

Panel discussion: *Newness of Christian life experienced in marriage: fruitful love!*

FRANÇOIS-XAVIER and YVONNE SOLANGE (Rwanda)

We have been asked to share with you something about the fruitfulness of love in our experience of married life.

In our language we say “*Urukundo ruribyara*”, which means that love engenders itself. Love engenders love and has a multiplying effect through openness towards one’s spouse, receptiveness to life by welcoming children, to the world by evangelising, all with an open heart...

We have become aware that the love we have for each other is a talent that we should cherish. It is meant to produce fruit and not to be buried in the ground. It is a lamp that should not be hidden under a bushel but that should be placed on a lamp stand in order to give light to others so that they may give thanks to God who is the source of that light.

1. In the first place, matrimonial love enhances the married couple. We learn to accept each other as we are, to allow ourselves to be loved, and to allow the hurts of our childhood to be healed. For example, Yvonne-Solange was cured of a complex that made her feel that she was ugly.

When I was six years of age, a family friend called me an ugly little girl. Those words remained engraved on my heart for a long time. I was convinced that I was ugly and that nobody would like me. When I was twenty, I met François Xavier. He was handsome and respectful, and I changed completely. When I was with him, I discovered that I had to be beautiful because I was created in the image of God.

We can each be ourselves, bloom, develop our ability to love, and also learn to show love. For my part, I discovered that my way of showing love to my spouse was through acts of service, while my wife had the need for quality time, words of affirmation, gifts and also touching, what the American author Gary Chapman called the love languages. My wife knows how to use almost all of these languages. I had to learn to hold her hand, to give her a gift, to say some words of affirmation... So, we grew in love...

When there are misunderstandings, arguments and marriage difficulties, it is hard.

At certain times of difficulty in our marriage, each of us said: “we won’t be able to come out of it this time”. However, we knew that God was with us through the sacrament of matrimony, so we asked him to give us the strength to talk to each other, to tell the other what had hurt us, to share our feelings, and to forgive and ask for forgiveness. Every time that we had a crisis and forgave and made up, our love took on new momentum, and became stronger and brighter. It is like gold that has been tested by fire. It is a paradox. The forgiveness that comes from God allows everything to be renewed.

2. Love that grows and allows us to grow in freedom, is the cradle for new lives. There was a campaign in our country that encouraged people to have as many children as they were able to support, and that is a good policy. We said that the main criterion for deciding to have a child should be love. Communion between spouses comes before the material aspects. We come from a continent and a country that has a sense of life. This is one of our greatest cultural treasures. People greet each other by saying “*Gira abana*”, meaning, “may you have children!”

Traditionally, to have children is to have hands. It was the way to survive. Those who were childless were buried in charcoal, as if to say that the person was finished and would never again be spoken about.

We are pointing out this aspect because, in an environment like this, although children are desired so much, it is not for the children themselves but for family honour, for the riches that would come through that child, and also to prove that the man is capable of assuring the continuity of their lineage.

Fortunately, times have changed and people have evolved towards adhering to the teachings of the Church. The treasures already existing in African culture, like the importance attached to family, have been supported by the Gospel in this way. Fecundity is a gift, a talent that has been entrusted to us. In marriage, therefore, we accept the mission to have children and to raise them. We do not find it to be something that is merely automatic, but that children are a gift from God. Rwandans understand this well when they say: "*Habyarimana*", it is God who creates; "*Harerimana*", it is God who educates; "*Hatangimana*", it is God who gives; "*Hagenimana*", it is God who provides, who plans, etc. This is an attitude of trust and surrender to God that we should maintain as we carry out a mission in which we collaborate with God in the task of the continuity of creation.

To transmit life is to transmit that which we have received. It is to pass on something for which we are channels and that continues beyond us. We are husband and wife, and then we are also parents. As father and mother, we become aware that we are participating in the mission of the Father from whom comes all fatherhood and motherhood. It is a great responsibility.

We are conscious of the fact that our children are first of all God's children. God allows them to come through us who are, as the poet said, bows, and our children are arrows. God is the archer. The bow and arrows belong to the archer who knows where to direct the arrows. It is God who knows the target. Of course, God revealed it to us through Jesus Christ. The target is God himself. It is eternal life. The role of the bow (the parents), is to be docile in the hands of the archer so that he can carry out his plan for the arrows (the children)...

This allows us to humbly carry out our mission in trust, especially when some children go through difficult times.

It is not enough to bring children into the world. We have to educate them. This is a way of irrigating them so that they will grow in stature, wisdom and grace, just like Jesus Christ was raised within the Holy Family of Nazareth. In our country we say "*Uburere buruta ubuvuke*", upbringing is more important than birth. You could be born into a powerful and rich family, but if you receive no education, then you are nothing.

We educate their conscience, help them to recognise evil so that they can avoid it and goodness so that they can practise it, to live in truth and avoid falsehood, and to give service.

In our country we have domestic helpers, especially in the towns. This is not a luxury, but a way of sharing our income. The helpers are usually people who have not had schooling and who try to escape poverty by working in family homes (housekeeping, cooking, washing, babysitting, etc.). They are of great help in our homes that do not have washing machines or cookers. The danger exists, however, that our children grow up without ever lending a hand. They say that washing and even clearing the table is the work of servants.

We are aware that this spoils children, so we try to give our children some chores to do, suitable to their ability and age. They can clear the table, get the shoes ready, make and serve the tea, go to the shops for some small errands, go and help to draw water when there is a breakdown in the flow of water to the house, etc. Through these acts of service, they are also useful to the family, and they learn to adapt to all kinds of life situations. They learn to be humble and not to look down on simple people who have not studied and are without means.

They learn respect for others and their belongings. Respect for others is shown through respect

for their person by trying not to hurt or criticise them. When a child is about to talk about someone, the father asks if they are going to say something good or bad. The child stops to think, and then will speak only if it is something good, and will not continue if it is not.

Respect for others is also not to make noise when people are sleeping or are concentrating on their work.

To respect people's belongings means that we do not take anything without permission.

On the one hand, we have to encourage children to lend things. This helps them to be more openhearted. We must also teach them not to take what does not belong to them without the permission of the owner. They will then learn to be content with what they have and to take care of their things.

Bearing grudges and forgiveness: People can hurt others in the family through words, actions and omission. When that happens, they should learn to recognise their fault and the suffering it has caused the other, help them to be sorry for it and to ask forgiveness. The person who was hurt should learn to respond by forgiving. We should show children that bearing grudges destroys a person. In all of this, children need to see that we are true to this in our behaviour and way of life (double message). Our youngest child, Michaël, scolds us when we raise our voices. He tells us that it is not good to get angry. He reminds us of what we ask of him, and that we should be first to put it into practice by giving good example and not giving counter-testimony.

We take time to listen to them telling us about their struggles and their questions about the prevailing culture. One question is about the campaign promoting the use of condoms. One day, two of our children, aged 13 and 16, came home with packets of condoms which the police had given them when they visited the school to give voluntary tests for HIV/AIDS. When we saw these by chance in their satchels, we asked them why they had taken them. They said that it was because the others had taken them. We asked them what they would say of a person who had a pen. They replied that the person would use it to write with. The person with a hoe would use it to cultivate the land. Those with condoms are going to fornicate. We asked them if they intended to experiment with these. They said no. We point out here that our children are in a group called Stars of Jesus and Mary and they make a promise of chastity. Together with them, we decided to burn the condoms. Some days later, in a government newspaper, we saw an article prohibiting a certain kind of condom because they were past their use-by date. By the photograph we could see that it was the same kind that our children had brought home. We thanked God for protecting our children.

We also take care of the spiritual training of our children. We bring a child into the world, a person created in the image and likeness of God. God our Father calls us all together in baptism as brothers and sisters.

Our family is a domestic Church

Through the sacrament of matrimony, God makes a promise with the couple and stays with the family to help them accomplish the immense tasks they are given in this world.

This means that the family is first of all God's home, and those who are born into it should find God there.

The home is the first school of faith. Here they learn that God is there in the three Persons, that they can speak to God through prayer, that they listen together to God's word in the Bible, and get to know God's will in order to carry it out. In this way they are happy knowing that God takes care of us in all our difficulties.

In April 1994, we were expecting our first child, so he lived through the genocide tragedy while in his mother's womb. We had escaped and were in exile in Belgium. When the time for the birth was approaching, we heard about the death of our parents in dreadful detail, and we were very distressed. We decided to praise the Lord through song and dance because we knew that praise

would break through the chains that tied us.

Prayer comforted us with the words in 1 Cor 15: "O death, where is thy victory?...".

We felt that the experience we were having must have touched our child. In faith, we placed our hands on my stomach and prayed that God might free him from this hurt. The child began to move in every direction as a sign that our prayer had been heard. Our joy exploded like a volcano!

Our children's minds were imbued by the word of God through family prayer.

One day they came to us crying, "Papa, Mama, Jesus is coming!" There were children begging outside, and our children knew that Jesus was in the poor. We welcomed them with the honours due to a king.

Every evening we have family prayer, and each member takes a turn at preparing it. We are often astonished by our children's prayers. They pray for intentions that are quite surprising for children of their age. They are very aware of the sufferings of others. The prayer always concludes with an exchange of the sign of peace and a blessing. It is also an opportunity to forgive each other.

Family prayer completes the prayer of the individual and that of the couple.

Our experience is that if we have not been faithful to personal prayer, our prayer as a couple and as a family with parents and children suffers. We now understand what Jesus meant when he said "without me you can do nothing". Our fruitfulness can only come from God.

The fact that we call God "Our Father", opens the way to greater fellowship beyond that of regions, ethnic groups and continents. It even reaches Heaven (saints, including some family saints).

It helps us to accept a death in the family when we feel that the deceased are in God's hands.

It is a school of fellowship that is based on God. It is the universality of salvation.

It is here that we learn from a young age about God's plan of salvation for humanity. Jesus came to deliver us from sin and death.

Children learn much about the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus. The rhythm of the liturgical year is a treasure that helps us to enter into these mysteries together.

Children become receptive to the sacraments through participation at Mass.

Even before their First Communion, they see that there is something special being received by the older ones. They are curious to know more about it, and this is the moment to explain the real presence to them that will bring them to adoration of the Blessed Sacrament exposed or in the tabernacle.

It will bring them to reconciliation through the sacrament of confession. We remember one Christmas when we remarked that we all need to go to confession. It was 24 December in the afternoon. We made an appointment with a priest and we all, parents and children, took our turn. We were very happy and thanked the priest. He said that he should thank us because we had helped him to celebrate Christmas well.

Finally, it is in families that future priests are prepared, and future consecrated people and future families that are consecrated to evangelisation. It takes place in ordinary life where there are laity who are in the world without being of the world, witnesses to God in daily life. We are aware that the family is the first school for social life, and the first school for family life. Preparation for marriage begins at home.

3. Love is fruitful when it welcomes children who have lost their parents. In our country, each family has taken in one or several orphans or unaccompanied children. They can find new hope and believe in the future. They discover love that can help them to give and be open to others, because we cannot give what we have not received. Most of us have been supported in our studies by uncles and aunts. The extended family is a great support for a child.

4. Love is fruitful when it welcomes the poor. Many poor people come to our home. As we said before, it is through them that we see Jesus coming to visit. We help one another to be vigilant because we can easily start to complain about certain people coming. The disfigured face of Jesus that does not attract us can come to us and we pass it by. There is an expression in our language that shows the connection between compassion and fruitfulness. When you have done something good for someone, they will say to you: “*Urambyaye*”. This means that you give me life, “*Warambyaye*”, you have given me life. There are poor people who do not necessarily come to ask for material goods. They come to ask for advice. They are couples and young people, and it is really marvellous to see how they improve and carry on with life. We can understand how this does not come from us, but from the One who faithfully uses us.

5. We discover that evangelisation, life witness and explicit proclamation of the good news of love, marriage and family are a source of life for families, for young people and for society in general. In our country, where the social fabric has deteriorated because of various circumstances, marriage has suffered very much. There are more divorces than before. Young people say: “If it’s like that, it is not worth getting married”, or “we need to try out marriage and see how it goes”. When they see our love flourish, and how we witness to love and the beauty of marriage, they have more confidence in life. They realise that it is still possible to love. We do not hide our struggles, but we show them how we overcome everything with Jesus Christ every day, and they want to follow the same path. As for those who choose the priesthood and consecrated life, we know that it is not because they are disappointed by what they see in marriage. It is not an escape, but a call to which they respond.

6. Today’s global culture impairs our outlook towards children. People use the excuse of overpopulation to carry out an aggressive campaign to promote condom use. This brings about a contraceptive mentality that arises and grows in all strata of society. Fecundity is seen less as a gift to be used but more as an illness to be cured. Children are sometimes seen to be a threat to well-being. Some births are regarded as misfortunes and not as blessings.

The policy of prosperity, sustained by a certain theology of prosperity recommended by many Evangelical Churches, makes wealth a goal to be achieved, and family solidarity is seen as a threat from which to be liberated, and generosity diminishes. It is this that deeply threatens the arrival of more children to the world, because the gift of life is a manifestation of generosity.

More and more, we see that our children are being educated by others whom we do not know and with whom we have never spoken. These are the media and publicity posters. The values of chastity and virginity are losing ground. We know that we should take account of these messages and educate ourselves in order to know what to say to our children so as to encourage them, and also the people with whom we are in contact. Our words should conform to the teaching of the Church, and to the word of God which shows us God’s plan for human love, marriage and the family.

We shall conclude with words by Pope John Paul II: “The right and duty of parents to give education is essential, since it is connected with the transmission of human life; it is original and primary with regard to the educational role of others, on account of the uniqueness of the loving relationship between parents and children; and it is irreplaceable and inalienable, and therefore incapable of being entirely delegated to others or usurped by others”.¹

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 36.