



My very dear couples,

My very dear Team members,

I hope that every one of you is well at the time of receiving this letter that I write, as always, I thinking of each of you, who are well represented by those whom I have already had the grace and privilege of meeting at the various international gatherings over this past few years and in the various regions of the world. It is truly a reason for joy and a grace to be able to bear witness in these gatherings to how you live the "joy of love", that our good Pope Francis speaks about, with enthusiasm as a couple and as a family.

"Joy" refers to an expansion of the heart (*Amoris Laetitia*, 126) in the person who knows that they are loved, in the sense of being welcomed, accepted for who they are, gratuitously, and not for what they can give. In earlier times the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle (384-322 BC), used to say that friendship consisted of wanting another person's good because of who they are and not for what they can give. Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) took up and developed this definition; the recent Magisterium of the Church, from Pope Paul VI to Pope Francis, sees in this gratuitously charitable dimension all that is most deeply true in terms of what we can understand and experience as friendship, as love. (*Amoris Laetitia*, 101-102)

The foundation of Christian marriage is the relationship between spouses who love each other, that is, who each want the other's good, for what they are and not for what they can give. The sacrament purifies human conjugal love that contains the mark of eternity, that is by its nature meant to be definitive, (*Amoris Laetitia*, 123) and raises it to the level of a sign of love between Christ and the Church: the husband represents Christ and the wife the Church. Obviously, this is an imperfect analogy (*Amoris Laetitia*, 73), because human love always needs to be purified and nourished in order to grow; but the analogy reminds that love does not exist without sacrifice, suffering and the cross: all true love is a crucified love!

But this is where the "joy" results, even that "joy" of love, that was the mark of the early Christian communities—they lived "with glad and sincere hearts" (Acts 2:46)—and the great majority of them were couples and families, who lived their vocation as spouses and parents seriously, in the midst of an adverse and pagan world.

As Pope Francis reminds us so well, paternity and maternity are inscribed within our human nature as men and women, created in the image and likeness of God (*Amoris Laetitia*, 9). St John Paul II used to talk about the "spousal dimension of love" saying that we are oriented towards each other; that we cannot live without one another; that others ought not be seen as a weight, a danger or tiresome, but as a gift,

a divine present. In his Theology of the Body, St John Paul II spoke of the urgency to see all reality and especially others in the light of a "hermeneutics of the gift." (*Editor's note: Hermeneutics – the theory of interpretation*)

Very dear couples united by the marriage sacrament, here is your vocation and your mission. Pope Francis invites you, as couples, to recognise each other as a gift that God has thought of and prepared for each one of you since the beginning (*Amoris Laetitia*, 72). You are a gift for each other and both of you are a gift for your children; you are a gift from God, who thus manifested in an admirable way, how much He loves you for what you are; because you are loved by God, each one of you is valued by God himself, whose love leads and guides you.

My dear couples, use these thoughts as a subject topic for yourselves, for a *Sit-Down*. Remain faithful to the mystique of our Movement, as is condensed within the *Endeavours*. They are a gift of God to the Church, that makes couples and our Movement a sign of hope, because they demonstrate, through the way you live your lives, that it is possible to live the "Joy of Love" today!

**Father José Jacinto Ferreira de Farias, scj,**

**Spiritual Counsellor to the ERI.**