

A CHRISTIAN JOURNEY **FOR FAMILIES**



Introduction

This booklet is the fruit of a journey shared by families over a number of years.

The original text was first developed and used with families in Turin, Italy. Over the past four years, it has also been used in the Parish of St Swithun Wells during our Family Get2Gethers. At each meeting, different parts of the text and the accompanying questions provided an opportunity for dialogue and mutual encouragement among families.

The present edition is the result of that shared experience. It has been revised and adapted in the light of our pastoral journey, while remaining faithful to the spirit of the original proposal.

This booklet is intended to accompany families over time. Each section offers points for reflection, followed by questions that encourage sincere dialogue between husband and wife. The three parts of the booklet focus on the love of God, love in the family, and love for the community and the world. The purpose is not to provide ready-made answers, but to help families to grow in the grace of their vocation.

Fr Raffaele Cossa
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First Part

THE LOVE OF GOD

The family that prays together,
stays together.

- Mother Teresa

COMMON PRAYER

It is helpful within the family to establish a simple rule of common prayer, which encourages a constant dialogue with God.

Every living organism needs rules, repetition and rhythm. Human existence is marked by the beating of the heart and by breathing, even during sleep. There are also many other rhythms. Of all of them, the most important is the rhythm of prayer, the breath of the soul.

Establishing a simple daily rule of prayer is vital for spouses. Without this constant commitment our relationship with God becomes an abstract idea and we lose the awareness of being children who are loved and wanted by Him.

It may be helpful to set aside a brief moment of recollection in the morning (for example, praying together the Our Father, or praying the Angelus before breakfast or before leaving the house) and a slightly longer one in the evening (for example, praying a decade of the Rosary, reading a passage from the Gospel, making a silent examination of conscience, praying the Act of Contrition, the Angel of God, the Eternal Rest, the Divine Mercy Chaplet, and prayers to Our Lady and the Saints). The beauty of praying together can also be rediscovered before meals, which, whenever possible, should be shared as a family and at regular times. The rhythm of family prayer can also follow the liturgical year. Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter and the feasts of the saints offer simple opportunities to bring the mysteries of faith into the life of the home.

It is important that children take part in these moments of prayer. Beginning the day by entrusting themselves to God, and ending it in silence and prayer, also helps them to be at peace.

Questions

1. What is your experience of family prayer? How does it help you?
2. What is your prayer routine?
3. How do you encourage your children to pray?

SILENCE AND PERSONAL PRAYER

Each spouse should establish a personal rule of prayer that helps and sustains him or her throughout the day.

A rule of prayer introduces a dialogue with God into daily life which, over time, embraces every moment of the day. It is good to dedicate a certain amount of time to silence each day—for example, fifteen minutes—in order to gain a healthy detachment from daily occupations and to recollect oneself in the presence of God.

Silence is a necessary condition for listening to the voice of the Lord, who speaks through Scripture, the teaching of the Church, the events of daily life and inner inspirations.

The fundamental dimensions of silence are prayer, reading, and meditation. Each person will try to live them at the times and in the ways that suit them best.

PRAYER

Prayer is asking. The more aware we are of our weakness, the more we ask God for help, experiencing His support, light and strength in our hearts. Prayer is also thanksgiving, praise and the offering of ourselves to God for the salvation of all.

Each person should choose the form of prayer that is most helpful: the Liturgy of the Hours, the Holy Rosary, or personal dialogue with Jesus.

The Psalms, in particular, are a helpful way to live every moment of life, even the most painful and difficult, in relationship with God.

The Rosary has the advantage that it can be prayed anywhere and at any time.

Short prayers also make it possible to pray throughout the day, even while working. A good suggestion is to choose one short prayer and repeat it often, so that, over time, it flows spontaneously from the heart, making every moment a more conscious prayer and offering (for example: *Veni Sancte Spiritus, veni per Mariam*; or *Lord, have mercy on me*; or *Come Holy Spirit*; or *Jesus, I trust in You*; or *Stay with me, Lord*).

READING

God also speaks to us through what we read, especially through the Bible, the writings of the Church Fathers, the lives of the saints, spiritual reading, and the teachings of the Popes and the pastors of the Church. Since we are often distracted during meditation, it is a great help to have a written text before us. It does not matter how much we read; what matters is that we reflect on the passages that strike us most, perhaps noting down a few sentences so that they gradually take root in our hearts. We should ask the Holy Spirit for the grace to put into practice what we have understood. God always gives us the strength we need to take the steps He asks of us.

Let us therefore reflect on what we understand and on what touches us in the text we are reading, humbly accepting that the rest will be revealed in due time, when God wills it to be.

MEDITATION

Meditation means reflecting on the experiences of our lives in order to distinguish what is essential from what is not, to give thanks to God for His gifts, and to ask for the light needed to discern good from evil.

It also means examining ourselves to understand whether our thoughts, words and actions are in accordance with God's will or have been corrupted by our own weakness.

Meditation also means listening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and asking ourselves how we can put the teachings of Jesus and the saints into practice.

In prayer and meditation we can truly experience the grace of contemplation, the joy and peace of knowing God. Many people find it helpful to write during meditation. Especially at the beginning, it is good to keep one's notes short and simple.

Questions

1. How do you pray?
2. Which spiritual readings have helped you most? Why?
3. Do you reflect on your experiences in the light of God? What conclusions have you come to?

THE SACRAMENTS

The sacraments of the Eucharist and Confession are privileged means of nourishing the grace of marriage.

The holiness of marriage is not measured by the amount of time spouses spend together, but by the decision, renewed each morning, to live out the vows they made on their wedding day (promises to love one another faithfully, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, all the days of their lives). The sacraments help spouses to begin again with a positive attitude and deep serenity.

Faithful and lasting love is a grace, a gift from God, who alone is perfectly faithful. For this reason, frequent reception of the Eucharist and regular celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation become, over time, the true support of married life, filling even the most difficult moments with joy.

THE HOME AS A PHYSICAL PLACE OF MEMORY

Spouses should ask themselves what kind of life they want to live in their home, and how the arrangement and furnishing of their home can help them to achieve it.

We all love beauty, which gives us a foretaste of the world to come. That is why it is important to care for the beauty and order of our homes, while also teaching our children to take responsibility for them.

Furniture and images (paintings, icons, crucifixes and decorative objects) are important both for us and for our children, because we all learn a great deal from what we see.

A beautiful image of Christ, Our Lady or a favourite saint, a crucifix displayed with dignity, or a Bible placed in a visible position can gently remind the whole family of God's presence throughout the day.

It is important to choose a place in the home where a beautiful sacred image can be displayed, before which the family can gather for prayer.

The Church also encourages us to have our home blessed.

Wherever possible, each member of the family should have his or her own personal space, however small. At the same time, we should ensure that bedrooms and other rooms do not become places where we or our children isolate ourselves, especially given the intrusiveness of modern technology.

The way the different rooms in the home are organised can help to teach children modesty and respect for others.

Since the family is the most important community to which we belong, we should organise our home in such a way that it encourages times when the whole family can be together, sharing meals, experiences, joys and struggles. For this reason, we should give careful thought to where we place the television and other screens.

Today many people work from home. This is a positive development because it allows us to spend more time with our families. However, it is important to maintain a clear distinction between the working area and the family living space.

Our home can also become a place that is open to the wider community and to friends. Welcoming other people into our home can enrich family life. Whenever possible, it is good for the home to have a room or space suitable for receiving guests and friends.

Questions

1. What role do the sacraments play in your family?
2. How do you make your home a place that nurtures your relationship with God and with others?
3. How could changes to the layout of your home improve family life?

THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Extracts from the pastoral letter “Let your speech always be gracious”
by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

INTRODUCTION

Twenty years ago, few of us would have even heard the term “social media.” Now it permeates almost every aspect of our lives.

On one hand, we could say that social media is simply one more way we have developed to communicate with others. Like every mode of communication, it exists to serve a fundamental human good: the building of bridges among people by the sharing of information. As Pope Benedict XVI observed, this desire to connect with others—whatever the mode—is a beautiful thing, “When we find ourselves drawn towards other people, when we want to know more about them and make ourselves known to them, we are responding to God’s call—a call that is imprinted in our nature as beings created in the image and likeness of God, the God of communication and communion.”

On the other hand, social media is unique in terms of its speed and its reach. Unlike at any other time in human history, massive numbers of people are now able to communicate almost instantaneously. Although social media’s speed and reach exponentially increase the potential good it can do, they also increase the potential harm it can do.

Over the past two decades, the Popes have reflected on both the promise and the challenge of social media in their annual World Communications Day messages. The Popes have encouraged Catholic Christians to engage social media boldly, embracing new platforms to foster and sustain meaningful relationships and even to share faith with others. At the same time, they have warned against naivety. As Pope Francis noted, “Digital relationships, which do not demand the slow and gradual cultivation of friendships, stable interaction or the building of a consensus that matures over time, have the appearance of sociability. Yet they do not really build community.” Social media can give the illusion of creating bridges between people when it is in fact tearing apart our common life.

COMMITMENTS WE CAN MAKE TOGETHER

The Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace invites all who use social media to make the following commitments as a way to witness to core Christian values and help build a healthy online environment that serves the common good. We commit to:

1. CHECK FOR ACCURACY

A commitment to truth is central to Christian life. The great Doctor of the Church Saint Thomas Aquinas describes truth as having a picture of things in your mind that is aligned with how they are in reality. While reality is vast, and we will never have a complete picture of it in our minds, as Christians we always commit to trying to make sure that we align what is in our minds, as best as we are able, with what is real. This is not an easy commitment to live out on social media.

One of the most dangerous dynamics in social media today is the proliferation of misinformation, disinformation, and “fake news.” Pope Francis noted, “We need to unmask what could be called the ‘snake-tactics’ used by those who disguise themselves in order to strike at any time and place.”

2. SEEK GREATER PERSPECTIVE

The Christian commitment to truth implies not only that we pursue what is real, but also that we look at the vastness of reality from a wealth of angles. The danger of “fake news” on social media exists alongside the danger of echo chambers in which we read only from a narrow set of sources and engage with a narrow set of like-minded voices that reconfirm what we already believe rather than broadening our understanding of reality.

3. VALUE HUMAN DIGNITY

Remembering the personhood of those with whom we interact on social media can be difficult. The fact that on most platforms we see only a small headshot of the person on the screen—if that—perhaps inclines us to treat persons as if they were only heads, in essence only a sum of their thoughts and ideas. It is easy to forget that behind those thoughts and ideas are real people who, just like us, have bad days and good days, experience a

wide range of emotions, make mistakes, and lead complicated lives. Even when we disagree with what others post and when we understand their views to be misguided, we must maintain a commitment to treat them with human dignity.

4. PRIVILEGE "IRL" (IN REAL LIFE) ENCOUNTERS

Thus far, we have considered what it looks like to show up as a Christian online, but we must also be attentive to the impact of our online time on the rest of our lives, especially our relationships with those we meet IRL (in real life). In 2011, Pope Benedict XVI observed the amount of time spent on social media and wondered, "Does the danger exist that we may be less present to those whom we encounter in our everyday life? Is there a risk of being more distracted because our attention is fragmented and absorbed in a world 'other' than the one in which we live?" More than a decade later, we can answer in the affirmative. Yes, there is a danger, and the risks are now well documented. In fact, the behaviour of paying more attention to one's phone than to people has a name—phubbing (a contraction of the term "phone snubbing")—and it has been shown to decrease enjoyment of face-to-face interactions in the moment while increasing anxiety. Over a long period of time, phubbing leads to more shallow interactions in which people do not develop the kinds of deep and lasting relationships that sustain and mature us as human beings.

We must remember that the God we have come to know as Christians is not one who was content with connecting with us from afar; instead, God chose to take on our human flesh to eat with us, pray with us, talk with us, lay hands on us, even die our death. Social media can be a powerful way of making new connections and nurturing old ones, but it can never be an end in itself. It should enrich, not diminish, face-to-face encounters. As Pope Francis reminded us, social media is intended to complement, not replace, "an encounter in the flesh that comes alive through the body, heart, eyes, gaze, breath of the other. If social media is used as an extension or expectation of such an encounter, then it ... remains a resource for communion. If a family uses social media to be more connected and then meets around a table and look into each other's eyes, then it is a resource. If a Church community coordinates its activity through social media and then celebrates the Eucharist together, then it is a resource." The implication is that if social media does not lead to more profound physical presence with one another in the larger picture, then it is no

longer a helpful resource for the Christian life. We need to prioritise being present to those with whom we share a physical environment.

5. TEND TO OUR TIME SPENT ONLINE

Over a decade ago, Benedict XVI noted that “If the desire for virtual connectedness becomes obsessive, it may in fact function to isolate individuals from real social interaction while also disrupting the patterns of rest, silence and reflection that are necessary for healthy human development.” We share this worry. We are concerned that time spent online will not only negatively impact relationships with close family and friends, but also cut into the time we spend in prayer, exercise, civic activity, nature, sleep, and the other goods of life.

A growing number of social media users report experiencing addiction-like behaviours: a desire to compulsively check their accounts; mood changes if they are not on social media; relapse after they’ve tried to step away. Throughout scripture, we see God’s desire for human freedom from every form of slavery. We can be certain that God does not want us to feel chained to our devices. We support the practice of taking a “Technology Sabbath”—a full day without screen time—each week, and we encourage users to seek the help of others if they are engaging with social media in a way that is detrimental to their own well-being.

Questions

1. How does technology affect our children and families?
2. Is technology helping to build community and healthy relationships?
3. How can we find a healthy balance in our use of technology, the internet and social media?
4. How does technology affect the mental health of our children?

LOVE IN THE FAMILY

The most important thing in life
is not to do something
but to be born and
to be loved.

- Chiara Corbella Petrillo

CONJUGAL LOVE

Spouses are always on a journey, seeking to make their home a place of peace, welcome, and love both received and given.

Within family life, the first person we are called to love is our spouse. It is in our relationship with our spouse that we experience the concrete love of God, a love that is free, full, faithful and fruitful. The Lord has entrusted us to one another so that we may journey together towards happiness, which coincides with holiness.

As Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote, "Love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking outward together in the same direction."

Within the order of family life, one's spouse comes before the children. To say this does not diminish the importance of the children, because nothing makes children happier than living with a father and mother who love one another and walk together towards God. Parents who lead a rich and fulfilling life, characterised by a healthy independence from their children, naturally radiate a beauty capable of attracting and reassuring even the youngest.

AFFECTIVITY - OUR EMOTIONAL LIFE

Spouses should support one another, taking into account the differences between men and women, and respecting each other's sensitivity and individuality.

Through their mutual love, spouses reflect the life of the Trinity, in which the joy of giving and receiving is one and the same. We never stop growing in love: we never fully know the person beside us, not least because our needs change at different stages of life. Love has no limits or boundaries.

Love is expressed not only through great sacrifices, but also through the countless small gestures and activities of everyday life: a warm smile, an affectionate touch, a loving glance, sharing inner experiences and emotions, listening attentively, talking, consoling, encouraging, forgiving, sharing a meal together, watching a favourite show together, working

side by side on a project, having fun and laughing together, playing together, sharing housework and childcare, etc.

These simple acts and activities gradually build a relationship founded on trust and respect, and communicate a powerful message, "I enjoy being with you."

Our emotions are a gift from God. Joy, sadness, fear and anger are part of being human. We should neither ignore them nor be ruled by them. As we grow, we gradually learn to direct our emotions towards what is good, so that they become a help rather than an obstacle to love.

Feelings naturally change throughout life. There are times when love comes easily and others when it requires patience and perseverance. Christian love is more than a feeling: it is the daily decision to seek the good of the other person and to value his or her interests.

The complete gift of a man and a woman to one another is the highest expression of human love. Husband and wife are called to love one another with their whole being: heart, mind, body and soul. For this reason, the physical expression of their love is not something separate from married life, but an integral part of it.

In the intimacy of marriage, husband and wife renew the gift of themselves that they made on their wedding day. Their bodily union expresses and strengthens their free, full and faithful love. Open to the gift of life, it becomes one of the privileged ways in which spouses experience God's love and cooperate with Him in the gift of creation.

FORGIVENESS

Spouses should learn to recognise the mistakes they have made, to apologise to one another and to forgive one another.

The consequences of original sin are also present within marriage. For this reason, authentic married life becomes much more difficult without Confession, which frees us from evil, and without the Eucharist, which gives us the strength to pursue what is good.

It is important for spouses to learn to recognise the hurt they have caused one another, to apologise and to forgive, taking the time to explain their behaviour and to understand each other's reasons.

We should also consider that our differences are not an obstacle but a gift. Differences arising from being male and female, as well as differences in personality, temperament, values and lifestyle, can be accepted and lead to a deeper unity. This requires a constant and sincere attitude of listening, self-giving love and respect for the other person. Spouses do not possess each other, but are God's free gift to each other.

Often disproportionate reactions during conflicts conceal deeper issues and wounds. Patience and charity are needed to bring these to light with sincerity, bearing in mind that everyone has their own pace. Once recognised, these wounds should not simply be accepted, but brought to the Lord and gradually healed, so that they no longer determine the way we relate to one another.

Each person should also reflect on the attitude with which they enter into dialogue and on the words they use, because certain reactions and expressions hurt the other person and make it more difficult to begin again. A willingness to change for the good of the other, together with the search for respectful dialogue, needs to be a constant commitment. In time, this bears great fruit.

Forgiveness must be sought by honestly acknowledging one's own faults, and at the same time it must always be offered wholeheartedly to the other. As spouses learn to ask for and grant forgiveness, misunderstandings can be resolved more quickly, and they learn to look upon both the other person and themselves with affection, tenderness and even a sense of humour.

Forgiveness, however, does not mean denying the hurt or pretending that nothing has happened. When trust has been seriously damaged, rebuilding it may require time, sincere repentance and a genuine change of behaviour.

No sin, when acknowledged and forgiven, is an obstacle to married life. In mutual forgiveness we experience the truth of St Paul's words, "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (cf. Rom. 5:20).

Questions

1. What does it mean for husband and wife to help one another on the path to holiness?
2. What does it mean that love is more than a feeling and is the daily decision to seek the good of the other person?
3. What is your experience of forgiveness?
4. How can we learn to forgive?

DIALOGUE

It is important to set aside time to share the graces received and the difficulties encountered. In more mature marriages, this can gradually become part of everyday conversation.

At least once a month (or more often, depending on the circumstances and individual temperament), it is good for spouses to set aside time for relaxed conversation without the presence of the children.

They might choose to talk in the evening, after the children have gone to bed, provided neither is too tired and it is not too late. Even better, they may choose to go out together (for a meal, a walk, and so on), where they can enjoy a quieter and more relaxed atmosphere.

During these conversations it is helpful to reflect together on family life, hopes, dreams, personal needs, work, relationships with the children, finances, friendships, faith, health and any other important aspects and decisions of family life. It is not necessary to discuss every issue in detail each time.

It is important that both spouses are committed to valuing both their own interests and those of their partner. This shared reflection should help the couple to recognise what needs to be strengthened and what needs to change in their relationship and in the life of the family.

These moments of dialogue should be prepared by taking some time beforehand for personal reflection, identifying the most important events, discoveries, difficulties and thoughts to be shared.

At first, these conversations may seem a little artificial. In time, however, it becomes clear that relaxed conversation, uninterrupted by countless distractions, creates the right condition for understanding one another more deeply, even in the ordinary circumstances of everyday life. For this reason, in more mature marriages, the special monthly conversation may gradually give way to an ongoing daily dialogue.

LUNCH AND DINNER

Meals are an opportunity for dialogue, for educating children, and for welcoming and feeling welcomed.

Meals (especially dinner) are an important opportunity for dialogue. By sharing the events of our day, we experience the joy of love.

As far as possible, we should try to set aside personal concerns and prepare ourselves to listen attentively to one another. In time, we discover that a meal shared in this way helps us to leave work behind and enter fully into family life. If there are urgent concerns, it is right to discuss them and seek advice. In general, however, it is better not to burden lunch or dinner with difficult decisions or demanding discussions. Let meals remain a time of joy and peace, with the children actively involved in the conversation.

Let us learn to speak about what we have experienced during the day and to share our ideas and plans. Let us become accustomed to speaking one at a time so that we listen to each other. When children are present, it may sometimes be helpful for mum or dad to act as a gentle "facilitator", ensuring that the conversation does not become chaotic.

Meals shared together are a precious opportunity to know one another more deeply. They are also a privileged occasion to pass on to our children the values we hold dear. By reflecting together on everyday events (work, school, politics, society and so on), we can hand on a Christian way of looking at life that embraces every aspect of human experience.

Questions

1. What are your conversations with your spouse like? What could be improved?
2. How do you reflect together on your life, work, relationship with your children and other important matters?
3. Are meals an important part of your family life? How do you experience them? What could be improved?

POVERTY AND CHARITY

Life is filled with joy when it is lived in service to others, making generous use of the means available to us, according to each person's freedom and circumstances.

To keep joy alive in our hearts, we need to grow in a healthy detachment from things and people, keeping our gaze fixed on God.

Consumer society constantly encourages us to acquire more and more material possessions. This leads to exhaustion and distraction. Simplicity, on the other hand, is far more beautiful, because it teaches us to place our hope not in temporary possessions but in eternal goods.

We are therefore called to discern what we truly need and what is merely superfluous or burdensome. Each family must decide how best to live out the ideal of evangelical poverty, which Jesus presents as an essential path to the Kingdom of Heaven. Within the family, it is important to practise genuine sharing of material goods, while respecting what belongs to each person.

Works of charity also help us to recognise that everything we have is given to us for the building up of the Kingdom of God. By sharing our resources with those in need, we help to build a more just world.

Among the families closest to us, we should be attentive to those with particular needs, not only financial but also practical. The generous offering of ourselves and our resources—far more than words—creates an atmosphere of joy and fraternity.

Questions

1. How can we grow in a healthy detachment from things and people, while keeping our gaze fixed on God?
2. How do you discern what you truly need from what is superfluous?
3. Do you practise works of charity? How do they help you to grow?

REST AND THE LORD'S DAY

Time away from work provides an opportunity to experience true freedom, rest and togetherness. True rest is found in the experience of being loved by God and by our brothers and sisters.

For this reason, planning time together carefully is a fundamental element of family life. It is important that spouses are aware of this and take responsibility for it.

If this does not happen, family life will soon be dominated by work, school, sport and the children's activities. The family risks becoming a slave to externally imposed schedules and deadlines.

As far as possible, Sundays should be kept free from work commitments. Where this is not possible for serious reasons, every effort should be made to find free time on other days of the week.

It may sometimes seem that time spent in communal prayer (especially at Mass) and in personal prayer takes time away from our other responsibilities. In reality, the opposite is true. By turning our hearts towards what is most important, we discover that we have more time, that we are freed from anxiety and that we are filled with peace.

It is good to make a commitment to meet regularly with other families in small groups (for example, once a month). Whenever possible, such groups should be guided by a priest or, at least, by someone with a deep faith. When adults gather in genuine friendship, they also give an important witness to their children. It is good for the children to take part, at least for some of the time—for example, during meals—while, during the adults' discussions, they can play together under appropriate supervision.

With regard to leisure, we need to ask ourselves what truly refreshes both body and spirit. We should honestly consider whether the time we spend together renews us and gives us fresh strength to face the demands of daily life. If it does not, we should not be afraid to try different ways of spending our free time and then reflect on whether they have truly helped. It does not matter if we sometimes get it wrong; what matters is that we continue to try different approaches and reflect on what truly helps our family.

Some leisure activities are enriching for everyone, while others benefit only particular individuals. In general, it is good to give preference to activities that are beneficial for the whole family. At the same time, since every person has his or her own personality, it is important to give each family member the space they need to rest in their own way. Helping one another to remain cheerful and refreshed benefits the whole family.

RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR FAMILIES OF ORIGIN

Our parents have handed on to us a precious inheritance to cherish and, where possible, to pass on. At the same time, every family is unique and is called to follow its own path.

We should always show gratitude, respect and charity towards our parents, who gave us life and cared for us. The traditions, values and faith we have received from our families are often a great treasure. Our children, too, benefit greatly from a loving relationship with their grandparents.

At the same time, marriage calls a husband and wife to form a new family, with its own identity, responsibilities and journey. A healthy detachment from our families of origin helps us to avoid unhealthy dependence and allows the new family to grow and mature. This also means using phone calls, messages and social media wisely.

Questions

1. How do you plan your free time?
2. How do the Liturgy and your time of prayer help you?
3. Do you meet regularly with other families? How does this help you?
4. Can you give examples of what you do in your free time that helps you to feel refreshed?
5. What have you received from your families of origin that you would like to pass on?

THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN (Part 1)

It is the family's responsibility to welcome children as a free gift from God, to raise them in the faith, and to accompany them towards the fulfilment of their destiny.

THE GRACE OF GIVING LIFE

The Trinitarian image of God is manifested in a particular way in the relationship between man and woman. This relationship should always remain open to the children whom God may give; otherwise, husband and wife risk becoming closed in on themselves and losing vitality.

The first task of a married couple, inseparable from their mutual love, is to welcome children, raise them and introduce them to the meaning of life, to a broad vision of reality, and to all that is true, beautiful, and good.

Even the inability to have children naturally—an experience God may ask of some couples—does not diminish the fruitfulness of marriage, because the act of giving new life can also occur in a spiritual sense. Every adult is called to be spiritually fruitful as an educator (through adopted children, the children of friends, students, members of the community, and so on).

Bringing up children is a long journey. There are no ready-made solutions. It requires humility and a willingness to keep learning. It is important that spouses frequently recall their vocation to be mothers and fathers, so that in the struggles of everyday life they remain aware of their mission to introduce others to true life. This responsibility takes precedence over every other commitment (work, friendships and charitable activities).

This does not mean that children should become the absolute centre of the couple's life. While fully recognising the importance of caring for their children, parents must preserve their own identity, focusing first and foremost on walking together in following Christ. Even when children become adults, one never ceases to be a father or mother. The form of the task changes, but its importance remains.

INTRODUCING CHILDREN TO THE FAITH

Daily prayer and the offering of each day to God always help us to start again, even in the midst of great difficulties, enabling parents to maintain a loving attitude. Children absorb this above all through what they see rather than through what they are told.

Life within the Christian community, in turn, supports the couple by preventing them from becoming absorbed solely in the challenges of family life. This provides a valuable foundation for the peaceful growth of their children.

When children reach the age of one or two, they can already be gently introduced to prayer, especially in the morning and before bedtime. After dinner, it is helpful to establish a simple evening routine, perhaps ending with reading a good story or saying a few simple prayers together. Regular routines give young children a sense of security and help them to fall asleep peacefully. Not every evening will follow the same pattern, because unexpected events inevitably arise, but a simple prayer routine practised consistently strengthens family life and bears lasting fruit.

Sunday Mass is also an adventure to be discovered. Going together to Mass with other families helps children to look forward to it as a joyful occasion of friendship and sharing. By watching older children, younger ones gradually learn to remain quiet during the celebration. Slowly, they begin to participate actively in the liturgy, and it becomes natural for them to appreciate its beauty. In an increasingly secular society, attending Mass helps children to realise that they are not alone and teaches them that faith is not simply a private matter.

Sacramental preparation should be understood in this light. It is important to ensure that children experience this journey alongside friends, while also encouraging them—even from a young age—to get to know priests and catechists or other educators who are willing to guide them. Likewise, gatherings of adults can become valuable opportunities for friendships among the children to grow and deepen.

Every family is called to reflect on the people with whom they wish to share the responsibility of educating their children in the faith. Teachers, catechists, priests, mentors, friends and many others can all make a valuable contribution. These collaborators should be chosen with care or,

where that is not possible, parents should seek to maintain an open and constructive dialogue with them.

A Catholic school can be a precious support, working alongside parents in the education of their children in the faith.

Questions

1. How do you live out the responsibility of welcoming children, educating them and introducing them to the meaning of life?
2. What does it mean to you to be a father or mother, both to your own children and to those entrusted to your care?
3. How do you help your children to pray, to participate at Mass and to receive the sacraments?
4. How do you share responsibility for your children's education in the faith?

THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN (Part 2)

It is the family's responsibility to welcome children as a free gift from God, to raise them in the faith, and to accompany them towards the fulfilment of their destiny.

THE ADVENTURE OF EDUCATION

The first way we educate our children in the faith is through our own faithful participation in the sacraments. At first this connection may not seem obvious, but experience shows that the greatest gift parents can offer their children is to live together in God's grace.

The second path of education, inseparable from the first, is the example we give, especially through our daily commitment to follow Christ.

More generally, we can say that the loving relationship between husband and wife is more powerful than any teaching. The more we devote ourselves to our own vocation to holiness, the more we contribute to the growth of our children. For this reason, we must first seek our own true happiness, understood as the awareness of the profound meaning of our lives and of our relationship with God.

Naturally, we will make mistakes, but our weakness is not an obstacle. On the contrary, by being willing to ask forgiveness and begin again, we teach our children a precious lesson, showing them that, with God's help and the support of our brothers and sisters, there is no fall from which we cannot rise again.

In education there is a time to speak and a time to remain silent. We should try to communicate clearly what we desire for our children, but we must also be willing to listen to them in silence. Our children are a gift and a mystery, constantly changing and growing. We will never know them completely. If we remain attentive and are willing to encounter them anew each day, both our words and our silences will find the right moment to bear fruit.

It is important to present our children with clear and positive proposals. If we ourselves are uncertain about the direction we wish to offer, it becomes difficult for them to embrace it, and in time we too become less certain of what is truly good. At the same time, we must be careful not to become controlling or obsessive.

The time spent with children, especially when they are young, is an invaluable source of love and understanding that will help them to respond to their vocation.

For this reason, parents should, as far as possible, devote time not only to all their children together but also to each child individually, sharing something special with each of them—a walk, a game or simply a conversation. This helps to build a relationship of trust and openness, enabling children to discover that they are loved and wanted for who they are, each in a unique and irreplaceable way.

We must have great respect for our children's freedom, just as God respects ours. If we have done everything we reasonably can for their growth, while remaining committed to our own journey towards the truth, we will then be ready to let them go when the time comes. We will be less possessive and better able to accompany them, not only when they begin families of their own, but whenever they need us.

The transition from childhood to adolescence, and then into adulthood, is made even more delicate by the pervasive influence of technology. There is a real danger of serious misunderstandings and harm. For this reason, parents should think carefully about whether and when to introduce their children to the digital world—for example, by deciding when, or even whether, to give them a smartphone. A gradual approach is often the wisest.

Father and mother are the primary educators of their children. This responsibility cannot and must not be delegated entirely to others. At the same time, healthy education always involves a positive openness to both the Church and the wider world. Parents should therefore seek whatever support is necessary.

The choice of school and of other educational environments (parish, youth groups, sports clubs and so on) should be made with great care. This requires ongoing and open dialogue between father and mother. Both should be united in the direction they choose, while remaining open to changing course whenever this is necessary for the good of their children.

Sharing the task of education with other families brings enormous benefits. It is a great help not to be alone in a society whose values often differ

greatly from those of Christian life. Families can also support one another in many practical ways. For this reason, it is highly beneficial for families to reflect together on both the ideals they wish to pass on and the practical approaches they wish to adopt in educating their children. In this way, children also come to realise that they are not alone, but are supported by a community of friends who share the same journey. Pope Francis used to say, "It takes a village to raise a child."

Questions

1. The text says that we must first seek our own happiness. Do you agree? How do you live this in practice?
2. Do you have clear and positive proposals for your children? Can you give some examples?
3. What does it mean to you to respect your children's freedom?
4. How do you share responsibility for your children's education?

LOVE FOR THE COMMUNITY AND THE WORLD

We must share our lives with everyone,
and share in the lives of everyone.
Charity knows no boundaries.

- Fr Luigi Giussani

A WELCOMING HOME

A home can gradually become a beacon of light for the couple, for their children, and for all who enter it.

A home flourishes through two fundamental dimensions: hospitality and recollection. If there is only hospitality, it falls apart; if there is only recollection, it turns in on itself. The wisdom of married life lies in maintaining a healthy balance between these two dimensions.

It is important to open the home joyfully to friends and to those in need, confident that in welcoming others we welcome Christ himself. At the same time, spouses also need moments of privacy: time to talk peacefully together, to rest, and to recollect themselves in silence.

Whenever possible, husband and wife should decide together whom to invite and when, so that hospitality becomes a shared responsibility and something they prepare together. Children, too, should be involved in welcoming guests, perhaps by helping to prepare the meal or by making a small gift such as a drawing, a place card or a flower.

BELONGING TO THE CHURCH

By seeking guidance, spouses can place at the service of the Church what they themselves have freely received.

The Christian family finds its true home within the wider community of the Church. There it grows by contributing to the good of all through the daily offering of each family member, personal and communal prayer, and participation in educational and charitable activities.

What matters is not the amount of time given, which naturally varies according to each family's circumstances, but the joy and generosity with which it is offered. The selfless gift that each family makes of itself strengthens the whole Christian community. At the same time, serving others helps spouses to look with renewed love upon their own family—upon their husband or wife, and upon their children.

It is important to seek the guidance of priests, or of people deeply rooted in God, who can foster spiritual growth and help families discover practical ways of living faith and charity in today's world.

Questions

1. Can you share some experiences of welcoming others into your family?
2. Do you feel the need to set aside time for recollection as a family?
3. What place does the Christian community have in your family life?
4. Does your service within the parish help your family to grow?

RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER FAMILIES

Families who come together become a mutual support in faith amid the challenges of everyday life.

If we do not build friendships with other families, we risk becoming isolated. Even our belonging to the Church can become vague, reduced to participation in the sacraments and, at best, in various activities. Even the richest and deepest teaching bears little fruit unless it is lived and tested within a community. This is especially urgent today, when society has become increasingly detached from Christianity and is shaped very differently from the values of the Gospel.

For this reason, it is important to build relationships with other families, sharing experiences, discussing difficulties and seeking advice, including on matters already faced within our own family. The primary aim is to help one another grow in faith, in love for God and for our brothers and sisters, while sharing together both the joys and the struggles of everyday life.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH PRIESTS

Communion and genuine friendship with priests help foster a shared responsibility in bringing Christ's love to everyone.

Marriage and the priesthood (or religious life) can be seen as the two focal points of an ellipse: distinct vocations which illuminate and support one another. Families need people who are not entirely absorbed in the dynamics of the world, to help them lift their eyes towards what is lasting and eternal. At the same time, priests need the friendship of families from whom they can learn about a love that is faithful, fruitful and capable of sacrifice.

Celibacy embraced by those who dedicate themselves entirely to God and to the service of others can be a great example, teaching how to live relationships truly oriented towards the good of the other. For this reason, the presence of a priest can be of great value within family groups whose purpose is to support one another in the vocation of marriage. Within these groups, priests are called to exercise their spiritual fatherhood with-

out making decisions that families must make themselves. Families cannot expect priests to solve their problems or devote exclusive attention to them, since priests are entrusted with the care of the whole community—the young and the elderly, the sick, parish groups and many others. Rather, families should ask themselves how they can support their priests in their many activities.

All of us are called to live charity through mutual support, fraternal correction and practical help in the needs of everyday life. Let us therefore work to build communities in which each person is helped to fulfil his or her own specific task. The friendship between priests and families offers a glimpse of eternal life: a life of communion in which each person faithfully responds to God's call.

Questions

1. What is your experience of connecting with other families, to discuss and seek advice?
2. What is your experience of connecting with other families to help each other in the life of faith and love for God and for others, sharing the joys and struggles of life together?
3. What can families learn from the example and vocation of priests (and their spiritual life), and what can priests learn from the daily life and love of families?

MISSION

Proclaiming Christ means giving freely what we have received freely.

A family that lives in the love of Christ becomes a place of hope, welcome and witness for everyone. In this way, it fulfils the mission entrusted to it by God. As Dostoevsky wrote, the world can only be saved by beauty, which is the embodiment of Goodness and Truth in a concrete form of life.

This means that the family's missionary task is fulfilled not primarily through activities, but through the married couple becoming ever more deeply rooted in faith, allowing themselves to be enlightened by Christ.

In this way, the family becomes capable of welcoming and supporting everyone, even those furthest from Christian life and those burdened by the many forms of loneliness that characterise our age.

By bearing witness to their faith, spouses become more aware of the grace they have received and learn to keep their gaze fixed on Christ, even in difficult times. In giving to others, we discover anew what we ourselves have received.

It is important for spouses to recognise that there is an order among their responsibilities: first, the mutual good between husband and wife; second, the education of their children; third, the building up of the Christian community; and fourth, their witness through their work. This should not be understood as a rigid framework, as lives can vary greatly depending on age, circumstances and the tasks entrusted to each person by God's providence.

Everyone should ask themselves what God is asking of them in order to build His kingdom. However, it is undeniable that participating in the life of a parish, movement or religious community greatly facilitates the fulfilment of the family's missionary task.

Questions

1. Do you agree that a family's missionary task is not fulfilled primarily through activities, but rather through the married couple being rooted in faith?
2. The text says, "In giving to others, we discover anew what we ourselves have received." Is this true in your experience?
3. Do you agree that there should be an order of priorities among a family's responsibilities?
4. What do you think God is asking of you in order to build His Kingdom?

THE MEANING OF WORK: CREATION, SACRIFICE AND COMMUNION

Work is one of the fundamental experiences of human life. It is not simply a practical necessity or a way of earning a living. It touches the very heart of what it means to be human.

CREATION AND WORK

The opening pages of the Book of Genesis present both God and humanity in relation to work. God is revealed as the first “worker”, bringing the universe into being and then resting. This divine rest is not mere inactivity, but the fulfilment and contemplation of what has been accomplished. It shows that work and rest are not opposing forces in conflict with one another; rather, they belong together within a unified vision of life.

Human beings are created in the image of God. Even before sin enters the world, humanity is entrusted with cultivating and caring for the earth. Fatigue and hardship appear as consequences of sin, but work itself is not a punishment. Sin distorts what was originally good; it does not create work. Work remains an essential dimension of human existence.

To work is to express one’s being. A person who does not work cannot fully realise their potential, just as one who neither loves nor seeks understanding cannot become fully alive. Through work, we enter into relationship with reality and with others. Even when carried out in solitude, work transforms the world and bears fruit for the wider community.

Work unites humanity with the rest of creation. The world is unfinished—not because we can complete it by our own power, but because we are invited to contribute to its growth. Through artistic creation, intellectual effort, manual labour, education, scientific research, or domestic tasks, each person participates in shaping the world so that it becomes a better world for humanity.

Precisely because work is so noble, it can also be distorted. It may become a source of rivalry, division, or exploitation. It can even be idolised. When work is treated as the ultimate purpose of life, relationships, family

life, and faith may be sacrificed to it. What was meant to unite ends up dividing. The problem does not lie in work itself, but in the way it is lived. On the other hand, sloth and apathy represent a refusal to engage with reality. They are spiritual illnesses often rooted in fear, discouragement, or wounded pride. While rest has its rightful and necessary place at every stage of life, human existence is fundamentally a time in which we are called to use our gifts for the good of others. It is through such active engagement that the heart finds true fulfilment.

A healthy culture, therefore, must help people to rediscover the beauty, dignity, and meaning of work.

EUCCHARIST AND WORK: OFFERING AND REDEMPTION.

A further question arises: how does human work enter into the mystery of redemption? Work does not, in itself, have saving power. It cannot redeem the world by its own strength. Yet neither is it insignificant in God's plan.

The Christian liturgy offers a profound key to understanding this mystery. During the offertory, bread and wine are presented as "the fruit of the earth and the work of human hands." In these simple gifts, divine creation and human labour come together. The earth and the vine are gifts from God; cultivation and preparation are the result of human effort. Together they are offered so that they may become the Body and Blood of Christ. This gesture reveals the deeper meaning of work. At its foundation lie the gifts God has placed within each person: intelligence, freedom, creativity, desire, and the capacity for love. Work is a participation in God's action—not only as Creator, but also as Redeemer. It becomes part of the great movement by which the world is drawn towards its fulfilment in Christ.

Two words help to illuminate this mystery: sacrifice and offering. Sacrifice does not mean empty renunciation or the destruction of what is good. Rather, it means accepting that our life and labour are not ordered towards self-glory, but towards the glory of Christ. Every profession and every task can become a privileged path through which we cooperate in the coming of the Kingdom.

Offering goes even deeper. To offer one's work to God is to recognise that He is both its origin and its final judge. He alone sees the full course of history and understands the place that each effort holds within it.

Whether visible or hidden, successful or apparently fruitless, work entrusted to God acquires a lasting value.

Finally, work is always oriented towards communion. What we create, organise, or build can either strengthen human relationships or wound them. Work is never purely individual; it always has a social dimension. It can help to build up the communion to which we are called.

Questions

1. When have you experienced your work as something good and creative, not just as a duty or obligation?
2. Have you ever felt that your work became too central in your life—or, on the contrary, that it was hard to engage with it?
3. In what concrete ways could you offer your daily work to God?

NOTES

