

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

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1. The Community

Greetings to everyone. I would like to begin by telling you about the Pope John XXIII Community. In this way I can explain how we experience the joys and difficulties of married life as we live each day of faith in the fruitfulness of love, in the life transmitted to children generated in love, in the discovery of motherhood and fatherhood, and in the upbringing of our children, especially through our sharing with the poor.

Our founder passed away on 2 November 2007. He was Fr. Oreste Benzi, a parish priest who greatly loved the Church. Benedict XVI called him “a tireless apostle of charity”. The Holy Spirit also surprised all of us in the Pope John XXIII Community by choosing a married layperson to take over the leadership role in succession to Fr. Oreste. My wife Tiziana and I have twelve children. Three of these are our natural children and the other nine were regenerated in love. They are blessed children of God with their physical and mental handicaps.

The word of God was like a fire for Fr. Oreste. He always had his bible on the seat of his car in which he spent hours travelling from place to place visiting his communities. The word of the Lord was his point of reference, his firm keystone. He always invited us to read the Bible together with prayer. He said, “try to immerse yourselves in prayer and you will see how everything changes. The gift that you should give your children is the divine life that you have experienced. That is more important than anything else”.

In the People of God, “the weakest members are the most necessary”. A community deserves that name if it is missionary. “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near’. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment” (*Mt 10: 7-8*).

The Holy Spirit guided every aspect of Fr. Oreste’s life. The first family homes were opened in 1973, and now there are about five hundred spread over the five continents. These homes welcome seriously disabled children, physically, mentally and sensory. Here they have a father and mother and do not live in an institution.

We have communities that provide therapy for young drug addicts and help them by bringing them closer to Christ.

There are 13 social cooperatives with 85 outlets, 25 of which employ people with mental disabilities in jobs in laundries, gardening, schools and farms. There is a new kind of economy that employs 1,500 workers, old and young, and that gives dignity to people who are starting afresh after prison sentences, people who live in psychiatric units, or people who have been on the streets subject to prostitution slavery.

Many of our families have gone out on mission to other countries. They are now in thirty countries including Australia, China, Russia, Spain, the Netherlands, Brazil, Venezuela,

Bolivia, India, Bangladesh, Zambia, Kenya and Tanzania. They take in children who have been abandoned, maltreated or orphaned, and children with AIDS, and they share their lives with them as witnesses to Christ in the world.

I give thanks to the Lord when I see these families and the children in their care. One day last year when I was visiting Merida in Venezuela, they brought me to the public hospital where there are seriously handicapped children. Many have been there for over ten years, abandoned by their natural parents. These are the children that God has entrusted to us and who have come to live with our families. They are really a gift to our communities from God.

They have a place in history and must not be regarded simply as recipients of assistance. They are players in the life of the Church. They should no longer be hidden, ghettoised and sidelined, but should be seen as a necessary part of the Body of Christ, the Church, whose weakest members are its most necessary.

The Pope John XXIII Community aims to be an open extended family and a spiritual family for these children who have no family of their own and those who cannot be cared for by their parents because of their physical, mental or relational problems.

We feel that the charism given to us is to be fathers and mothers to those who no longer have their parents, and to be brothers and sisters to those who have no one. We form small communities, and the purpose is to conform our lives to Christ. Jesus always carried out the will of the Father by becoming poor with the poor, and our communities want to share the lives of the little ones with Jesus.

We identify with the words of the prophet Isaiah: “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (61: 1-2).

This is why we go out to help the young girls on the streets, many of them underage. Many of their companions have already been killed. Over 6,000 have been saved through the efforts of Fr. Oreste, and today around 400 of them live in our communities. We go out to meet the homeless in the train stations and those serving life sentences in prisons. Fr. Oreste used to say that there are poor people out there who will never go in search of our help.

We hear their cry to God, and we feel that God’s mercy has touched us. We want to transmit this mercy in any way that we can. Saint Paul said that Jesus “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (*Phil 2: 6-7*). It is our vocation to be like humble servants, to be the gift that we have received, which is to be parents, and to give it to those people.

Fr. Oreste Benzi loved Jesus Christ passionately. He still had fire within him when he died at the age of 82 in November 2007. He used to say that Christ is not a philosophy or an ideology. Jesus Christ is a living person with whom we can have a living relationship. It is relationship with Jesus that brings this fire to the world. The Community began in the Italian dioceses and parishes and has spread throughout the world. In the history of the Church a founder’s death is followed by an explosive increase of the charism. Now they are asking us to go to Congo, Chad, Argentina and Papua New Guinea. We are starting up in Lourdes and Fatima.

One of the greatest gifts we have received is recognition as an international association of the faithful by the Pontifical Council for the Laity, a department of the Holy See. This is not a formality for us because it clearly marks our belonging to the universal Church, and that means that we can be present in the local Church anywhere in the world working with the very poor and the marginalised. Fr. Oreste was always happy to be a parish priest, faithful to the bishop. He said that wherever a bishop calls us, that is where we should go and share our lives with the poor in order to be God's holy people.

It is our spirituality to be one great spiritual family. It is made up mostly of married couples with children and also of consecrated people and diocesan priests who live according to this spirituality in order to respond to the universal call to holiness. They all help to build the Kingdom of God and take part in the Church's mission through welcoming and sharing with the very poor.

We have so many young people longing to see Jesus, and they find it in this wonderful way of living their lives together with others, helping to carry another's cross. They are young people on social service who go to our mission territories of Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya, Chile, Bolivia, China and Australia. In Palestine, the young people in the Dove Operation, a non-violent peace group, live in Twany, a Palestinian village of shepherds. They live with the children, accompany them to school, and are with them in order to build bridges of peace with the Israelis. We are also in Colombia and Kosovo.

The Community has around 1,600 members and 400 people discerning this vocation. There are around 2,000 people without families living with us, and 41,000 people who have their meals in our Community soup kitchens. I see all of this sharing on the part of our brothers and sisters in my role of service as Fr. Oreste's successor as general leader, and I give thanks to God because God works such great marvels.

Fr. Oreste used to say that in order to get up from the ground and stand up, we first of all have to get onto our knees. In order to be really with the poor, we have to be really with the Lord. We try to administer God's gifts, including money, by giving back what we do not need. It is possible to live in community with a common kitty and not have anything of your own. You put everything at the disposal of the community and take whatever is needed. It is possible, if you try to live according to the Gospel as administrators and not as owners, to build a new society where there is voluntary giving and a civilisation of love in which each one has something to give for the good of everyone. There is bread for everyone if it is shared, and resources multiply.

We live by means of our work, contributions from the state and from private entities, and especially through abandoning ourselves to providence.

Saint Basil said that: "This bread which you have set aside is the bread of the hungry; this garment you have locked away is the clothing of the naked". Saint John Chrysostom used to say that doctors should cure the poor free of charge and that the rich should have a shelter made available for the poor; only that which is given from our own pockets can gain merit and obtain forgiveness for sins.

We want to cry out to the whole world to tell them that Our Lord is the God of life who loves children from the time of their conception and that abortion is manslaughter. Life still has value as it approaches its sunset and deserves to be nourished. Euthanasia goes against the value of life. We also want to tell them that immigrants have basic rights just like we have.

We shall be judged on our love: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing” (Mt 25: 35-36).

Help us to live this vocation and charism so that we can contribute to making this world a better place, and that we may be receptive to the action of the Holy Spirit.

We always entrust ourselves to Our Lady, our Mother in whom we trust, confident that our hope to conform totally to Jesus’ will may not be disappointed.

2. Newness of Christian life experienced in marriage: fruitful love.

There is a series of conditions, according to our experience and opinion, that can help to give satisfaction in bringing up our children. These are not rules or solutions to problems. They are simply ways that have helped us to feel more satisfied as parents and educators to the children with whom we are blessed to share our lives and relationships. None of us is spared problems and difficulties in life.

Favourable conditions are:

- The quality of our life as a couple
- The quality of our presence
- The real values in life
- Coherent presence
- Awareness of limitations

The quality of our life as a couple

The way parents live as a couple is the air that the children breathe. This is the atmosphere they feel and that often conditions their emotions and behaviour. This is where they feel loved and also where they see and hear how we should love. It makes a difference for a child to see affection between the mother and father or to see that there is simply an arrangement of domestic collaboration. The latter is useful, but the former is vital. Children constantly learn from the way their parents relate. It is the firm basis of their emotions where they learn their social role as sons and daughters. They learn to listen and to express themselves, they become aware of their own relational characteristics, and they learn strategies in the negotiation and mediation of points of view.

They also grow spiritually and they learn to see how God loves and how humanity is frail. They see how God intervenes in history. They see covenant and betrayal, forgiveness and reconciliation.

One of the most important undertakings by parents is to safeguard and nourish their life as a couple. It is a duty towards themselves, their spouse and their children.

We should not only concentrate on active teaching as this is not the full story. For example, we are always told that we should adopt a united front when dealing with our children. We feel that our children can learn a lot from hearing different points of view from their parents. We should not worry if our children see that we do not agree on everything, if we handle it well. We discuss and explain our position, listen attentively to the other’s point of view, modify our stand when the other opinion is more convincing and appropriate, and show coherence with our values even when they are not in our interest. Children know when we are pretending, and they can distinguish between a

decision made by formal accord and one that comes from real communion even when there are different opinions. A formal accord usually gives rise to resentment and retaliation (maybe beneath the surface, but nonetheless real). The effort to be in communion stimulates the capacity for self expression and appreciation for each other, parents and children.

Let us always maintain communion, even when expressed with differing opinions. It is more important than either person's opinion. The first to understand this is the first to be prepared to modify their standpoint.

We are spouses above all, and the greatest need of our children is to have parents who love each other.

The quality of our presence

It is often said that the time spent with our children depends more on quality than on quantity. We feel that the quantity and quality are both relative to WHEN we are present in our children's lives. It does not matter how many hours are spent, what activities are carried out or whether attitudes are permissive or strict. What is most important in the upbringing of children is to have emotional and educational points of reference, and whether we are present when they need us. Children and adolescents need continuity of presence of their parents. Everything is important, the time, the way, the things we decide to do, but what makes a difference is to be present when our children need us. Infants are totally dependent on the care and assistance of an adult who responds to their needs for nutrition and protection. As they grow, their needs are more complex and diverse – relational, emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual. These needs do not often require an instant response as before. They need to be studied and clarified, and need awareness and mediation. The presence of parents or other points of reference gradually becomes more subtle. It is more a case of suggestions than of impositions. They are careful to make observations and to comprehend the complexities rather than to intervene in order to prevent, protect, condition and shield the lives and needs of their children. If we are able to be sufficiently present when our children need us, we can hope to be their choice of point of reference in the future when they are independent.

The real values in life

We live at a time when, socially speaking, there are few shared values. Life is not one of them, nor is the understanding of quality of life. Values like democracy, legality, justice, ethics, solidarity, honesty, truth and religion, are all decided by context and time, or they are overridden by each other, or they are given equal value.

It happens very often that the system of values learned at home is put into question at too young an age by the huge number of other value systems in society presented by friends, school, clubs, sports, etc. We think it would be foolish to neglect our children's need to share and find confirmation of the values learned at home with values found elsewhere. We all need to challenge our "primary" system of values with other value systems.

There is no family, parent or educator, no matter how good they are, who can educate a child alone in one single value system of reference. We need help from others. Some will confirm the values learned at home and others will question them. However, it is only through the interplay of confirmation and plurality of perceptions and meanings,

expressions and choices, that our children can form their value system with awareness and responsibility.

The aspect of this educational responsibility that frightens us most is not so much the outside influences as our own insecurities. We perceive our own frailty in our value system. That is why we have civil society. It is not only to respond to needs, but also to share the values that are at the root of our needs. That is why we have the Christian community, parish, groups and associations to be able to deal with the need we have to share our values and find confirmation from others. To educate our children in the faith, and the values underlying a life of faith, and to do so alone, is a huge undertaking. A community of faith makes it possible. It helps us to face the challenges coming from other value systems. They no longer represent a danger but a resource. They are an opportunity to discuss, explore and to find the reasons for our convictions.

Coherent presence

Of course, if we can depend on a community that confirms and sustains us as we teach our children a certain set of values, choices and ways of behaviour, this does not mean that we are avoiding our responsibility in this respect as parents. Our children will accept whatever they see that we are putting into practice with joy, determination, passion and enthusiasm in our daily lives. Would any of us freely take on a faith, idea, professional choice, relationship or way of life that disheartens us, bores us, embarrasses us and makes us unhappy?

We must think of how to offer our children values, meanings, choices and ways of behaviour that are not simply attractive but that are really worthwhile adopting, and not only as theories, but in practical everyday life.

We all seek all possible happiness in this life. Jesus said: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give ..." (Lk 11: 13).

What are the good things we give to our children? Is it well-being, social standing, culture? We could wonder if we convey to our children the skills of self-sacrifice, contentment, sharing with those with less, resisting imaginary needs, etc. They should know that it is possible to be happy without a mobile phone. They should be rewarded for acts of kindness as if they had achieved the maximum in mathematics. We should be happy when they stand back to make room for another. We should praise and reward them for telling the truth even if it costs us. We should prefer them to fail a university entrance exam rather than see them succeed by cheating. We should not wish to see them exploiting situations to their advantage, even though everyone else may do so.

We also want them to respect traditions and the values we teach. We do not want them to cause trouble to others or embarrassment to us. We want them to go to Mass on Sundays, and not to cohabit, smoke cannabis, drink too much, ask to go on holidays with their boyfriend, etc.

Don Milani used to say that he preferred to see an atheist living a coherent life to a believer living an incoherent life.

We sometimes hear parents complaining about their children and wondering where they have gone wrong and what they should have done better. They should be happy with their lives. If we want something from our lives, our ideals and values, to pass on to our

children, we ourselves have to be sincerely happy with our values, choices and ideals. Happiness means, above all, to be prepared to personally make every effort and to suffer in order to remain faithful to our values and maintain our integrity.

Awareness of limitations

Our children do not know how to deal with words, neither those that flatter and seduce nor those that scold and threaten. They are bright and intelligent, but frail and restless. They are bombarded by publicity and social messages that excite them and delude them into thinking that they have power or even omnipotence that they do not have at all. Sooner or later, reality kicks in with defeat, failure, betrayal, desertion, illness and even death. Young people are under the illusion that they can always be at the top and can have what they want. When this fades away, there is also a fading of their hope in the beauty of being in the world. They frequently feel the need to avoid things and to escape a world that has disillusioned them. They are deluded into thinking the world is perfect, and then they find themselves abandoned in a wretched world.

On the other hand, those who are used to dealing with limitations, their own and those of others, are better prepared to face life. They do not get too excited about pleasant events nor are they excessively dispirited by adversity.

In order to help our children to be aware of their own limitations without depressing them, and to put their talents at the service of others without bragging or abusing, is an educational responsibility that we must undertake with our children from the beginning. The benefits will be seen and felt by experience.

There is no need for words. Witness is given by small daily experiences of adversity, difficulties and trials that life brings us. If we can manage them serenely with an attitude of concentrating on what we can change either in ourselves or in our task, if we can take responsibility for our shortcomings and try to do our best, then our children will grow in awareness of limitations and difficulties that can and must be overcome. They will have self-confidence and the assurance of help from others. They will have the certitude that the world is beautiful even though imperfect, that even the most self-assured person has wounds and defects, but that there is nobody who has only deficiencies and limitations. It is also true that there are limitations that we cannot humanly overcome. There are situations and conditions in which no amount of effort is sufficient in order to avoid failure and suffering. There are farewells, separations, bereavement, obstacles, inconveniences, serious illness, tragedies in families and disasters on the world stage.

We give our children opportunities to experience that there is hope, comfort and solidarity, even in the darkest situations and the most acute or chronic pain.

There are so many people whose body, mind and soul undergo trials, illness, disability and poverty of every kind, but who live with dignity, serenity and joy. There are so many families marked by tragedy who maintain their human dignity and their faith in God. There are so many simple people who promote human values wherever they are, in school, at home, at work, at play, in parishes and in social milieux of every kind. They show what is real, beautiful and just in our dignity as people made in the image of God. If we place disabled children in a class where they are listened to, loved and appreciated by adults, then the other children will become fond of them and will discover many things that no teacher could ever impart: that there is a hierarchy of values, people come first and

things second, being comes first and having second, serenity comes first and beauty second, and communion comes first and self-sufficiency second.

We do not wish to idealise limitations and suffering, and even less to misrepresent them, but we recognise that limitations have an educational role to play, humanly and spiritually. They bring us back to what we really are, marvellous creatures but transient. Christian hope fills our existence with meaning and saves us from a life spent in fear of death. It gives us hope in a life of certainty and marvels for us and for our children.