live an impassioned and responsible love.

May God bless you!

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