

## FIRST CATECHESIS

### TODAY'S FAMILIES

**“SON, WHY DID YOU DO THIS TO US? BEHOLD, YOUR FATHER AND I HAVE BEEN LOOKING FOR YOU ANXIOUSLY” (Lk 2:48)**

Mary, woman of listening, open our ears;  
grant us to know how to listen to the word of your Son Jesus  
among the thousands of words of this world;  
grant that we may listen to the reality in which we live,  
to every person we encounter,  
especially those who are poor, in need, in hardship.

Mary, woman of decision,  
illuminate our mind and our heart,  
so that we may obey, unhesitating,  
the word of your Son Jesus;  
give us the courage to decide,  
not to let ourselves be dragged along,  
letting others direct our life.

Mary, woman of action,  
obtain that our hands and feet move “with haste” toward others,  
to bring them the charity and love of your Son Jesus,  
to bring the light of the Gospel to the world, as you did. Amen.

*(Pope Francis, Saint Peter's Square, 31 May 2013)*

The Gospels tell us little about the events in the life of the Holy Family of Nazareth. Much is left to our imagination, considering that Jesus lived with his family in Nazareth for nearly thirty years. The small number of episodes that have been transmitted to us are therefore essential for getting an insight into this Family's mystery. The only story that presents Jesus at age twelve (then, at this age he was not just an adolescent but a person who had recently reached the age of maturity) interacting with his parents is found in the Gospel of Luke, in the narrative of *“The finding of Jesus in the temple.”* We would surely have expected the story of an idyllic page of the Holy Family, a bit like the commercials in which all the family members are always beautiful, smiling, and luminous, in total and absolute mutual understanding. Instead of that, to our amazement, the Gospel tells us a different story. To use a term very much in fashion today: The Family of Nazareth *“is in crisis.”* Mary and Joseph, who are very devote, go to the temple in Jerusalem every year for the Passover feast, as Luke tells us himself, and they take Jesus with them to educate him in these religious commitments. Yet, unexpectedly, on the way home from Jerusalem, after a day of travelling, they discover that Jesus is missing. This family prays, but apparently their prayers and their religious devotion do not preserve them from this kind of family adventure. Imagine, then, the sentiments

that Mary and Joseph experience in the face of this totally unexpected event. A father and above all a mother can well understand the absurd anguish that engulfs a parent who cannot find a child and does not know where to look for him or her. In short, this Holy Family does not seem wonderful, nor does it seem to give us a good example, and, hence, it cannot be a model for us. Why is Luke the Evangelist so interested in this dramatic event that he tells us about it? The whole story changes our way of thinking about this Family and certainly sends us in another direction, to a greater mystery that is beyond our comprehension. Pope Francis, in *Amoris Laetitia*, opens our eyes to contemplate this mystery: “*The Bible is full of families, births, love stories and family crises. This is true from its very first page, with the appearance of Adam and Eve’s family with all its burden of violence but also its enduring strength (cf. Gen 4)*” (AL 8). The Word of God does not show us an idyllic and abstract image of the family, as we would expect but places before our eyes a series of stories of real families, with the singularity and uniqueness of their problems, difficulties, and challenges. The Word takes us right into reality with “*the presence of pain, evil and violence that break up families and their communion of life and love*” (AL 19). Similarly, it presents “*the icon of the Holy Family of Nazareth. Its daily life had its share of burdens and even nightmares, as when they met with Herod’s implacable violence. This last was an experience that, sad to say, continues to afflict the many refugee families who in our day feel rejected and helpless*” (AL 30). The basic point, then, is not the absence of crisis in families (no family, even the Holy Family, is free of them) but how to react in the face of any kind of crisis situation. Luke’s narrative, with its foresight and concreteness, offers to all families these fundamental indications, which become a true school of life for all. At first glance, we modern parents, full of attention and care for our children, at once grasp the imprudence of Joseph and Mary, who leave their son alone and unattended for a whole day on their journey back home. In fact, in that culture Jesus is no longer considered a minor, and consequently he is treated as a person who has come of age. Yet, beyond this, we can see another, deeper aspect that can be designated with a term often used in both the social and ecclesial spheres: there is an “educational challenge.” In this regard, Pope Francis gives us all a longsighted indicator, “*Obsession, however, is not education. We cannot control every situation that a child may experience [...] The real question, then, is not where our children are physically, or whom they are with at any given time, but rather where they are existentially, where they stand in terms of their convictions, goals, desires and dreams. The questions I would put to parents are these: ‘Do we seek to understand ‘where’ our children really are in their journey? Where is their soul, do we really know? And above all, do we want to know?’*” (AL 261). We meet many parents who are, eager to see their children engage in a great number of educational, sports, and artistic activities, and perhaps push them to do what they themselves wanted to do when they were young; but they never take

time with them to listen, if only for a moment, to a whole range of concerns in their hearts. Joseph and Mary run this risk, with all the anxiety that it brings along, and only after three days—three long and interminable days—do they find Jesus again in the temple. Their first reaction is simple astonishment, for, as we read in *Amoris Laetitia*, “*inevitably, each child will surprise us with ideas and projects born of that freedom, which challenge us to rethink our own ideas. This is a good thing. Education includes encouraging the responsible use of freedom to face issues with good sense and intelligence. It involves forming persons who readily understand that their own lives, and the life of the community, are in their hands, and that freedom is itself a great gift*” (AL 262). A child is always surprising and a mystery for the parents from the moment of conception. “*Scientific advances today allow us to know beforehand what color a child’s hair will be or what illnesses they may one day suffer, because all the somatic traits of the person are written in his or her genetic code already in the embryonic stage. Yet only the Father, the Creator, fully knows the child; he alone knows his or her deepest identity and worth*” (AL 170). Hence, before the mystery of a child, the most sincere attitude can never be judgment, disappointment, blame, or condemnation. How often do words and statements such as the following, which are destructive for a child, come from the lips of parents: “*You are not the child that I expected.*” Before this “*living reflection of their love, a permanent sign of their conjugal unity and a living and inseparable synthesis of their being a father and a mother*” (AL 165) the holiest attitude is openness to God’s surprises. All this does not happen in a spiritual way or, to put it mildly, superhumanly. Of course, we are perturbed and troubled, as Joseph and Mary were, by unexpected events that provoke anguish; and this precisely explains why it is said that they looked anxiously for Jesus. The Gospel does not dehumanize the human heart but respects it and gives voice to feelings that they are neither good nor bad, and at the same time teaches us how to relate our feelings. We must always reflect and ask. Mary, indeed, on behalf of both, asks Jesus a question. The few words that she pronounces extraordinarily open for us the true mystery of parenthood: “*Son, why have you done this to us? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously*” (Lk 2:48). A son remains a son, and must always be called, recognized, and loved as such. The son must always be asked and listened to, never be accused and condemned; and a parent must never be afraid to put himself or herself into play in the relationship with the child: “*Why did you do this to me?*” It is not the moral norm or duty that are at stake here, or what is right or wrong. What matters most is the relationship which, in this case, is the basic parent-child relationship. Mary goes even further. She highlights not only the parent-child relationship but also their father-mother-son relationship, in its completeness and integrity. She, the mother, is speaking not only in her own name but firstly on behalf of his father and then on behalf of herself. This sequence brings to light an extraordinary underlying order of paternity and

maternity in relation to the offspring. Pope Francis rightly says that *“each of the spouses ‘contributes in a distinct way to the upbringing of a child. Respecting a child’s dignity means affirming his or her need and natural right to have a mother and a father.’ We are speaking not simply of the love of father and mother as individuals, but also of their mutual love, perceived as the source of one’s life and the solid foundation of the family. Without this, a child could become a mere plaything. Husband and wife, father and mother, both ‘cooperate with the love of God the Creator, and are, in a certain sense, his interpreters.’ They show their children the maternal and paternal face of the Lord.”* (AL 172). Why does Mary speak and not Joseph? Why does she first mention her husband? Because, from time immemorial, we cannot in any way deny the uniqueness of the relationship between a mother and the child conceived and carried in her womb: it is she who *“joins with God to bring forth the miracle of a new life”* (AL 168). Carrying the child inside her, in her womb, is not only an anatomical, physiological, or temporal aspect of being a mother but constitutes a permanent dimension that characterizes a woman’s motherhood. Mary speaks to Jesus because she has a closer, more intimate relationship with her son; but at the same time—and this is something that today’s mothers should all learn to do—she leads to Joseph and indicates the antecedence of fatherhood over motherhood. Here, we are far from a cultural or social discourse, or from any moralism, or even more, sexism that states the priority of the father over the mother. The Gospel narrative directs our gaze much farther, deeper, and higher: the father as such is a sign of God’s Fatherhood. On the other hand, what do we see today? *“Ours is a ‘society without fathers.’ In Western culture, the father figure is said to be symbolically absent, missing or vanished”* (AL 176). The Gospel, thus, sheds light on a fundamental truth: *“children need to find a father waiting for them when they return home with their problems. They may try hard not to admit it, not to show it, but they need it”* (AL 177). If Mary and Joseph can interact with Jesus as mother and father, this is because, fundamentally, their marital complicity is alive. We so often forget that the foundation of parenting is not the offspring (one becomes a parent not only by naturally giving birth to a child, and Joseph is a fine example of this fact) but the couple’s conjugal relationship. In fact, the essential crisis experienced today more than ever by the families concerns precisely the emotional illiteracy that, starting from the basic relationship of the two spouses, pours into all the other areas, generating a *“‘culture of the ephemeral.’ Here I think, for example, of the speed with which people move from one affective relationship to another. They believe, along the lines of social networks, that love can be connected or disconnected at the whim of the consumer, and the relationship quickly ‘blocked.’ I think too of the fears associated with permanent commitment, the obsession with free time, and those relationships that weigh costs and benefits for the sake of remedying loneliness, providing protection, or offering some service. We treat affective relationships the way*

*we treat material objects and the environment: everything is disposable; everyone uses and throws away, takes and breaks, exploits and squeezes to the last drop. Then, goodbye” (AL 39). All this clearly discourages the younger generation—frightened by the failure of those who have made this choice before them—from building a family. In this sense, the Family of Nazareth is not an ideal beacon, because it too is real and, in the contradictions and absurdities of its life, shows to all generations “the joy of love” (AL 1) experienced at home. For this reason, the Holy Father resolutely states: “The covenant of love and fidelity lived by the Holy Family of Nazareth illuminates the enables it better to face the vicissitudes of life and history. On this basis, every family, despite its weaknesses, can become a light in the darkness of the world. ‘Nazareth teaches us the meaning of family life, its loving communion, its simple and austere beauty, its sacred and inviolable character. May it teach how sweet and irreplaceable is its training, how fundamental and incomparable its role in the social order’” (AL 66). Do we want to learn to be a family? Let us get rid of the idealistic model that we have in our heads and look to the Holy Family showing everyone how critical events in life are an inexhaustible source of grace and holiness for the entire world.*

### **In the family**

#### ***Let us reflect***

1. How can a family crisis become an inexhaustible source of grace?
2. What is, in your view, the particular uniqueness of motherhood or fatherhood?

#### ***Let us live***

1. There have undoubtedly been difficulties and problems, or so-called “crises,” in your family and married life. How did you deal with them? Yet, in the light of the catechesis that you have meditated on, how should you have faced them?
2. How do you live your fatherhood or motherhood in relation to the spouse that God has placed beside you? How do you let your children experience the mother-father relationship?

### **In church**

#### ***Let us reflect***

1. Why is the beauty of the culture of love-forever struggling to be attractive in the face of the provisional?
2. In what sense is God’s Fatherhood the foundation of all earthly parenthood?

#### ***Let us live***

1. How should an ecclesial community act in the face of the multiple and frequent crises in families? What style, methods, tools, spaces and other means is it called to offer?

2. Being a father and being a mother is the hardest and most complex mission. How is the Church called to make Her contribution to this particular and unique mission?