

FOURTH CATECHESIS

THE GREAT DREAM FOR EVERYONE

“AND ALL WHO HEARD HIM WERE AMAZED AT HIS UNDERSTANDING AND HIS ANSWERS” (Lk 2,47)

Lord Jesus Christ,
 you have taught us to be merciful like the heavenly Father,
 and have told us that whoever sees you sees Him.
 Show us your face and we will be saved.
 Your loving gaze freed Zacchaeus and Matthew from being enslaved by money;
 the adulteress and Magdalene from seeking happiness only in created things;
 made Peter weep after his betrayal, and assured Paradise to the repentant thief.
 Let us hear, as if addressed to each one of us, the words that you spoke to the Samaritan woman:
 “If you knew the gift of God!”
 You are the visible face of the invisible Father,
 of the God who manifests his power above all by forgiveness and mercy:
 let the Church be your visible face in the world,
 its Lord risen and glorified.
 You willed that your ministers would also be clothed in weakness
 in order that they may feel compassion for those in ignorance and error:
 let everyone who approaches them feel sought after, loved, and forgiven by God.
 Send your Spirit and consecrate every one of us with its anointing,
 so that the Jubilee of Mercy may be a year of grace from the Lord,
 and your Church, with renewed enthusiasm, may bring good news to the poor,
 proclaim liberty to captives and the oppressed, and restore sight to the blind.
 We ask this of you, Lord Jesus, through the intercession of Mary, Mother of Mercy;
 you who live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit forever and ever.

Amen.

(Pope Francis Prayer for the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, 8 December 2015)

It is the very first time that the Gospel presents Jesus speaking and interacting with the teachers in the temple, asking them questions and giving answers. Now, what he says leaves everyone amazed and surprised by His intelligence. It is interesting to note that, in his first intervention, he does not teach while his interlocutors merely listen in silence. He actually interacts, dialogues, asks questions, listens, and responds, in very dynamic and lively dialogue, surprising absolutely everyone. His Word manages to touch everyone, and this is already apparent the first time he speaks. From the beginning, He not only shows the ability to personalize His dialogue with everyone he meets on His path but, also and above all, He shows his desire to speak to all because He “*wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*” (1 Tim 2:4). Everyone needs God’s salvation, and this redemption reaches every person through the divine mercy revealed in the Son’s face. “*For this reason—says Pope Francis—, I have proclaimed an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy as a special time for the Church, a time when the witness of believers might grow*

stronger and more effective” (*Misericordiae Vultus* 3). This invitation is primarily addressed to the Church, because She is the first *“to announce the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel, which in its own way must penetrate the heart and mind of every person. The Spouse of Christ must pattern her behavior after the Son of God who went out to everyone without exception”* (*Misericordiae Vultus* 12). There is no frailty, weakness, or human misery that cancels or stops divine mercy, but rather, *“once clothed in mercy, even if the inclination to sin remains, it is overcome by the love that makes it possible for her to look ahead and to live her life differently”* (*Misericordia et Misera* 1). It is wrong and somewhat misleading to think of God’s merciful action as a reward given to those who have abandoned their misery. The mercy of God is never conquered or bought; on the contrary, it is always given and offered freely to everyone, so that each person may, like the prodigal son, be covered with the most beautiful robe by the Father who, since the day of his or her departure, has been waiting for him or her to come back and embrace a new life. Fundamentally, it is God’s mercy that generates the act of conversion, not the contrary. Human conversion will never attract and win divine mercy. It is the always gratuitous and surprising experience of God’s forgiveness that stimulates in the human heart a true and sincere desire for conversion and a new life. This announcement is addressed to all, each in his unique and personal situation and condition. No one, absolutely no one is excluded from the mercy of God! The arms of the merciful Father are always open even for those who, for various reasons, are still living in a way that is at odds with the ideal of the Gospel. Therefore, as well, *“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”* (AL 243). Attention! This in no way calls into question the Christian doctrine on the gift of indissolubility in the Sacrament of Marriage. The Church is well aware that *“any breach of the marriage bond is against the will of God”* (AL 291), because the indissolubility of marriage is *“a fruit, a sign and a requirement of the absolutely faithful love that God has for man and that the Lord Jesus has for the Church”* (*Familiaris Consortio* 20). This explains the appeal that Pope Francis addresses to the entire ecclesial community: *“The pastoral care of engaged and married couples should be centered on the marriage bond, assisting couples not only to deepen their love but also to overcome problems and difficulties. This involves not only helping them to accept the Church’s teaching and to have recourse to her valuable resources, but also offering practical programs, sound advice, proven strategies and psychological guidance. All this calls for a pedagogy of love, attuned to the feelings and needs of young people and capable of helping them to grow interiorly. Marriage preparation should also provide couples with the names of places, people and services to which they can turn for help when problems arise. It is also important to remind*

them of the availability of the sacrament of Reconciliation, which allows them to bring their sins and past mistakes, and their relationship itself, before God, and to receive in turn his merciful forgiveness and healing strength” (AL 211). It is, therefore, urgent to make all the necessary instruments available, so that we may live the extraordinary gift of the indissolubility of the nuptial sacrament and bring it to fulfillment; and we must, above all, make everyone aware that Christ “in the celebration of the sacrament of matrimony offers a ‘new heart’: thus the couples are not only able to overcome ‘hardness of heart’ (Mt 19,8), but also and above all they are able to share the full and definitive love of Christ, the new and eternal Covenant made flesh. Just as the Lord Jesus is the ‘faithful witness’ (Ap 3:14), the ‘yes’ of the promises of God (cf. 2 Cor 1:20) and thus the supreme realization of the unconditional faithfulness with which God loves His people, so Christian couples are called to participate truly in the irrevocable indissolubility that binds Christ to the Church His bride, loved by Him to the end” (Familiaris Consortio 20). Given the great wealth of the Gospel’s extraordinary truths and these concrete, realistic pastoral guidelines, we need to ask ourselves the basic questions of how much time, space, and resources our Christian communities dedicate to conjugal and premarital pastoral care? The responsibility for the many marriage failures is all too easily placed on the shoulders of the spouses alone. It is, perhaps, important for the ecclesial community to ask how much accompaniment and discernment young couples have benefited from, before taking the big step of their life by receiving the Sacrament of Marriage? They must be offered what is due; above all “the initial years of marriage are a vital and sensitive period during which couples become more aware of the challenges and meaning of married life. Consequently, pastoral accompaniment needs to go beyond the actual celebration of the sacrament (Familiaris Consortio, Part III). In this regard, experienced couples have an important role to play. The parish is a place where such experienced couples can help younger couples, with the eventual cooperation of associations, ecclesial movements and new communities” (AL 223). The same care and attention must be given to all those in conflictive family situations. “Illumined by the gaze of Jesus Christ, ‘the Church turns with love to those who participate in her life in an incomplete manner, recognizing that the grace of God works also in their lives by giving them the courage to do good, to care for one another in love and to be of service to the community in which they live and work’” (AL 291). No one will ever be able to limit the boundaries of the work of divine grace, because it always acts, in everything and everywhere, in a humanly inconceivable way. However, the ecclesial community is called to a special mission that Pope Francis likes to interpret in this way: “I sincerely believe that Jesus wants a Church attentive to the goodness which the Holy Spirit sows in the midst of human weakness, a Mother who, while clearly expressing her objective teaching, ‘always does what good she can, even if in the process, her shoes get soiled by the mud of the street’” (AL 308).

We now find ourselves at a central and crucial point of the Christian faith, where it is very easy to fall into two extremes: the first, which is perhaps culturally more common and widespread, tends to minimize any matrimonial status provided that one's conscience is right before God; the other, now considered more retrograde, distinguishes the so-called regular Christians from those in "irregular" situations. Clearly, neither of these extremes is in line with the teaching of the Gospel or the Magisterium of the Church. The great proclamation that Christ brought to the world and that we must always reiterate, everywhere and in every time, is that God has a Great Dream for all, and no one is excluded. What is this Great Dream of God for everyone? It is, perhaps, better to start from what it is not. The divine dream is not marriage, nor is it the constitution of a family. Both are part of the Dream, because they trace the way, the road, the path, and the itinerary; but they never constitute the final goal of a person's life. This means that those who fully live the Sacrament of Marriage already have on earth the foretaste of the final goal of the eternal wedding of Christ with the whole of humanity. However, those who for different reasons live their earthly existence in a situation of human frailty, where their sacramental marriage is tested and struck by incurable wounds, will not be excluded from the wedding banquet; on the contrary, the desire for this goal may burn even more strongly in their hearts because of their current human condition. What, then, is the Great Dream of God for all, from which no one is excluded? The eternal wedding with each human creature! Why in the reflection and, consequently, in the Church's pastoral ministry, are such divergences underlined to the point of creating ambiguity and confusion in the minds of Christians? Because we often look at God's Dream from an earthly perspective and not from that of heaven. When you look at a piece of embroidery from its reverse, you can only see many tangled threads, intertwined in a confusing and meaningless way. However, when you look at its front side, you can see with great surprise that thanks to that untidy intertwining of the threads a beautiful picture is realized, embroidered with love and patience by the hand of God. In the same way, we can perceive the beauty and the greatness of God's Dream only if we look at it from the side of eternity. This precisely leads to Pope Francis' invitation at the conclusion of *Amoris Laetitia*: *"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. Let us make this journey as families, let us keep walking together. What we have been promised is greater than we can imagine. May we never lose heart because of our limitations, or ever stop seeking that fullness of love and*

communion which God holds out before us” (AL 325). Moreover, those who live in the grace of the Sacrament of Marriage also have a greater responsibility for situations of conjugal and family crises, if it is true that the Sacrament of Marriage—like the that of the Holy Orders—is directed toward the Church’s mission and edification. Indeed, “These situations ‘require careful 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’” (AL 243). So, the indissolubility of marriage is not a gift only for the spouses; it is also for the whole community and especially for those who bear the wounds of a crisis in their marriage. In other words, if it is true that the spouses experience, by virtue of the nuptial grace, the power of their communion divinely, that irrepressible power cannot be enclosed within the walls of their couple or their family, but, by its very nature, reaches out and expands everywhere, making everyone, and especially those who are living conjugal and family dramas, relish the balm of communion, of God’s tenderness and compassion, passing through the ode of their marital indissolubility. This indissolubility is, therefore, a great gift for the whole Church because it communicates to everyone the eternal faithful love of God in Jesus Christ.

In the family

Let us reflect

1. In what sense is the gift of the indissolubility of marriage not only for the couple but for the entire ecclesial community?
2. What should be offered to a young couple that knocks on the church door to ask for the Sacrament of Marriage?

Let us live

1. How could families become responsible agents of premarital and conjugal ministry in our church communities?
2. In what sense and how are spouses called to make a valuable and unique contribution for all families suffering from any kind of crisis and conjugal fragility?

In church

Let us reflect

1. What is God’s Great Dream for all, from which no one is excluded?
2. How much time, how much space and how many resources do our Christian communities dedicate to premarital and conjugal pastoral care?

Let us live

1. What kind of pastoral accompaniment, discernment, and integration is the Christian community called to implement for all families suffering from any kind of crisis and marital fragility?
2. What difficulties does pastoral ministry encounter in relation with those who at times feel somewhat excluded from ecclesial communities because of their particular marital and family situations? What could be proposed to promote a true proclamation of God's Great Dream for them?