



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO THE OFFICIALS OF THE TRIBUNAL OF THE ROMAN ROTA
FOR THE INAUGURATION OF THE JUDICIAL YEAR**

*Clementine Hall
Friday, 27 January 2023*

[[Multimedia](#)]

Dear prelate auditors!

I thank the Dean for his kind words, and I cordially greet you and all those who work in the administration of justice at the Apostolic Tribunal of the Roman Rota. I reiterate my appreciation for your work at the service of the Church and of the faithful, especially in the sphere of cases regarding marriage. You do a great deal of good with this!

Today I would like to share with you some reflections on marriage, because in the Church and in the world, there is a strong need to rediscover the meaning and value of the conjugal union between man and woman on which the family is based. Indeed, an aspect, which is certainly not secondary, of the crisis that is affecting many families is the practical, personal and collective ignorance regarding marriage.

The Church received from her Lord the mission of proclaiming the Good News, and she also illuminates and supports that “great mystery” which is conjugal and family love. The Church as a whole can be said to be a big family, and, in a very particular way through the life of those who form a domestic church, she receives and transmits the light of Christ and his Gospel in the family sphere. “Following Christ who ‘came’ into the world ‘to serve’ (*Mt* 20:28), the Church considers serving the family to be one of her essential duties. In this sense both man and the family constitute ‘the way of the Church’” (Saint John Paul II, [*Letter to families*](#), 2 February 1994, 2).

The Gospel of the family recalls the divine plan of the creation of man and woman, that is, the “beginning”, according to the word of Jesus: “Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder” (*Mt* 19:4-6). And this being *one flesh* is part of the divine plan of redemption. Saint Paul writes: “This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (*Eph* 5:32). And Saint John Paul II comments: “Christ renews the first plan that the Creator inscribed in the hearts of man and woman, and in the celebration of the sacrament of matrimony offers a ‘new heart’: thus the couples are not only able to overcome ‘hardness of heart’ [*Mt* 19:8], but also and above all they are able to share the full and definitive love of Christ, the new and eternal Covenant made flesh” (Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, 22 November 1981, 20).

Marriage according to Christian Revelation is not a ceremony or a social event, nor a formality. It is not even an abstract ideal: it is a *reality with its own precise consistency*, not “a form of mere emotional satisfaction that can be constructed in any way or modified at will” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 66).

We might ask ourselves: how is it possible for there to be such a captivating union between a man and a woman, a union that is faithful and everlasting, from which a new family is born? How is this possible, taking into account the limits and fragility of human beings? It is worthwhile to ask ourselves these questions and to allow ourselves to wonder at the reality of marriage.

Jesus gives us a simple yet at the same time profound answer: “What God has joined together, let not man put asunder” (*Mt* 19:6). “God himself is the author of matrimony”, as *Vatican Council II* affirms (cf. Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 48), and this can be understood as referring to every single conjugal union. Indeed, spouses give life to their union, with free consent, but only the Holy Spirit has the power to make a man and woman a sole existence. Moreover, “the Saviour of men and the Spouse of the Church comes into the lives of married Christians through the sacrament of matrimony” (ibid., 48). All this leads us to recognize that every true marriage, even non-sacramental, is a gift of God to the spouses. Matrimony is always a gift! Conjugal fidelity rests on divine fidelity; conjugal fruitfulness is based on divine fruitfulness. Man and woman are called to accept this gift and freely correspond to it with the reciprocal gift of self.

This beautiful vision may seem utopian, inasmuch as it does not seem to take human frailty, the inconstancy of love, into account. Indissolubility is often conceived of as an ideal, and the mindset according to which marriage lasts as long as there is love tends to prevail. But what kind of love is it? Here too there is often unawareness of true conjugal love, reduced to the sentimental level or to mere selfish satisfactions. Instead, matrimonial love is inseparable from marriage itself, in which human love, fragile and limited, meets with divine love, always faithful and merciful. I wonder: can there be a “dutiful” love? The answer is found in the commandment on love, as Christ said: “A new

commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (*Jn* 13:34).

We can apply this commandment to conjugal love, also a gift from God. This commandment can be fulfilled because it is he himself who supports spouses with his grace: “as I have loved you, love one another”. It is a gift entrusted to their freedom, with its limitations and its lapses, so that the love between husband and wife needs continual purification and growth, mutual understanding and forgiveness. I want to emphasize the latter: hidden crises are not resolved in concealment, but in mutual forgiveness.

Marriage should not be idealized, as though it existed only where there are no problems. God’s plan, being placed in our hands, is always imperfectly realized, and yet “the Lord’s presence dwells in real and concrete families, with all their daily troubles and struggles, joys and hopes. Living in a family makes it hard for us to feign or lie; we cannot hide behind a mask. If that authenticity is inspired by love, then the Lord reigns there, with his joy and his peace. The spirituality of family love is made up of thousands of real gestures, concrete gestures. In that variety of gifts and encounters which deepen communion, God has his dwelling place. This mutual concern ‘brings together the human and the divine’, for it is filled with the love of God. In the end, marital spirituality is a spirituality of the bond, in which divine love dwells” (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, 19 March 2016, 315).

The permanent reality of marriage as a bond needs to be rediscovered. This word is at times regarded with suspicion, as if it were an external imposition, a burden, a “tether” in opposition to the authenticity and freedom of love. If instead the bond is understood precisely as a bond of love, then it reveals itself as the core of marriage, as a divine gift that is the source of true freedom and which preserves matrimonial life. In this sense, “the pastoral care of engaged and married couples should be centred on the marriage bond, assisting couples not only to deepen their love but also to overcome problems and difficulties. This involves not only helping them to accept the Church’s teaching and to have recourse to her valuable resources, but also offering practical programmes, sound advice, proven strategies and psychological guidance” (*ibid.*, 211).

Dear brothers and sisters, we have highlighted that marriage, a gift from God, is not an ideal or a formality, but marriage, a gift from God, is a reality with its own precise consistency. Now I would like to underline that it is *a good thing* ! An extraordinary good, a good of extraordinary value for all: for spouses themselves, for their children, for all the families with whom they enter into relations, for the entire Church, for all humanity. It is a good that is diffusive, that attracts young people to joyfully respond to the vocation of marriage, that continually comforts and revives spouses, that bears many and various fruits in ecclesial communion and civil society.

In the Christian economy of salvation, marriage constitutes first and foremost the way to holiness of the spouses themselves, a holiness lived out in the daily routine of life: this is an essential

aspect of the Gospel of the family. It is significant that the Church is today proposing some married couples as examples of holiness; and I am also thinking of the countless spouses who sanctify themselves and edify the Church with what I have called the “holiness next door” (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*, 19 March 2018, 4-6).

Among the many challenges that affect family pastoral care in its response to the problems, wounds and sufferings of each person, I am now thinking of married couples in crisis. The Church, both the pastors and the other faithful, accompanies them with love and hope, seeking to support them. The Church’s pastoral response seeks to actively transmit the Gospel of the family. In this sense, a fundamental resource for facing and overcoming crises is to renew awareness of the gift received in the sacrament of marriage, an irrevocable gift, a source of grace on which we can always count. In the complexity of concrete situations, which sometimes require the collaboration of the human sciences, this light on one’s marriage is an essential part of the journey of reconciliation. Thus fragility, which always remains and also accompanies conjugal life, will not lead to a breaking point, thanks to the power of the Holy Spirit.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us always nourish within us the spirit of thankfulness and gratitude to the Lord for his gifts; and in this way we will also be able to help others nourish it in the different situations of their lives. May Our Lady, faithful Virgin and Mother of Divine Grace, obtain this for us. I invoke the gifts of the Holy Spirit upon your service to the truth of marriage. With all my heart I bless you. And I ask you please to pray for me. Thank you.

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