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Audience with International Leaders of the “Équipes Notre-Dame” Movement

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the international leaders of the *Équipes Notre-Dame* Movement, to whom he delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters!

I am pleased to meet you, international leaders of the *Équipes Notre-Dame* Movement. Thank you for coming and above all thank you for your commitment to families.

You are an expanding movement: thousands of *équipes* spread throughout the world, many families who are seeking to live Christian marriage as a gift.

The Christian family is going through a genuine “cultural storm” in this changing era, and is threatened and tempted on various fronts. Your work, therefore, is valuable for the Church. You closely accompany married couples so that they do not feel alone in the difficulties of life and in their marital relationship. In this way, you are an expression of the “outbound” Church, which is close to the situations and problems of the people and unreservedly committed to the good of the families of today and tomorrow.

It is a true mission to accompany married couples today! *Protecting marriage* indeed means *protecting an entire family*, it means saving all the relationships generated by marriage: the love between couples, between parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren; it means saving that witness of a love that is possible and forever, which young people struggle to believe in. Indeed, children need to receive from their parents the certainty that God created them out of love, and that one day they too will be able to love and be loved as their mother and father did. Be sure that the seed of love, sown in their hearts by their parents, will germinate sooner or later.

I see a great urgency today: to help young people to discover that *Christian marriage is a vocation*, a specific calling that God addresses to a man and a woman so that they can fully realize themselves as generative, becoming a father and a mother, and bringing the Grace of their Sacrament into the world. This Grace is the love of Christ united with that of the married couple, His presence between them, it is God's fidelity to their love: it is He who gives them the strength to grow together every day and to remain united.

Today, it is thought that the success of a marriage depends only on the willpower of the people. It does not. If it were so, it would be a burden, a yoke placed on the shoulders of two poor creatures. Marriage, on the other hand, is a "three-way step", in which Christ's presence between the bride and groom makes the journey possible, and the yoke is transformed into a game of glances: a glance between the bride and groom, a glance between the bride and groom and Christ. It is a game that lasts a lifetime, which can be won together if one takes care of one's relationship, if one cherishes it like a precious treasure, helping each other to pass through each day, even in married life, that gateway that is Christ. He said: "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved" (*Jn 10:9*). And, speaking of glances, once, during a General Audience, there was a couple, married for sixty years; she was 18 when she got married, and he was 21. They were therefore 78 and 81 years old. And I asked them, "And now, do you still love each other?". And they looked at each other, then they came to me, with tears in their eyes: "We still love each other!" Beautiful!

Therefore, I would like to leave you with two brief reflections: the first relates to *newly-wed couples*. Take care of them! It is important that newly-weds experience a *nuptial mystagogy*, that will help them to live the beauty of their Sacrament and a spirituality of the couple. In the first years of marriage, it is necessary above all to discover faith within the couple, to taste it, to savour it by learning to pray together. Many people marry today without understand how faith enters into their married life, perhaps because no-one bore witness to it before them prior to their marriage. I invite you to help them with a "catechumenal" journey – let's call it that – of rediscovery of the faith, both personal and as a couple – so that they learn straight away to make room for Jesus and, with Him, succeed in taking care of their marriage.

Your work, next to priests, in this sense, is valuable; you can do a great deal in parishes and in communities, opening up to welcome the youngest families. We must start out again from the new generations to make the Church fruitful: to generate many domestic Churches in which a Christian style of life is lived, where one feels familiar with Christ, where one learns how to listen to those who are next to you, just as Christ listens to us. You can be like flames that kindle other flames to faith, especially among the youngest couples: do not let them accumulate sufferings and wounds in the solitude of their homes. Help them to discover the oxygen of faith gently, patiently, and trusting in the action of the Holy Spirit.

The second reflection is on the importance of *co-responsibility between married couples and priests* within your movement. You have understood and live tangibly the *complementarity* of the two vocations: I encourage you to take this into the parishes, so that the laypeople and priests discover its richness and necessity. This helps to overcome that clericalism that prevents the Church from being fruitful – beware of clericalism! – and this will also help married couples to discover that, with marriage, they are called to a mission. Indeed, they too have the gift and the responsibility of building the ecclesial community, alongside ordained ministers.

Without Christian communities, families feel alone, and loneliness does a great deal of harm! With your charism, you can become rescuers attentive towards those who are in need, those who are alone, those who have family problems and do not know how to talk about them because they are ashamed or have lost hope. In your dioceses, you can make families understand the importance of helping each other and forming a network; building communities where Christ can "dwell" in the homes and in family relations.

Dear brothers and sisters, next July you will have your international gathering in Turin. In the midst of the synodal journey that we are undertaking, may it be for you a time of listening to the Spirit and fruitful planning for the Kingdom of God.

I entrust your mission and all your families to the Virgin Mary, so that She may protect you, keep you steadfast in Christ, and always make you witnesses of His love. In this year dedicated to prayer, may you discover and

rediscover the joy of praying, praying together at home, with simplicity and in daily life. This time I will not say anything about mothers-in-law, because there are some here! I bless you from my heart. And I ask you to please pray for me. Thank you!
