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DANCING TO THE FUTURE WITH HOPE

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‘Dancing to the future’ is a good metaphor for the joy of love – Amoris Laetitia, which we would all like to experience in our marriage and family life. However, we all know that we are likely to encounter many challenges, setbacks and suffering as we go through life. This reality is reflected in our marriage vows for better or worse.... These expected realities are compounded in today’s world by the rapid social, economic and cultural changes and related values that are occurring at an unprecedented pace and are having a major impact on marriage and family life.

In the midst of this how can we dance to the future with hope? I believe that Pope Francis has shown the way in Amoris Laetitia. He expresses his hope that in reading the text, ‘all will be called to love and cherish family life, for ‘families are not a problem; they are first and foremost an opportunity’. (7) I would like to briefly describe the opportunity for couples and families provided by Equipes – Notre-Dame (Teams of Our Lady in English). It was founded in Paris by Fr Henri Caffarel in 1939 with a number of married couples on the eve of World War II. They wished to find ways of living out their marriages and family life inspired by and grounded in their Catholic beliefs. In that time of desolation and hopelessness they saw families not as a problem but as an opportunity, a great source of hope. . From these small beginnings it now operates in over 70 countries. A Worldwide gathering of Teams takes place every 6 years and 9000 attended the most recent one in Fatima last month. It was brought to Ireland over 50 years ago by John Blaney and his beloved French wife, Bernadette. They remained members of Teams as a couple over that period. John sadly passed away just last June at age 92. (You may already have obtained copies of our Literature at our stands 41 and, of course, you will also find full details on Teams by googling equipes notre dame.)

In essence Teams is about adopting a way of living out our Christian/ Catholic marriage that brings us closer to each other and to God. That way of living is based on simple endeavours. In this we recognise that our marriage at times can be joy filled and thus relatively easy to make time for our relationships with each other and with God. At other times it can be a struggle when we can experience disappointment, bitterness, exclusion and the loneliness that goes with being distant from each other.

Our first endeavour, therefore, is to make time regularly for quality communication through good times and bad. We aim to devote at least an hour once a month to talk to each other, away from distractions. We share our joys, our concerns, our hopes and fears and, where we may be following short in our relationship. We call this a ‘sit down’. Pope Francis in paras 136 to 141 of Amoris Laetitia gives clear guidance on the type of dialogue we have been trying to achieve in our ‘sit downs.’ For Teams, these are among the most thumbed sections of Amoris. That section is in Chapter 4. As you know this is a very moving reflection on the nature of genuine love which for Pope Francis is experienced and nurtured in the daily life of couples and their children. (90). Teams now regularly reflect on and are inspired by this.

The other core commitment is to make time frequently and regularly for our relationship with God. Through individual prayer we place our joys and concerns before the living God. Pope Francis quotes the Vatican Council as stating (313) that lay spirituality ‘will take its particular character from the circumstances of ...married and family life’ and that ‘family cares should not be foreign’ to that spirituality. He suggests (318) that our prayers could include telling God our worries, asking for the



needs of our family, praying for someone experiencing difficulty, and asking for help in showing love. We talk to God in prayer, but also listen to Him in regularly reading Scripture. Pope Francis reminds us (22) “ that the Word of God is not a series of abstract ideas but rather a source of comfort and companionship for every family that experiences difficulties or suffering”. But Pope Francis also points to the need for deeper bonds with God both within and outside the family quoting Lk. 8:21 ‘ My mother and my brethren are those who hear the word of God and do it’.

Couples also endeavour to make time to pray together, for example, praying the Our Father, or the Magnificat, a prayer also said at all Team meetings. This makes it easier and more normal to engage in family prayer.

Each year couples go on a Retreat, which some Teams now call a “Day for Your Marriage”. This is above all a time for taking stock and for discernment on our relationship with each other, our values, and our relationship with God. We thus reflect with our husband or wife in the security of our love and trust in each other.

The individual Team is a fundamental part of our Teams experience. We provide support for each other and, especially with the endeavours, leadership and inspiration. We meet monthly over a meal and share the key happenings in our lives, our progress with the endeavours and our prayers. We also share on a subject topic we choose to deepen our understanding of various aspects of our faith and of life. This sharing is more experiential than academic. A Team invariably evolves into a group of friends, who often become our closest friends. We share our joys, (we have many laughs), our anxieties and our problems. We are always there for each other.

As for the future, Pope Francis warns that ‘the weakening of faith and religious practice in some societies (this would now include Ireland), has an effect on families, leaving them more isolated amid their difficulties (43). For many today, in the words of Pope Francis, “ the tensions created by an overly individualistic culture, caught up with possessions and pleasures, leads to intolerance and hostility in families” (33). But Pope Francis sees hope in young people. “ We need”, he says, “to find the right language, arguments and forms of witness that can help us reach the hearts of young people, appealing to their capacity for generosity, commitment, love and even heroism, and in this way inviting them to take up the challenge of marriage with enthusiasm and courage” (40).

This represents a huge challenge to us in Teams. We are conscious of our need to find ways of sharing the great gift we have been given out in parishes and especially among the deprived through mentoring younger couples and sharing our experience of married and family life. To do so in today’s world, we need to find the right language, arguments and forms of witness.

I find this passage from Matthew’s gospel (Mt 9:32-38) very apt. ‘ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples,” The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest”. Dancing into the future challenges us, not least in Teams, to go out to the plentiful harvest of couples and families to show them the joy of love and its source in a loving God, which is the great hope for the future.