

AN ADDRESS TO RETREATANTS OF TEAMS OF OUR LADY

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WHAT IS THE CHURCH ASKING OF US?

WHAT CAN WE OFFER THE CHURCH?

The questions posed for our reflection this afternoon come out of an address given by our Holy Father Pope Francis to an international gathering of Teams of Our Lady in Rome on September 10, 2015.

In response to the question ‘what can we offer the church’, I will argue quite simply that Teams offers the Church, a **spiritual pathway expressed as a set of concrete disciplines or commitments**. I will attempt to point out that this spiritual pathway is founded on the church’s teaching on marriage and also serves as a catechesis to the faithful and an important reminder of what every Christian is called to be and to do. **The key words in this catechesis are Love, Communion and Time**. Indeed, in this address which I have before me, Pope Francis offers, in conjunction with, and on behalf of TEAMS, what is really its greatest treasure, its spiritual pathway. Let us listen to the words of the Pope: *“In the first place, then, I encourage all couples to put into practice, and to live in depth, with constancy and perseverance, the spirituality the Teams of Our Lady follow. I think that the proposed “concrete points of commitment” are truly effective aides, which enable couples to progress with confidence in conjugal life on the way of the Gospel.”* This spirituality, the practical manifestation of which is called the ‘endeavours’ is at the very heart of what our movement offers to the Church and the world. As a pastor involved on and off with the TEAMS movement for the last 17 years, I can testify that the success or failure of individual TEAMS mostly hinges on their fidelity (or lack of fidelity) to the endeavours.

Second, to the question ‘what does the church ask of us?’, *I will argue that what the Church asks of TEAMS, particularly through the magisterium of Pope Francis, is that TEAMS become more and more icons of mercy, reflections of the Good Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep and goes in search of the lost sheep. (Matt 18: 12)*. I will respectfully submit that the church asks us to find something better to say to other couples living in irregular situations, the divorced and remarried, the happily single-parent families and same-sex couples, something other than *“get thee hence Satan!”* The *TEAMS movement is challenged see itself as more than merely a support group for persons who are properly married*. We are invited to enter into Pope Francis’ understanding of the Church as a **‘field hospital’** caring for wounded persons in the midst of a terrible battle.

I turn my attention now to what TEAMS OFFERS TO THE CHURCH. The Holy Father in his address to the international gathering, references the spirituality of Teams and important components of our ‘endeavours.’ He speaks of **couple prayer** or as he terms it *“the prayer of couples and prayer in the family”* **the monthly sit down**, or as the Holy Father says: *“the time for monthly dialogue proposed to the spouses – the famous and demanding ‘duty to sit down’ which runs so counter to the habits of the frenetic and agitated world pervaded by individualism”* and lastly what he calls **‘faithful participation in Team life.’** I will argue that all of this is a

living, and practical catechesis and reminder to Christians in the body of the church of all that we are called to be. This catechesis offered by the TEAMS endeavours is ultimately rooted in the Church's teaching on marriage and conjugal spirituality.

In the course of the address, once it is carefully read, one can discern by Pope Francis, the faint outlines of a gentle catechesis on the place of marriage in the Christian life. He begins by referring to the family as the "vital cells of our societies." Ever since the time of the French philosopher Rene Descartes who coined the famous aphorism "I think therefore I am" the whole of Western society has viewed all of human existence from the perspective of the individual. What is uppermost in the human experience is the consciousness of *myself*, that I exist as an entity separate from all others, furnished with a particular set of rights and immunities. In the teaching of the Church, while she affirms the surpassing dignity of the individual, the vital cell is the human family, the most basic form of human association.

The documents of the Second Vatican Council teach that the human person is by nature inherently social. We are created for life in community. It is only within the context of community that the human person comes to fulfillment. In fact the council also teaches, that left to his own devices, man is a mystery to himself. To plumb the depths, to open the door to the mystery of man, or better yet, the mystery of human beings, two fundamental keys are needed, that key which is given by a genuine encounter with the living Christ. As we read in *Gaudium et Spes*, only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light.(GS 22) and secondly, the key which is given by relationship and human community. Man or woman cannot find completeness in his or herself. This happens only through the mystery of love and relationship. At the dawn of creation, God remarks: 'it is not good for man to be alone.'(Gen 2: 18) Each of us needs a "Thou" to respond to the call of the "I". **Our pathway in TEAMS teaches that relationship {with our spouse, our family and others} is important and we make time for it – the sit down, the family meals, the prayer in common. It is only there that we find ourselves. Our call to relationship is rooted in a deeper call to love.**

Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio* speaks of this basic vocation that we all have to love. It is a vocation that is at the heart of the spirituality of TEAMS and at the heart of the Church's conjugal, or marriage spirituality: God is love (21) and in Himself He lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in His own image and continually keeping it in being, God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion. (22) Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. (FC 11)

And again:

Christian revelation recognizes two specific ways of realizing the vocation of the human person in its entirety, to love: **marriage** and **virginity** or **celibacy**. Either one is, in its own proper form, an actuation of the most profound truth of man, of his being "created in the image of God."

Because we are made in the image and likeness of God, we can say that the committed married couple united by their mutual self-giving in their irrevocable expression of 'vows' or 'consent' together form an icon of the Trinity. Our marriage constitutes the authentic human response to God's call to love. A simple observation of our human nature shows that we experience strong attraction to each other. *This is but the biological expression of the human vocation to love*. Just as a 'laptop' computer may be 'Bluetooth- ready', God by nature makes us 'love-ready.' We see this well expressed in the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* by our current pope

where he says: Marriage is a precious sign, for “when a man and a woman celebrate the sacrament of marriage, God is, as it were, ‘mirrored’ in them; he impresses in them his own features and the indelible character of his love.

Marriage is the icon of God’s love for us. Indeed, God is also communion: the three Persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit live eternally in perfect unity. And this is precisely the mystery of marriage: God makes of the two spouses one single existence”.¹¹⁹

Elaborating on this ‘oneness which we find in marriage, the pope describes it as a **friendship**:¹²³ After the love that unites us to God, conjugal love is the “greatest form of friendship”.¹²² It is a union possessing all the traits of a good friendship: concern for the good of the other, reciprocity, intimacy, warmth, stability and the resemblance born of a shared life. Marriage joins to all this an indissoluble exclusivity expressed in the stable commitment to share and shape together the whole of life. **I would like to suggest that our pathway of shared prayer, of dialogue and discussion are practical means to realize the ‘friendship’, the COMMUNION to which all married persons are called.** Jesus says to the disciples in the Gospel of John 15: 15 – I shall no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have learnt from my Father.” Friendship means disclosure. Friendship means **sharing**. (This is very therapeutic for us in a suspicious age) Friendship then, implies a depth of sharing, of joys and sorrows, insecurities, of failures, triumphs and hopes. Our TEAM meeting encourages this communion of sharing and friendship between the partners of the individual TEAM couples and among the couples themselves. The “faithful participation in TEAM life” which the pope speaks about encourages this reciprocity, this mutual assistance and opening of one to another. The individual couple mirrors this openness on a microcosmic level and the group forms a kind of model society which is counter-cultural to the culture of suspicion which we inhabit. (*Our discussion at Lydia’s house on Trinidad’s shame culture and the way it hampers people from seeking help*).

TEAMS reminds people that **TIME** itself is important, and time is made sacred, time is hallowed by what we do with our time. TIME is for relationship. Relationship takes time, lots of time. Relate this to the ‘tiredness’ of modern culture where people barely have time for the essentials of relationship} Our most precious use of time is of course our time for God. This time takes the form of a life-long journey pursued alone as individual persons and in the company of our spouse and others. This takes us right back to the teaching on marriage and friendship. The ultimate friendship is with God, then comes the friendship with our spouse, but the growth of friendship occurs through a process of gradual maturation, in which we may often have to journey through some dark corners of ourselves. It is a journey pursued in light and shadow, but always pursued relentlessly and with great practicality. Here I think of the supreme value of our ‘**rule of life**’ a rule that helps us live the journey of life and live it well, without wasting our time.

LOVE. COMMUNION. TIME

Let us now turn to the church’s challenge to TEAMS. In his address to the International gathering in Rome Pope Francis states:

I also exhort you to be close to wounded families, who are so numerous today, due to unemployment, poverty, health problems, mourning, worry over a child, the imbalance caused by an estrangement or absence, a climate of violence. We must have the courage to come into contact with these families, in a discreet but generous way.... (and further on)

I cannot but encourage the couples of the Equipes Notre Dame to be instruments of the mercy of Christ and of the church towards people whose marriage has failed. Never forget that your conjugal fidelity is a gift of God, and that mercy has been exercised on behalf of each one of us. A united and happy couple can understand better than anyone else, as from within,

the wound and real situations of these people, and to accept them with their wounds and help them to walk in faith and in truth, under the gaze of Christ the Good shepherd, to play an appropriate role in the life of the church.

The theme of mercy referenced here appears as well in the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* which summarizes the thoughts and deliberations of the bishops at the recently concluded Synod on the Family in 2015.

...although the church realizes that any breach of the marriage bond “is against the will of God” she is also conscious of the frailty of many of her children. Illuminated by the gaze of Jesus Christ She turns in love to those who participate in her life in an incomplete manner recognizing that this grace of God works also in their lives, by giving them the courage to do good to care for one another in love and to be of service to the community in which they live and work. (AL 291)

Here I think that Pope Francis and the Synod of bishops issue an important challenge to us in TEAMS and indeed to the rest of the church to **see grace in imperfection without fearing moral confusion**. This is not to say in any way that our church is naïve or looks at life through rose-coloured glasses. **The situations in which people find themselves are varied and complex and each is not the same. They must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis.** The Pope writes: some forms of union radically contradict this (Christian) ideal, while others realize it in at least a partial and analogous way. *{Note the beginning of AL refers to the fact that acts of the magisterium CANNOT solve all moral problems. The very nature of moral dilemmas prevents this. Their evaluation hinges heavily on CONTEXT and there are as many contexts as there are people. Instead of leaning on the crutch of law and regulation, we must develop the capacity for discernment and a much deeper awareness of the role and function of CONSCIENCE in the Christian life- our people need true Christian maturity marked by the capacity for decision-making.}*

The presence of so many of our brothers and sisters in failing and often abusive marriages should temper and affect the way we proclaim the church’s teaching on the marriage covenant. We absolutely affirm with the Church’s tradition that marriage that is genuine and authentic is indissoluble and that the commitment once given cannot be withdrawn, yet we must also recognize that here in the Caribbean, particularly in Trinidad and Tobago, rates of domestic abuse are HORRENDOUS and quite a number of our sisters (mostly) live in situations that constitute a grave threat to their physical and psychological health. It is absolutely important for us to insist along with the Church’s pastoral tradition that persons have a serious obligation to avoid and even leave situations in which the loss of life – God’s first gift – is a real possibility. To recklessly endanger one’s life by staying in a life-threatening marriage situation is in a real way an act of disobedience to the great commandment which demands that we love God and our neighbour AS we love ourselves. We are never excused as human beings from the duties of appropriate self-love.

I mention psychological abuse as well. Years ago, while pastor of the Eastern parishes of Toco and Matelot, the case was drawn to me of a young woman from a village called Langousta, who suffered years of physical and mental abuse. One day, while her husband slept, she took up a cutlass and decapitated him. Here is an example of the power of psychological abuse to wound and deform the individual to such an extent that she commits an unthinkable act.

Finally, being icons of mercy in this world, involves, for us, learning to speak to people in a new way, developing the capacity to **find common points of interest, common concerns** with those who may possess beliefs we may consider abhorrent. We see a good example of this in Acts 17 where Paul addresses the men of Athens. He notices their heavily idolatrous culture, but rather than speak of their religious tradition in scathing terms, he finds a ‘bridge’ to Greek society in speaking of their ‘altar to an unknown God.’

It would require that we develop the ability to move in 'baby steps' with people, allowing the wheat and the darnel to grow until the harvest, moving problem families from 'point A' to 'point B' without demanding a RADICAL transformation in the way that they live. Here we should remember the parable of the sower. Some seed experience much more obstacles than others. As followers of Jesus Christ we should be ever sensitive to the varied situations out of which people listen to the saving Word of God.