

THE JOY OF LOVE

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, of the Holy Spirit. Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

This time of prayer together gives us the chance to revisit the document *The Joy of Love*, published by the Holy Father five years ago. You might recall Pope Francis chose last March 19 to launch the Year of Amoris Laetitia Family. He chose March 19 to mark the fifth anniversary of the document. And so, here we are, more or less halfway through this great Year of the Family. We want to talk to the Lord about the joy of the family, the joy of love. After all, the document *Amoris Laetitia* means *the joy of love* and explores- and we want to explore the joy and beauty of the family. And so, one way for us to carry out this time of prayer is to take a look at a few of the insights of the Holy Father in this long and very beautiful document. The goal, of course, is for us and our families to come to resemble more and more closely the Holy Family of Nazareth.

One of the prominent themes of the document is learning how to accept all the members- every single one of the members of the family as they are and how to do so with greatness of spirit. And this we all know from experience requires interior life. It requires a very conscious effort to accept it, to revel in each one of our family members. At one point, early on, the Holy Father says, "Married couples joined by love speak well of each other. They try to show their spouses good side, not their weakness and faults. In any event, they keep silent rather than speak ill of them."

You might recall that very poignant story, the story about an experienced couple giving a class to young couples preparing for marriage. At one point, one of the two experienced spouses said, this is rather striking, she said to the young ones, "If, when I'm with my friends, I would ever speak badly about my husband, I would be unfaithful to him." Now, as you can imagine that caught everyone by surprise. But, it's a very powerful way of saying, I am loyal. Spouses are loyal to each other. You most probably know the motto of the US Marines is Semper Fi. In other words, always loyal. Semper Fidelis, always loyal. And if it's good for the Marines, it's certainly good for each one of us. I am a loyal person. Each spouse is loyal to his or her spouse. And, we can extend that to every single member of the family. This is my brother, my- my sister. For that reason, I am loyal.

An undercurrent of the entire document is what you could call, what the Holy Father does refer to, as spiritual realism. It's a very interesting concept. To give you an example, then it will be- it will become clear what he's referring to: "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. Love exists with imperfection." This really is spiritual realism because we know on this Earth, love it's just- it's never perfect. We wish it were, but it's not. St. Josemaria had a very similar way of speaking about this when he said, "It is not only a matter of loving a person in spite of his or her defects, it is necessary to love that person with those defects." Right now in our prayer, because this is a time of prayer, we can ask the Holy Spirit to help us to- to wrap our heads around that idea, so to speak. Rather than getting annoyed and being permanently annoyed by the defects of those with whom we live, we can, if we so choose, make this decision, and we make it right now, I'm going to love those people in my household, my own family members, with their defects, confident that they're doing the very same thing with regard to my defects.

There is another recurring theme of the Holy Father in this document and in other documents of his. It is the theme, the reality, of tenderness. Consider these thought provoking words: "Tenderness makes us approach a person with immense respect and a certain dread of causing them harm or taking away their freedom." It's the kind of sentence that we should have emblazoned on our forehead, at least spiritually speaking, virtually. "The first place, approaching everyone around us, everyone we come across, with immense respect." In another place, the Holy Father talks about removing our sandals when we're in the presence of another person. Why is that? Because that other person, by definition, is an image and likeness of God, that is how each one of us has been created. But not only approaching them with immense respect, we also have to approach them with a certain dread of causing them harm or taking away their freedom.

Now, as you know, dread is a tremendously powerful word. It is a very, very intense word. But to be intensely fearful of causing anyone harm, fearful- dreading to take away their freedom, no one who was in our presence should ever feel inhibited. On the contrary, they should realize that they are in the presence of someone who loves them, who respects them, who is thrilled to see them exercise their freedom. This- this one point, this one sentence is- offers us a powerful examination of conscience: How am I in my family setting? Do those around me speak freely, at the dinner table, for example? Do they feel not only able, but welcomed to say exactly what they're thinking?

Someone was writing recently about the fact that sarcasm does a lot of damage. Offhand comments, whether good or bad, can have a remarkable shelf life. These- these ideas might make us wince. In fact, they probably do because they make us think back- why did I say that? Why did I say that- that sarcastic, ironic, even harmful comment, because all that does is provoke that seed of resentment in that other person.

The Holy Father says in another- another section of the document: "Loving another person involves the joy of contemplating and appreciating their innate beauty and sacredness which is greater than my needs." Well, as we go deeper into this document, probably you're thinking, this is really challenging. This really takes thought, being aware of these things on an ongoing basis, praying about them. And you're absolutely right. These- these attitudes do not happen automatically. On the contrary, that which comes automatically, you could say our default setting, is to be ironic, cutting, a whole bunch of negative approaches to those around us. That is why we have to ask the Lord right now to give us this joy of contemplating and appreciating everyone's innate beauty and sacredness.

Pope Francis says, "Develop the habit of giving real importance to the other person. This means appreciating them and recognizing their right to exist, to think as they do, their right to be happy. Never downplay what they say or think, even if you need to express your own point of view." At this point, you might think that you're in a boxing ring getting one blow to the right and another to the left because it's just one powerful thought after another. These are really challenging thoughts, which is why this time of prayer is so necessary, revisiting these thoughts that you probably have not read or pondered in the last four or five years.

We can call upon another writer whose name is Jacques Philippe, you may have come across some of his great books. At one point in *Interior Freedom*, which is a very important book of his, he says, "We need the loving gaze of another person in order to discover our talents." It is a fascinating thought. Each one of us has talents, qualities, that we are most likely not yet aware of. And how are we- how will we become aware of them? By someone- someone who is on our side, saying you know, you're really good at that. How do you do that? Then we suddenly realize- I never thought about it, it just comes naturally.

Even as we pray about this one idea, you might be thinking of one member of your family who could blossom because of one enthusiastic comment of yours. Perhaps, for example, they are really good at a certain intellectual pursuit, they excel at a certain sport. Maybe in your household there is a future actress, novelist, a great chef who does not yet realize that that is where they're headed. But thanks to that comment of yours, that very enthusiastic comment, they will come to know themselves and they will decide to pursue- to pursue that talent.

Another topic, a big topic, we need to free ourselves from feeling that we all have to be alike. At this point, you probably have read one or another book about the different temperaments. This goes back to the ancients- we are becoming more and more aware, we have to take these different temperaments into account. Some people are- some people are very melancholic, others are choleric; some people are introverts, other people are extroverts. And if we expect everyone to be the same,

we're going to be greatly disappointed, and we will end up driving- driving people crazy. We have to allow and actually rejoice in the fact that we have different temperaments. "At one point," this is in Number 276 of *Amoris Laetitia*, "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 worthy of our concern, our kindness, and our affection. Every day the family has to come up with new ways of appreciating and acknowledging its members. That all happens to the extent that we break out of," as he says, "break out of our fatal self-absorption." Very powerful phrase.

Every marriage goes through tough moments. Whenever difficulties arise, the couple needs to fight, in the good sense. Here's what Francis says, "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." It's important to fight for that marriage. The Holy Father often brings up the fact that we live in a very ephemeral age where things are just "here today, gone tomorrow." But something as important as the family, especially the marriage, we have to fight. It is important to accept marriage as a challenge to be taken up and fought for. A couple has to do whatever to bring about rebirth, renewal and reinvention again and again and again. As one person observed after years of marriage, she wrote, "I've been married three times, all three times to the same person. When I was 21, I married one person; when we were 45, I was different, he was different; now that I'm 75, we're both different." So, she put it in rather- a rather thought provoking way. But, it's a great point. We have to work at this because we all grow, we all change.

Number 137 of the document is especially powerful and it boils down to one word- *listen*. The Pope says, "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."

I don't know if any of the Supreme Court justices read *Amoris Laetitia*, but it just so happens, as you may have read, that thanks to their eighteen months during COVID, eighteen months in which all their hearings were conducted over the phone, they came to realize, we need another approach, a new approach. And so, they came up with a whole new set of protocols, basically giving each justice the chance to ask questions, going in an order, and also letting those lawyers who appear before the Supreme Court of the United States to speak without being interrupted. It's right out of- we have to learn how to listen patiently and attentively to everything the other person wants to say. It's practically verbatim what the justices were saying to the lawyers. We want- you've taken the trouble to come here, we will listen.

“Not only listening,” the Pope goes on, “but also looking at each other.” He says, “A look of appreciation has enormous importance, and too begrudged is usually hurtful. How many things do spouses and children sometimes do, just in order to be noticed? Much hurt- many problems result when we stop looking at one another. We often hear in families, my husband does not look at me; he acts as if I were invisible. Or, please look at me when I'm talking to you; in my home, nobody cares about me, they don't even see me, it is as if I did not exist.” As we were saying before, this document involves great spiritual realism. When have we ever seen in a papal document such concrete examples of what happens in families?

Well, finally a truly original thought from Pope Francis which comes at the very end of *Amoris Laetitia*. If you have gotten this far in the meditation, hang in there because the following is dense, but well-worth spending a few minutes to mull over. The Pope says, “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 realizes that the other is not his or her own, but that each 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. God alone can be the ultimate center of their life.”

It is very dense, which is why it's worthwhile going back, getting your own copy of the document and looking at this and- and praying about it, praying about this idea of healthy autonomy which is an attitude that frees us from clinging to another human being, expecting everything from that other one because the Lord must be the ultimate center of our life. Equally surprising is the next paragraph, along the same lines, where the Pope talks about a certain disillusionment: “A spouse needs to stop expecting from the other something that is proper to the love of God alone. This demands an interior divestment. It is in the love of God where each one needs to find the deepest source of meaning in their own lives. This is spiritual realism.” I don't know if we've ever heard before about a certain disillusionment. It is important because if one spouse expects from the other everything, it's not healthy. We have to expect everything from God himself, and that's on this Earth knowing love will be imperfect.

We can finish with a thought from the Holy Father, from the audience where he announced this Year of *Amoris Laetitia* Family: “May the Virgin Mary grant that families throughout the world be increasingly fascinated by the evangelical ideal of the Holy Family, so as to become a leaven of a new humanity and have a genuine and universal solidarity.” We make this wish of the Holy Father our own, even as we renew our determination to continue this year of the *Amoris Laetitia* Family, pushing- begging for the grace to put all these ideas into- into action, to really and truly make our family a replica, an imperfect one, of the Holy Family of Nazareth.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations that you have communicated to me in this meditation. I ask your help in putting them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, of the Holy Spirit. Amen. God bless you.



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