

**SIXTH CATECHESIS**  
**THE CULTURE OF HOPE**

**“HIS MOTHER KEPT ALL THESE THINGS IN HER HEART” (LK 2:51)**

Jesus, Mary and Joseph,  
in you we contemplate  
the splendor of true love,  
to you we turn with trust.  
Holy Family of Nazareth,  
grant that our families too  
may be places of communion and prayer,  
authentic schools of the Gospel  
and small domestic churches.  
Holy Family of Nazareth,  
may families never again experience violence, rejection and division:  
May all who have been hurt or scandalized  
find ready comfort and healing.  
Holy Family of Nazareth,  
may the approaching Synod of Bishops  
make us more mindful of the sacredness and inviolability of the family,  
and its beauty in God’s plan.  
Jesus, Mary and Joseph,  
graciously hear our prayer. Amen.  
*(Pope Francis, prayer for the Synod on the Family, 25 March 2015)*

When we are faced with sudden, unexpected, and surprising human events to which we can find no logical explanation nor draw any benefit, the heart often reacts by rejection, or even rebellion that can sometimes reach the point of exasperation, and is filled with rage. No one can live life on earth according to the chosen plans and programs. Thus, life becomes an endless struggle, often made of compromises and calculations, as a person seeks, with clenched teeth, to get what seems to be his or her due. In today’s language, the word “hope” has come to mean the ambition to reach, with one’s whole self and the belief of succeeding, the heart’s desires. The following question, then, necessarily arises: Is it really possible that hoping means entering into this whirlwind of uncertainty and, at the same time, continuously struggling for an ideal that must be re-affirmed and conquered every day? Is it worthwhile living one’s life constantly running after something that always seems beyond reach? Before this prevailing logic, which inhabits and dominates the world, the figure of Mary stands out: she is a person who experienced the very same dynamics of human affairs with all their depth, but she positioned herself in a completely different or—to put it better—opposed way. If we look at the history of her life told in the Gospel narratives, we see that Mary too lives events that she could never have imagined. We know that her first words

were: *“How is this possible?”* Popular belief has perhaps exaggeratedly represented an image of Mary as docile and spontaneously accepting God’s plan and the events that life offers her. One forgets that she too has a human heart and that, as a creature, she cannot but wonder, reflect or ask herself about the meaning of her personal itinerary in history. The Gospels never say that Mary has clear, obvious answers to her questions. However, one single thing is said about her several times, expressed here by this sentence: *“His mother kept all these things in her heart”* (Lk 2:51). In the face of unexpected, unimaginable and sometimes undesired events, she shows and teaches everyone the art of keeping everything that happens in the heart. What does that mean? It means that nothing of life’s experiences should be discarded; on the contrary, all must be entirely kept inside, so that the meaning of everything may in time become clear and manifest the greatness of God’s design. Of course, no human being can fully understand life’s events, and being surprised is absolutely normal. On the contrary, rejecting and trying to forget all that life places before us is not human. Here, we do not want to affirm a sort of divine fatalism, according to which everything that we experience is preestablished and becomes comprehensible to man’s limited mind over time. That would imply totally canceling human freedom. The story of each person is, on the contrary, the greatest and most extraordinary affirmation of the freedom of the human creature. In fact, the angel Gabriel asks Mary to be available for the divine plan. She is given total freedom to say “yes” or “no.” The same dynamism is found in the story of Joseph. God never obliges anyone to do something, nor does He manipulate human affairs from above. Consequently, if everything is left to man’s freedom, how does God enter and interact in his life? Pope Francis always invites us to seek light in the Word of God, which *“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). The Word is essentially a travel companion for everyone without exception. There is no critical conjugal and family situation in which the Word of God cannot manifest its closeness and proximity. However, the fundamental question is this: What does God reveal with the light of His Word? Pope Francis does not speak of explaining the meaning of individual human events, as one is mostly tempted to do. He highlights one thing which is, moreover, a certainty repeatedly affirmed in different passages of Scripture: *“the goal of the journey.”* The fundamental question of our times is precisely this: do we live our life knowing and looking at the point of arrival of our pilgrimage in the world? When an archer pulls the arrow to hit the target, the point from which he is shooting and the arrows path are much less important to him than hitting the target. Of course, all these aspects are an integral part of the art of archery, but they are not an essential part. What matters most is hitting the target. Today, for many

people, it does not work like that. They tend to look at the starting point, often degenerating into easy victimization, because they were born in family contexts with origins that they did not chose and do not appreciate. Furthermore, there is a tendency to care more about what one is building in life, at every single step, without ever asking or really being interested in where one will end up. People rarely live by looking at the aim of their life. It seems absurd, but this is the most concrete and common reality. Only the divine Word can offer an authoritative light regarding the goal of human existence, and it is by starting from this one and only final point that all the human events of life acquire a genuine taste and flavor. Consequently, hope implies something much bigger and deeper: stop worrying about looking at how the different events occur, but see how in every single event the tension towards the true ultimate destiny of man is always present. What then is the true training ground of the culture of hope? The family alone is the original and primordial place where all things turn into daily bread, starting from the fundamental relationship of the spouses. In this regard, Pope Francis offers couples a very concrete suggestion: *“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 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; he alone can be the ultimate center of their life”* (AL 320). The spouse is not and should never be considered the ultimate joy of one’s existence; but he or she only represents the path, which is certainly fundamental, leading to this fullness of life: how much grace, how much peace and joy would couples receive if they lived their marital relationship according to this rather concrete perspective. Looking for the joy of one’s life in the spouse is a lie and, at the same time, the greatest danger for a married couple. The person to whom one gets married is not the whole of life but rather the main way leading to the Totality to which we are always called. Only by living with this perspective can hope also be affirmed in situations where the word might seem inopportune and insignificant, especially when *“family life is challenged by the death of a loved one”* (AL 253). Above all in this context, *“we cannot fail to offer the light of faith as a support to families going through this experience. To turn our backs on a grieving family would show a lack of mercy, mean the loss of a pastoral opportunity, and close the door to other efforts at evangelization”* (AL 253). How, then, can hope be announced in such dramatic situations? Of course, the family member *“can no longer be physically present to us, yet for all death’s power, ‘love is strong as death’ (Song 8:6). Love involves an intuition that can enable us to hear without sounds and to see the unseen. This does not mean imagining our loved ones as they were, but being able to accept them changed as they now are. The risen Jesus, when his friend Mary tried to embrace him, told her not to hold on to him (cf. Jn 20:17), in order to lead her to a different kind of*

*encounter*” (AL 255). Death is not the end nor the downfall of human life, as it is so often perceived by today’s world. If, on the one hand, it recalls man’s limit, on the other, it projects our gaze beyond it. Indeed, *“if we accept death, we can prepare ourselves for it. The way is to grow in our love for those who walk at our side, until that day when ‘death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more’ (Rev 21:4). We will thus prepare ourselves to meet once more our loved ones who have died. Just as Jesus ‘gave back to his mother’ (cf. Lk 7:15) her son who had died, so it will be with us. Let us not waste energy by dwelling on the distant past. The better we live on this earth, the greater the happiness we will be able to share with our loved ones in heaven. The more we are able to mature and develop in this world, the more gifts will we be able to bring to the heavenly banquet*” (AL 258). There is no dichotomy between life on earth and the afterlife. It is foolish to think that one can earn the afterlife by despising earthly life; likewise, it is absurd to attempt to exorcise death and value the present life alone, because of the uncertainty of what will come later (this is the most common trend today). Both lifestyles distort the deep meaning of life. On the contrary, it is necessary to strongly proclaim that the most human existence lived in today’s world is already holy and blessed by God and must never be despised; yet, it is not the whole of our existence, but the starter of the heavenly eternal banquet often mentioned in the Sacred Scriptures. This means that this foretaste of joy that life on earth offers must be lived fully and deeply, precisely because it will adequately prepare us for what is eternal. The Church’s gaze must then turn tenderly to all those families wounded by the death of their loved one. *“I can understand the anguish felt by those who have lost a much-loved person, a spouse with whom they have shared so much. Jesus himself was deeply moved and began to weep at the death of a friend (cf. Jn 11:33, 35). And how can we even begin to understand the grief of parents who have lost a child? ‘It is as if time stops altogether: a chasm opens to engulf both past and future,’ and ‘at times we even go so far as to lay the blame on God. How many people – I can understand them – get angry with God.’ ‘Losing one’s spouse is particularly difficult... From the moment of enduring a loss, some display an ability to concentrate their energies in a greater dedication to their children and grandchildren, finding in this experience of love a renewed sense of mission in raising their children.... Those who do not have relatives to spend time with and to receive affection from, should be aided by the Christian community with particular attention and availability, especially if they are poor’”* (AL 254). The Church is called to proclaim, strongly and convincingly, to them that joy has not been taken from them or stolen because *“all of us are called to keep striving towards something greater than ourselves and our families, and every family must feel this constant impulse”* (AL 325). It is no coincidence, then, that Pope Francis ends the *Amoris Laetitia* with these words to signify that *“the joy of love experienced by families”* (AL 1)—these are the very first words of this exhortation—

calls us to the promise of a great joy that will last forever: “*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). This is the true Christian hope that the Church is called to make into a culture in today’s world: all of this is experienced, realized, and manifested above all in the family, in all those fundamental relationships where the fundamental experience of love prepares us for the eternal Love of Christ, the Bridegroom, with whom we will all come together in the communion of saints.

### **In the family**

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

1. In our families, the word “hope” often expresses the fulfillment of one’s desires. Is it totally wrong to take it in this sense in the light of the Christian faith?
2. The family is the primordial and original place of hope. What does this statement mean? And what needs to be done so that this can concretely be realized?

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

1. There is no family that does not go through the drama of the death of a loved one. How can we concretely announce the true and profound sense of Christian hope in such family contexts?
2. How can a parent who has prematurely lost a child or a person who has suddenly lost his or her spouse become a bearer of Christian hope?

### **In church**

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

1. The word “hope” is often used to mean something uncertain, difficult or even impossible to reach. This, clearly, is not the case of Christian hope. Why does this gap difference of meaning often predominate in the minds and hearts of Christians? What is the Church called to do in order to proclaim true Christian hope?
2. Today, in the Church’s evangelization, the question of eternity is rarely touched, and speaking about the afterlife has almost become a taboo. Why is this happening? What was missing? What should be done?

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

1. The big problem is not just talking about hope but living hope. How can a Christian community concretely live hope in its different pastoral activities?

2. The presence of a widow or widower or a parent who has lost a child prematurely could be essential for the growth and maturity of couples who are preparing to consecrate their lives in the Sacrament of Marriage. How could all this be integrated into the ordinary pastoral care of our Christian communities?