

PASTORAL LETTER 2021 – 2022
Serving life where life is found
The family

Beloved families,

I address you as I did in my first letter, «*At home in the Church*»: it seems right to me, in this Year of the Family which Pope Francis invites us to celebrate on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of his Exhortation entitled «*Amoris Laetitia*», the «*Joy of Love*».

These are the words that open his writing and deserve to be remembered: «The Joy of Love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church. ... Despite the many signs of crisis in marriage, the desire for the family remains alive, especially among young people, and motivates the Church. As a response to this aspiration, the Christian proclamation concerning the family is truly good news».

The proclamation of the Gospel nourishes the joy of love and family life and this is what we always propose, especially this year: it is the mission of the whole Church, beginning with the families themselves, together with priests, deacons, onto consecrated persons and the whole People of God.

In the most painful days of the pandemic, we recognized and shared a criterion that we do not want to become a slogan: «serve life where life happens». It seems providential to me to be able to indicate it also for this year, aware that in the family life happens in a unique and original way, mysterious and wonderful, humble and grandiose.

The Christian community, largely made up of families, feels the mission of serving the family and the life that happens there, recognizing and nourishing the very life of Jesus, Crucified and Risen, who manifests himself and incarnates in the family community.

THE BIBLICAL ICON

I meditated on what Word could nourish this purpose and I felt that *the Hymn to Charity*, composed by the Apostle Paul, often proclaimed in the celebration of marriage and chosen by Pope Francis as the fundamental text of *Amoris Laetitia*, could represent the most fruitful inspiration to illuminate and nourish our service.

FROM THE FIRST LETTER OF ST PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS (13:1 – 13)

If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal.

And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, (love) is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth.

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails.

If there are prophecies, they will be brought to nothing; if tongues, they will cease; if knowledge, it will be brought to nothing. For we know partially and we prophesy partially, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.

When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things.

At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known.

So, faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

The comments on these words that span the centuries and hearts are incalculable. I would like to share with you some resonances, which I have collected by listening to the masterful lesson given by Fr Patrizio Rota Scalabrini to priests gathered in Assembly.

The hymn to charity represents the culmination of an important pastoral reflection that the Apostle Paul gives to the Christians of the community of Corinth, in ancient Greece, on the gifts of the Holy Spirit. After having highlighted them and having indicated some criteria for recognizing, welcoming and giving them for the good of the whole community, the apostle overwhelms the embankments of thoughtful considerations, to raise before the hearts of Christians the delicate and powerful words of the hymn to charity.

Often, it is preferred to replace the word charity, with the word love, in the name of the deformation that charity has undergone, identifying it in the end with almsgiving. But it is precisely this term that reveals the originality of God's revelation that expands the heart and the wonder of love. Charity, in fact, consists in the love of God himself, which becomes a gift in the person of Jesus and is communicated to us by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Love, which is certainly passion, friendship, intimacy and sharing of life, but also choice and daily virtue, becomes an ever greater and perennial gift, to the extent that it welcomes God's love, charity.

It is a gift that responds to two deep desires. First of all, the desire for stability, eternity, permanence. We want to build something that remains over time, that is not consumed, that overcomes precariousness, uncertainty, inconsistency ... Charity remains forever. Everything passes: what remains is inspired by charity. Charity will never end.

Charity also corresponds to the desire for power: charity can do everything. Everything apologizes, everything believes, everything hopes, everything endures. It is a power that does not crush, but liberates: charity frees love.

We do not find it difficult to glimpse in these words not only the hope of every family, but also the way forward so that hope can take the form of family life. We will be able to serve the life of the family and in the family, if we desire and accept the gift of God who is charity, who is Christ himself: the charity of God.

SOME PASTORAL CRITERIA

I would now like to re-propose to you the criteria that I indicated in last year's Letter, trying to apply them to family life.

1. The Experience That Should Not To Be Wasted: A Huge Heritage

If we have proposed not to waste the painful and supportive moments experienced during the pandemic, all the more we would not want to disperse the wealth of family experiences: while we mourn that and especially those we have lost, we recognize the heritage accumulated in what we have given and received in those months.

The characteristic of this heritage does not consist in the extraordinary events, bright or painful, which mark the life of almost all families. Rather, it is a matter of recognizing the richness of daily life, with the gestures, words, feelings and beliefs that characterize it and are often repeated every day, without us noticing it.

I would like our parishes, far from being alien to this daily dimension of life, to be ever more capable of recognizing this family patrimony and above all of recognizing in it the presence and action of God, of the Crucified and Risen Lord, of his Spirit.

This enlightened and sympathetic gaze nourishes wonder, gratitude, hope, often mixed with suffering, passion, prayer, awareness of the need to give each other a hand, not only in exceptional moments, but in ordinary reality.

2. WE CAN TAKE NOTHING FOR GRANTED

The pandemic has revealed not only our fragility, but also continues to fuel widespread uncertainty and precariousness. If these feelings risk nourishing forms of personal and social depression, of uncontrolled and sometimes violent vitalism, of resentment and anger, as Christians we want to interpret fragility as a propitious occasion to renew the awareness of the meaning of things.

Even in the family we cannot take anything for granted: precisely for this reason we do not want to resign ourselves to fatality or even harass ourselves in the search for obsessive security. Rather, it is a question of fueling the fire of the meaning and value of family life, relationships, hardships and joys.

Everyday life risks becoming exhausting if this fire, which is essentially love, is not guarded and continuously cared for. It is equally true that the daily life of the family is also exposed to sudden changes: these too risk becoming exhausting, if the "fire" is not revived.

I have the impression that having made the family a private matter has greatly weakened it.

A choice that the family can make is to overcome the temptations of closure and withdrawal and seek a wider belonging, cultivating relationships with other families and with the different inhabited worlds: it is a matter of moving from the apartment to community belonging.

The Christian community collects the gift of family life, which makes visible and real the mystery of God's love, of communion with him and with others: at the same time it offers to the life of the family the gifts of the Word, of the Eucharist and of the Sacraments, of a community life in the

name of gratuitousness and charity, which are absolutely capable of nourishing that fire so necessary to be "home".

3. SERVING LIFE WHERE LIFE HAPPENS

Serving life in the family is to make use of one of the criteria by which love is manifested among the people who form it.

It is not just a question of making one's own contribution to the life of all, of organizing responses to the simple or demanding needs of the family, of contributing with one's work, of helping one another: it is a question of doing all this for a good, a satisfaction, a joy, a hope, which is not only ours, but grows in us to the extent that it grows for others.

Serving life in family means enjoying together the joys of each and every one and sharing the efforts and sufferings of each one, at the moment in which it is marked.

Serving life in family is to cultivate gratitude for the service that each one offers, especially when it takes on the traits that are more often and seemingly modest.

In the light of this criterion, I would like to invite you to consider a condition that is becoming more and more widespread: that of old age. It is a precious and at the same time delicate age. The pandemic has inexorably and painfully revealed its fragility, inherent in life itself.

The situation of older people has imposed itself on a society characterized by increasing ageing. I would not dwell on the necessary social measures to be adopted, on the plurality of subjects that in the territory can represent a response to situations that arise in very different ways, but I would like to share the great importance that assume in a family, the care of elderly people and at the same time the richness represented by their presence.

The elderly are not only recipients of attention and care, they are not only a source of economic support and help in responding to the needs of their children, but they are a presence that nourishes the culture and practice of giving.

The Christian community represents a vision, a history, a commitment constituted both by the witness of the elderly and by concern for them. I hope that this story will continue, marked in a special way by the care of relationships and particularly of those between different generations.

Pope Francis insists on the fruitful relationship between young and old, recalling how the care of the roots nourishes dreams and hopes. In a special way, we nourish this sensitivity in the larger communities, so that no one is left alone.

The richness of the ways in which life is served "in" the family multiplies when we adopt the criterion of serving the life "of" the family. We can see some signs in this direction from society and the institutions that represent it.

I wish to express my appreciation for all the organized expressions that promote the social value of the family and in a particular way those that recognize and propose responses to two authentic emergencies: those relating to the birth rate and that of education.

Together with social measures, it is a question of supporting cultural, ethical and spiritual conditions, so that bringing new creatures into the world and raising them towards adult maturity can be recognized as a personal, family and social good.

The contraction of births and the educational emergency are not only the result of a lack of means, but of a fatigued, weakened, withdrawn feeling: it is on feelings that it is necessary to converge, so that they can support the values that make life worthy and beautiful and justify the efforts necessary to transform them into reality.

The spiritual patrimony of the Christian community enriches the social patrimony with the values indispensable to nourish not only hope of life but also the hope of the life. The original gestures of the Christian community (the acceptance of the Word of God, the Eucharist and the Sacraments, fraternity among those who compose it, the acceptance of those who appear, closeness to all), not only nourish the faith, but also nourish its generative power for the life of each, of all, and certainly of families.

In this perspective we can imagine the Christian community as a vital space for communities of families, which can take the most diverse forms.

4. THE CARE OF STYLE

The purpose of serving life requires a coherent style. It is a question of giving priority to the care of family and family relationships. They are relationships that have original characteristics, capable of nourishing a wider sociability.

The characteristic of the family is that of being a community of life and love. Taking care of family relationships means nourishing and witnessing to the recognition of the irreducible value of each person, simply for the fact of being a person.

If this criterion finds in the family the fundamental "place", at the same time it nourishes a social culture that is evidently enriched by it, precisely to make society more human.

The care of relationships takes shape in the recognition of "bonds" not as limits that mortify the person, but as conditions that exalt his freedom and trust.

The fatigue and deterioration of relationships, up to forms of unacceptable abuse and violence, must not empty of meaning and value the demanding relationship, the bond precisely, which represents the true antidote to the rampant and radical loneliness.

Precisely these convictions support the choice to pursue, without letting ourselves be demotivated by failures, the method of dialogue, so necessary for social life, but even more and first for family life.

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5. THE NECESSARY CONVERSION

In last year's Letter, I indicated in the necessary conversion one of the criteria that arose from the experience of the pandemic. The conversion that I propose to the family and to the Christian community is that of recognition.

If we do not constantly recall it and above all we do not practice it, we risk conceiving and judging the life of the parish only on the basis of the responses we register to the proposals and initiatives that the community proposes.

At the same time, if the family itself does not adopt this criterion, it risks conceiving itself only as the fruit of feelings, responsibilities and personal commitments, as if faith is a dimension that is added to family life, a kind of ancient ornament that embellishes the House.

The Christian community must first recognize and indicate the presence of the Risen One and the action of the Spirit in the life of a family and bless the Lord for this gift.

The gaze of the community will illuminate that of the family itself, so that it can see in the infinity of conjugal and family gestures, the presence of the Risen Crucifix and his Spirit.

I think that starting from this gaze, the family will be able to recognize the gift of the Christian community, overcoming the temptations to consider it an institution like any other and to assume instrumental attitudes in the relationship with the parish.

Precisely for this reason, conversion to the criterion of recognition is accompanied by conversion to the criterion of encounter. We have lived and are still living under the banner of the necessary distancing: if this is one of the measures aimed at containing the contagion, it cannot be adopted as the foundation of social, ecclesial and family life that are nourished by encounter.

The family and the Church mutually enrich each other with the experience of personal and community encounter and at the same time with the richness that flows from it for the good of the family itself, the Church and society.

"In particular, we would like to promote that dynamic that starts from the concrete experience of our families, as they are (merits, limitations, potential, fragility), to identify already there the incarnated action of the Spirit and accompany this action through a journey of discernment, elevation and purification in the light of the Word of God, the teaching of the Church and the testimony of the families themselves.

This must lead to the creation or promotion of a <<process>> that fosters awareness of the <<subjectivity>> of families in the life of the Christian community, so as to infuse you with that style of love, originating from God through the sacrament of marriage and widespread in every human and ecclesial relationship" (Zanetti don Eugenio).

There is a third modality of the necessary conversion: that of appreciation and promotion of the subjectivity of the family at the social and ecclesial level. Widespread and radical individualism

marginalizes the family from social, economic and cultural processes, to then resort to them in times of emergency, as it has also happened in this pandemic.

It is the families themselves that must represent themselves as the foundation of social life and they can do so to the extent that they unite with each other. How many family associations have arisen to respond to specific needs: it is necessary that it happens not only for this reason, but for the wider one, represented by the life of a society that cannot be conceived as a sum of individuals, because it will inevitably become a sum of numbers.

The Christian community must favor these forms and recognize the subjectivity of families as a richness for the Christian life itself. The family lives on its own rituality made up of recurring gestures, parties, symbols, signs and habits, speeches and judgments, memories and traditions, as well as concrete life choices and behaviors that express them.

The Christian community can be proactive, capable of suggesting often forgotten gestures, signs and words, which on the one hand nourish family life with meanings inspired by the Gospel and, at the same time, create a profound sharing between community life and family life.

6. PRAYER AND CHARITY

Finally, I cannot forget the relationship between prayer and charity in the family and in the community. In the time of the pandemic, prayer in many families has flourished not from fear, but from a deeper awareness of the gift of mutual love and the faith that nourishes it. Prayer is the bread of love in the family and serene and painful love is the necessary accompaniment so that prayer does not become insignificant and useless for the life of those who form a family.

Precisely the declination of prayer and charity, nourishes a family life not turned in on itself, and therefore exposed to a mortal weakness, but draws a family of physiognomy which, in the relationship with other families, expresses the ability to generate hope for the Christian community, for society, for those who remain alone and are abandoned. The Christian community lives from the gestures of love carried out in families and by families; it is enriched by family prayer and at the same time it shares with families the need for prayer and the beauty of a life marked by charity.

PASTORAL PROPOSALS

I entrust some proposals to the Diocese as a whole, to parishes, ecclesial groups and families so that a style of fraternal, hospitable, proximate community may grow.

The Family Office, rich of skills and availability, is particularly busy in this year dedicated to the family, on the fifth anniversary of the Pope's letter "Amoris laetitia". I invite priests, consecrated persons and lay people to refer directly or through the web to the proposals of the Office, unified by the beautiful image: "Reach your Heart". It will be the same Office that will identify and propose the best initiatives on the occasion of the World Meeting of Families to be held in Rome from 22 to 26 June 2022 and which the Holy Father wishes to be experienced especially at the local level.

The network of diocesan consultants, well tested, solid, and distributed throughout the territory, continue and increase its service, particularly in the field of formation, education and care of marital and generational relationships, with particular attention to the more delicate and suffered.

The Territorial Ecclesial Communities, whether they have privileged the existential lands of the family, or have privileged other areas of life, characterize their activity around this pastoral choice.

At the parish level, together with the many proposals that see collaboration between the community and the family, I propose to renew awareness and support for the many preschools that refer to our parishes, with the awareness that these are precious opportunities for establishing significant relationships, especially with young families and grandparents.

At the family level, awareness of the presence and action of the Lord in everyday life and in the relationships that make up the family should be nurtured, with particular attention to the elderly and people who suffer from their frailty.

Do not miss the rediscovery of simple and shared prayer, sometimes starting from the testimony that is not ostentatious but convinced of individual prayer. I suggest that families do not lack a religious image in their home and above all the text of the Gospel or, even better, of the Bible.

I invite families, with the support of the Christian community, to promote forms of aggregation that represent and strengthen them as subjects of social, economic, cultural and ecclesial life.

CONCLUSIONS

I started my pastoral pilgrimage and I bless the Lord and all the parishes visited, together with their priests, for the richness of the meetings. It will resume in October and I will be happy to be able to meet with the families on the simple occasions I have planned for this journey.

The Italian and universal Churches are accepting the Holy Father's urgent invitation to take on an increasingly synodal face. The word "synod" means walking together. We are waiting for the indications that will come to us to always assume more this physiognomy. Certainly the life of the family becomes an authoritative school, so that the Church becomes more and more a synodal community.

I would like to conclude with a quote which, although not strictly speaking, is poetry in its evocative depth. These are the poignant words that the great poet Eugenio Montale addresses to his wife at the moment of his death. They say the inexhaustible charm of the love relationship of a man and a woman and the generative fruitfulness that this relationship possesses and becomes a family.

"I went down, giving you my arm, at least a million stairs and now that you are not there, there is emptiness on every step. Even so, our long journey was short. Mine still lasts, and I no longer need coincidences, reservations, traps, scorni of those who believe that reality is what you see. I went down a million stairs giving you my arm not because with four eyes perhaps you can see more. I got off with you because I knew that of the two of us, the only true pupils, although so clouded, were yours ».

+ Francis, bishop

(August 26, 2021, Solemnity of Saint Alexander)

THE ICON

The chosen icon is known as the "Trinity of Rublev".

The three "angels" are seated around the table in the house of Abraham and Sarah, which in the background is represented as a welcoming home, as a rock of values, as a generative sprout. It is in God's family welcome at home that Abraham and Sarah have the good news as a gift, the gospel of the birth of a child.

On the occasion of this letter, I like to share a very particular detail. Following the line inside the figures around the table, the shape of a chalice is perceived: it is the horizon of the communion of love of God, of which we are made in the image and likeness. That cup invites us to live life where life happens, even and above all when Life is that of God.

The chalice is not actually there, but it is composed by opening a space, that is, offering each one his own place to sit as children at the table of the house of the family of God. This is the perspective of the hope of our faith and of our love, so is what we profess in the community Eucharistic celebration, so is the style of our families as "house churches".

The threshold of the house is a school and training ground for relationships, because it is the place of encounter and fidelity which, like daily bread, "makes every gesture sacred, even the most obvious, even the heaviest." It is the quality of that love that makes our bonds chalice, that makes our sitting at the table in the family divine, filling our life with God, right where life happens.