

## SECOND CATECHESIS

### FAMILIES IN THE LIGHT OF GOD'S WORD

**“HIS PARENTS WENT TO JERUSALEM EVERY YEAR AT THE FEAST OF THE PASSOVER” (LK 2:41)**

Mother, help our faith!  
 Open our ears to hear God's word  
 and to recognize his voice and call.  
 Awaken in us a desire to follow in his footsteps,  
 to go forth from our own land and to receive his promise.  
 Help us to be touched by his love, that we may touch him in faith.  
 Help us to entrust ourselves fully to him and to believe in his love,  
 especially at times of trial, beneath the shadow of the cross,  
 when our faith is called to mature.  
 Sow in our faith the joy of the Risen One.  
 Remind us that those who believe are never alone.  
 Teach us to see all things with the eyes of Jesus,  
 that he may be light for our path.  
 And may this light of faith always increase in us,  
 until the dawn of that undying day  
 which is Christ himself, your Son, our Lord!

*(Pope Francis, Encyclical Lumen Fidei, 29 June 2013)*

The evangelical icon that constitutes the background to these catechesis makes us immediately aware of the religious integrity of the Holy Family of Nazareth. As we read in the Gospel of Luke, Joseph and Mary go to the temple of Jerusalem every year for the Passover feast to accomplish together their act of faith, and they take Jesus with them. We are looking at a family in which all the members together—father, mother and son—go on a long journey, with all the hardships and difficulties of their time (including the fact that on their trip back home, Jesus has strayed on his own), to celebrate at Passover their act of thanksgiving to God for having liberated the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. This is a family recalling the saving love of God which enlivens it and makes it act in the present with the view to their future wherein the divine faithfulness will fulfill and accomplish His promise. The pilgrimage is not just a simple devotional and religious act that belongs to the traditions of their people. It is certainly not new to see whole families with all their members participating together in religious festivals that attract the attention of the entire community—for example, the feast of a Patron Saint or religious celebrations that characterize how some cultures live particular moments of the liturgical year, especially Christmas, Holy Week, and Easter. The pilgrimage of the Holy Family is not just a traditional act but also reveals an important “background” of which we are made aware by the Gospel narratives that precede this episode. Mary

and Joseph are both challenged by a completely unexpected and surprising word from Above that arouses in them a response of faith. Superficial readings of these two Gospel narratives—in Luke about Mary and in Matthew about Joseph—do not always grasp their full adhesion in faith to the mysterious divine plan. We often take for granted and overlook the angel’s appearance to Mary in her home in Nazareth and to Joseph in a dream; and it seems normal to us that both give their assent. In fact, these two Gospel narratives are intended to communicate an encounter with the Divine and His consequent call, surrounded by a mystery so deep that words cannot express it. Luke, in fact, does not speak about an appearance but uses the expression “*he came to her*” (Lk 1:28), and Matthew, writing that “*an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream*” (Mt 1:20), speaks about this not so obvious manifestation of the divine, because it actually takes place in a dream. Therefore, the central message of the two evangelists is not the so-called “Theophany” but rather the Word of God calling the hearts of Mary and Joseph to a total response that will mark their whole life. The Word communicates, informs, and makes both aware of new, extraordinary and unexpected events; but, above all, addressing them personally, it wants to establish a relationship. God communicates the same word to both: “*Do not be afraid!*” (Lk 1:30; Mt 1:20). In this regard, Pope Francis’ words in *Amoris Laetitia* are enlightening: “*the word of God is not a series of abstract ideas but rather a source of comfort and companionship for every family that experiences difficulties or suffering. For it shows them the goal of their journey, when God ‘will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more’ (Rev 21:4)*” (AL 22). If Mary and Joseph go to the temple of Jerusalem every year for the Passover feast, ready to make sacrifices and to face the unexpected events that the trip involved at their time, also taking Jesus with them, they do this because they have and continue to experience the Word of God in their concrete life. Their entire history is a plot woven by the same thread, which is the Word. It is the Word that leads them to give birth to the Son in the cave of Bethlehem, thus fulfilling what Scripture prophesied through Micah: “*And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel*” (Mt 2:6); the same Word invites them to flee to Egypt to save Jesus from Herod (Mt 2:13); and it is again the Word that calls them to return to the land of Israel after Herod’s death (Mt 2:19–23). The Holy Family, through its daily challenges, teaches all of us that the Word of God is more than the communication of religious truth, catechesis or a set of moral instructions to be put into practice; the Word is a deep, living relationship with God that becomes history in the life of every family. That is precisely why the family is the first place where the narration of the experience of the divine Word is transmitted, as Pope Francis says: “*The Bible also presents the family as the place where children are brought up in the faith. This is evident from the*

description of the Passover celebration (cf. Ex 12:26-27; Deut 6:20-25) and it later appears explicitly in the Jewish Haggadah, the dialogue accompanying the rite of the Passover meal. One of the Psalms celebrates the proclamation of faith within families: *'All that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us, we will not hide from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders which he has wrought. He established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children; that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children' (Ps 78:3-6). The family is thus the place where parents become their children's first teachers in the faith. They learn this 'trade,' passing it down from one person to another: 'When in time to come your son asks you... You shall say to him...' (Ex 13:14)'* (AL 16). We are so used to reducing the transmission of faith exclusively to the teaching of standards of truth and religious practices that we forget that faith implies a lively, concrete experience of God. However, if this experience is not realized and does not become part of us at home, the Christian faith is then reduced to mere religiosity and to ritualistic acts performed inside our church buildings and with very little meaning to our everyday life. Today, it is commonplace to complain that children and young people, after completing the itinerary of Christian initiation with the admission to the sacraments, often stop going to the parish, do not enter the churches for any liturgical act, not even for the so-called "Holy Days of Obligation:" Christmas and Easter. There are few people wondering how a young person can want to go to church if he or she does not experience the reality of God's Word at home and in everyday life. It is, therefore, urgent to change the register and to begin again, as if announcing Jesus Christ for the first time. Pope Francis quite rightly insists on this: *"In and among families, the Gospel message should always resound; the core of that message, the kerygma, is what is 'most beautiful, most excellent, most appealing and at the same time most necessary'. This message 'has to occupy the center of all evangelizing activity'. It is the first and most important proclamation, 'which we must hear again and again in different ways, and which we must always announce in one form or another'. Indeed, 'nothing is more solid, profound, secure, meaningful and wise than that message.' In effect, 'all Christian formation consists of entering more deeply into the kerygma'"* (AL 58). How can we proclaim the kerygma today? Joseph and Mary again show us the way. They do not go to Jerusalem for just any feast but for the Passover, which is not only the most important festival for the people of Israel because of its signification, but it is one that really touches people's concrete experience. In other words, Jesus' parents have experienced the Passover in the events of their lives; is not merely a commemoration of the past or a celebration ritual, but it is a vital experience of death and resurrection in their existence. They certainly do not have the slightest foresight and awareness about the Passover of

their Son Jesus, but we know that the authors of the Gospel stories always start from the Kerygma, that is from the fundamental proclamation of Christ's death and resurrection, in light of which they recount all the other episodes. Mary and Joseph live their family life according to the inspirations of the Word because they are totally grafted into the paschal logic. Likewise, the Word of God becomes flesh in every "domestic church" only when the Paschal Mystery is lived in the family; in fact, it is Christ's Passover that gives life and meaning to our homes. Now, Easter is not an idea, a truth, or an announcement to be transmitted to the families, but it is already present in each family from the day of the celebration of the Sacrament of Marriage. Their nuptial Sacrament is the actualization of the paschal mystery of Christ living and working in their love relationship. How many Christian spouses are aware of this amazing truth? How many know that their marriage and family life is, through grace given by the Sacrament of Marriage, a continuous celebration of Easter? How many have understood that all moments of suffering, pain, and of death are grafted into the paschal logic, and therefore that such painful trials have the penultimate word and prelude a surprising resurrection? If no one breaks the Word of God for them, who could ever look up and perceive the Great Mystery perceptible in their flesh? This is why *"the Synod Fathers noted that 'the word of God is the source of life and spirituality for the family. All pastoral work on behalf of the family must allow people to be interiorly fashioned and formed as members of the domestic church through the Church's prayerful reading of sacred Scripture. The word of God is not only good news in a person's private life but also a criterion of judgement and a light in discerning the various challenges that married couples and families encounter'"* (AL 227). If our families are to become what they are by virtue of the Sacrament, it is essential that ordinary pastoral ministry move and be guided in this direction. This is a craft that requires daily attention and paves the way for a real conjugal and family spirituality. The contribution and support of the pastors is precious for this. They are called to *"encourage families to grow in faith. This means encouraging frequent confession, spiritual direction and occasional retreats. It also means encouraging family prayer during the week, since 'the family that prays together stays together.'* When visiting our people's homes, we should gather all the members of the family and briefly pray for one another, placing the family in the Lord's hands. It is also helpful to encourage each of the spouses to find time for prayer alone with God, since each has his or her secret crosses to bear. Why shouldn't we tell God our troubles and ask him to grant us the healing and help we need to remain faithful?" (AL 227). More than teaching, instructing, or educating, Pope Francis repeatedly underlines *"encouraging,"* because he knows that the art of a true master consists not only in knowing how to teach but especially in infusing strength in the face of difficulties and of being able to convey more with the heart than with reason what he wants to give to the other person. The Holy Father is well aware that

it takes a lot of courage to start a family, and he himself is very surprised (as he writes at the beginning of *Amoris Laetitia*) that “*for all the many signs of crisis in the institution of marriage, ‘the desire to marry and form a family remains vibrant, especially among young people, and this is an inspiration to the Church’*” (AL 1). Praying, then, is not so easy and obvious before a family drama, such as the sudden loss of a child or the premature death of a spouse, or when both lose their jobs or are going through a serious marriage crisis. If we do not enter into the logic of the paschal mystery, always alive and active in each marriage, the lessons remain mere words that are easily blown away by the wind. So, a lot of encouragement is necessary; but there is equally a great need for concrete testimonies that pave the way and show that everything is possible in Christ who died and rose again. We find not a living testimony better than that of the Family of Nazareth. The families, “*like Mary, are asked to face their family’s challenges with courage and serenity, in good times and bad, and to keep in their heart the great things which God has done (cf. Lk 2:19, 51). The treasury of Mary’s heart also contains the experiences of every family, which she cherishes. For this reason, she can help us understand the meaning of these experiences and to hear the message God wishes to communicate through the life of our families*” (AL 30). The Word of God, therefore, gives each family the wisdom of life and the light necessary to interpret each family event, whether big or small, and so to taste the prelude of the Eternal Marriage to which every family has always been called.

### **In the family**

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

1. Why is the Word of God often seen in our families as distant, purely religious, and incomprehensible? What are the causes of this and what remedies could be proposed?
2. In moments of profound difficulties and severe crisis, families rarely turn to the Word of God in search of light and support. What is missing and what can be done about it?

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

1. Have there been events in your family life in which the Word of God has truly taken flesh in your home? Talk about these.
2. Easter is celebrated in the family only if you truly live it. Giving a paschal flavor to family matters is like tasting the new wine of the wedding at Cana. In light of this catechesis, have you experienced the paschal mystery alive and active in your home?

### **In church**

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

1. If “*the Bible is full of families*” (AL 8), as Pope Francis says, why are the Holy Scriptures often seen as too abstract and far from today’s families? Which ministry or, rather, what spirituality is missing in our Christian communities?

2. We see the attendance of Catholics at our liturgies declining more and more, and we often stop at this external symptom of a deeper problem. How could or should the Church deal with this situation?

***Let us live***

1. What can be done to introduce the Bible into the homes so that families read it, that it may become a true light for them?
2. Are we more concerned about celebrating the paschal mystery in our churches than living it within the family? What could be proposed to change this mentality?