

NOT WALLS BUT BRIDGES

THE PASTORAL CHALLENGE TO THE FAMILY IN THE NEW EVANGELISATION

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PRESENTATION OF THE TOPIC

THE SYNODAL SEASON

Family, where are you heading? The family keeps on navigating through the stormy sea of humanity which has gone beyond the second Christian millennium. Its central and irreplaceable role (Pope Francis, *Enciclica Laudatosi*, 213) encounters fresh challenges every day, sometimes these are harrowing, often these arouse our enthusiasm. In the same way that some metals, under the torque of an enormous force, do not break or bend, but allow themselves to be moulded and modelled and return afterwards to their original shape, the family is “resilient”. It encounters the provocations of our age; it allows itself to be called into question; it restores its equilibrium and its arrangements; always keeping as its benchmark God's thinking and, still more, God's dream for it.

Similarly the Catholic Church is pondering the destiny of the family in today's world. It already did this at the highest level through the Synod. After the first Extraordinary Session (October 2014) and its celebration in ordinary session (October 2015), it is time to undertake what it is that the Spirit asks of the Church, in order to be the ever faithful Spouse. It is a time of several pastoral challenges which await the family in the context of the “new evangelisation”.

“Synod” is a Greek word that means “road” (*odos*) travelled together (*syn*). It is a word that suggests a reality and a task. The *reality* is that the Church is the people of God gathered in the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (cf. Vatican Council II, *Lumen gentium* 1) - the body of Christ living in the world and in time (Idem, *Lumen gentium* 7). So it is a “synodal” reality in its very essence. The *task* is that of walking together, encountering the various personal and community journeys, in search of better ways of being “one” with the Lord and bearing witness to the whole world. This “walking together” involves the whole people of God: laity, clergy and religious. Only together can we understand what the Lord asks of the family in today's life situations.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE TEXT

The starting point (Chap. 1) is the attitude to the couple and the family in the light of Faith: the “gospel of marriage and the family”. By this expression we do not merely want to draw attention to the passages in the Gospel that deal with the family, but, more particularly, to the profoundly human reality – the family as an integral part of God's good creation – in which the light and grace of Christ shine out with particular clarity. It is in this sense that the family can be defined as “a gospel”: that is a human reality (alongside many others: the “gospel” of life, work, suffering...) illuminated and supported by God who is revealed and gives himself to us in Jesus. In this way it can shine as “good news”, full of beauty for the whole of humanity.

As for the “gospel”, the family comprises two dimensions: truth and compassion, God's plan as Jesus revealed it to us and, with these, God's pedagogy, to accompany his creatures on a path of gradual growth, marked by his tenderness. Chapter 2 focusses on ways in which families can be accompanied. A development that the magisterium of Pope Francis transmits to us with particular emphasis is: no family is perfect, each family is fragile; however it contains within itself a treasure “in earthen vessels” (2 Cor 4:7). For this reason, it is the task of the Church as Mother and Teacher to take the family by the hand and walk with it as it grows.

This growth starts with the marriage vocation, and earlier still with education about sexuality and affections (Chapter 3). From there we move on to consider the value of faithfulness within and beyond marriage (Chapter 4). Inevitably, each family must measure itself against the mystery of its own frailty as individuals, as a couple and as parents, where, furthermore, it is possible to experience a fresh period of God's fidelity and fruitfulness even as we are being put to the test. In our times, this frailty knows new types of divided, separated or “enlarged” families or new unions. (Chapter 5). The importance of the family deserves a separate, deep analysis dealing with the experience of procreation and children's education (Chapter 6); the value of the family in the social context (Chapter 7); and also the role of the family in the evangelisation of contemporary culture and its dynamics (Chapter 8). The text ends with a meeting providing a review by the team (Chapter 9).

THE METHOD OF THE SYNOD

The Synod, fully committed to following in the path outlined by the Council, also showed us a theological, pastoral and ecclesial methodology to follow, namely the “see-judge-act” method (cf. the three parts of the first *Relatio Synodi*), that we could also reformulate as the methodology of the “three I’s”: *inductive, inclusive, itinerant* method. In the various chapters of our international Study Topic, we have tried to be faithful to this methodology. A graphic symbol indicates these three parts: a face with ‘wide eyes’ to refer to “seeing”; a ‘thinking’ face for “judging”; and a ‘walking’ face to refer to “action”.

Inductive Methodology



Above all else, we are invited to read contemporary reality attentively and to listen to it confidently. Indeed the history of mankind, and that of families in particular, is full of the fruits of the Spirit of Christ, and believers are responsible for the task of discerning and interpreting them. In our day we see numerous signs of breakdown and crises occurring in families, but the signs and positive opportunities, which Vatican Council II called “the signs of the times”, are still stronger and full of promise. For example, the conjugal bond today appears more fragile than in the past, at the same time as the conditions for a better conjugal life have been created: affectionate relationships of great quality; a better relationship with our emotions; equality and respect for the dignity of women; valuing the bonds of tenderness and complementarity. Conjugal fidelity itself, although it has been weakened by numerous attacks and betrayals, is possible today in an improved form when compared to the past, as a dimension of conscience and interior conviction, much more than as the result of the rigidity and control enforced by social custom. A “positive” fidelity that is far more constructive than the mere “negative” of “Do not commit adultery” has been built day by day.

Inclusive Methodology



To be precise, ours is more a phenomenological methodology than it is inductive (which is proper to the observational and experimental sciences). Interpreting familial relationships is an experimental observation, in other words, a perspective which presupposes a judgement in the light of and employing the method of Jesus's Revelation. And even this action is not merely a transition from theory to action but is also valuable in what it reveals: in fact it is only through action and through its description that we can continue to better understand the Gospel of the family. The three stages (see-judge-act) are not sequential, but each presupposes and refers back to the other two.

In dealing with the various aspects of the family, the Synod exhorted us on several occasions to draw out and *include* the positive elements of our times (e.g. nn. 5, 35, 41 of the first *Relatio Synodi*), and *later* to underline the problematical aspects. We point out that in this “positive” approach it is not a matter of being sympathetic or devil-may-care. The inclusive method is rigorously theological because it takes as its starting point the *fullness of Christ*, only then moving on to consider *what is*, and therefore, what is still lacking in relation to this fullness, clearly from a perspective of growth and a maturing development.

So there are two aspects to this view of the family: truth and mercy. The first directs our reflection and our discernment by inviting us to constantly lift our gaze towards this plenitude of love revealed by God. It is a matter of expanding our judgement, which sadly is all too limited, in order to let ourselves be instructed and guided by the Gospel commandment: “Love one another as I have loved you”. Similarly mercy cannot be reduced to a mere moral virtue, and still less to a generic happy-go-luckiness according to which all is well. It is the synthesis and the model of all God's action throughout the history of salvation: a God who works through human weakness, despite and beyond such fragility. As in the ancient Japanese art-form, Kintsugi, mercy is a capacity to repair the broken shards of life using a golden glue of inestimable value, such that the vessel once repaired, with its fine veins shining in the sun, must appear truly more beautiful and more brilliant than before. So that “however much sin increased, grace was always greater” (Rom 5:20).

Truth and compassion are equally necessary and mutually involved. Truth alone would produce an evangelisation which only divides and which excludes; compassion alone would prevent our turning our attention towards the objective.

Itinerant Methodology



We have reached the third aspect of the methodology: an itinerant methodology that is capable of becoming a companion on our journey today. For a Church that is not only Teacher of the truth and Mother of mercy, but also Sister on the journey. All of this embraces a capacity to take the initiative in approaching the different human and familial situations, often weighed down by many flaws and shortcomings, to help them grow through a progressive and gradual journey, emphasised by the mercy and tenderness of God, and also by the lofty objective we must achieve. The Synod exhorted us to be a humane and maternal Church keeping company with others on their journey of growth. From the third meeting our questions will focus on the ethics of being a companion in order to give priority to and nourish the style that Pope Francis draws to our attention.

«Jesus shows how God's humbling act of coming to earth might always accompany the human journey and might heal and transform a hardened heart with his grace, orientating it towards its benefit, by way of the cross.» (Relatio Synodi, n.14). Pope Francis's orientation in this direction is very marked: «without detracting from the evangelical ideal, they need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively occur. [...] A small step in the midst of great human limitations can be more pleasing to God than a life which outwardly appears in order and passes the day without confronting great difficulties. Everyone needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of God's saving love, which is mysteriously at work in each person, above and beyond their faults and failings» (Gaudium Evangelii, 44).

TWO SYNTHETIC IMAGES

The oyster

The divine pedagogy, which as the Church we are called to imitate, invites us to understand that the real story of many people and families is not what "corrupts" and distances us from the fullness of God's plan, but on the contrary represents its very vehicle, its opportunity and its path. This is clearly a limited, partial and inadequate vehicle and for this reason is always caught up in a constant path of conversion, but is nonetheless real and positive. It is from this starting point that we should set out again to face the challenge of faith.

From this perspective, even evil and sin, to the extent that they open themselves to the light of conversion, can become the path of, and an opportunity for, growth. The history of salvation is nothing other than the history of the sins of men and women. The marvellous and abundant power of the Gospel of Christ crucified and risen is just that: God saves you not *despite* your limitations and your sins, but through *your limitations and your sins*. The power of God's mercy appears so abundant that even limitations and sins can become a means of salvation. It is as if man's life resembled the grain of sand that is cast into the oyster on a stormy day, and the oyster, far from thrusting it out, transforms it miraculously into a precious pearl, gradually and patiently enveloping it in a membrane of love.

The beacon and the torch

Confronted by the families of our day, who are exposed to numerous dangers and contradictions, the Synod exhorts the whole Church to be *"like the beacon of a lighthouse in a port or a torch carried among the people"* (Relatio Synodi 28). The light of the beacon is supported by the sure rock of truth and tradition; its solemn and sure light pierces the obscurity of the night and shows the way to seafarers in difficulty in the storm, so that they can avoid threatening traps and navigate towards the haven they seek. The torch's light, on the contrary, shows us a more humble and tremulous light that is capable of illuminating only a few steps on the road ahead, but enough to be able to advance through the darkness as we glimpse the short distance that has yet to be travelled. The torch's light is as stable and sure as that of the beacon, but in addition it can move around. It travels with the people, it is itinerant: it is not restricted to standing firm to show the way and the dangers to be avoided, but it follows along man's path and makes itself a companion of the pilgrimage of families in the current world. It is a friendly light and faithful companion on the journey, which does not light up the whole path but knows how to make the first steps firm and sure as they prepare the next steps, until the sought-after objective is reached. Beacon in the harbour and torch in the night: this is the face of the Church in its solidarity with families that the Synod exhorts us to develop.

Meeting No 1

"SET ME LIKE A SEAL ON YOUR HEART" – THE GOOD NEWS OF MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

I- The Word of God Song of Songs (Cant. 1:2-3; 4:1,7-11; 8:6)

*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love-making is sweeter than wine;
delicate is the fragrance of your perfume [...]
How beautiful you are, my beloved, how beautiful you are! [...]
You are wholly beautiful, my beloved, and without a blemish.[...]
Come from Lebanon, my promised bride [...]
You ravish my heart, my sister, my promised bride, you ravish my heart with a single one of your
glances [...].
What spells lie in your love, my sister, my promised bride! [...]
Your lips, my promised bride, distil wild honey. Honey and milk are under your tongue [...]
Set me like a seal on your heart, like a seal on your arm.
For love is strong as Death, passion as relentless as Sheol.
The flash of it is a flash of fire, a flame of the Lord himself.*

Love is the protagonist in the poem, sung with splendid images: dream, desire and passion. This book speaks of the emotions of the first meeting and of sexual union: body and spirit united to lose themselves and jointly build a new identity and a new existence.

In this poem the description of the bodies of the two lovers makes evident the wonder and marvel of the discovery of our beauty. Love then becomes the definitive choice of existence itself, where one can intuitively come to grips with the beauty of the other and of the eternal. Emotion calls forth will, a plan and, in this openness, love between a man and a woman opens towards the absolute that is God.

Let us meditate and reflect as couples on the Word of God

II – Presentation of the chapter

As our Movement is one of conjugal spirituality, our principal objective is to draw attention to the couple's love, which is the basis and foundation of the family. The couple's love is the **"Good News of Marriage"**.

Let us ask ourselves: what is the good news for us, as Christian men and women of our day?

The word Gospel means precisely "Good News". In effect, this word contains a joyous perspective which manifests itself outside the couple, and becomes concrete through its fruitfulness and in its evangelising mission. The Synod reminds us strongly of the sense of responsibility for this mission.

In addition, the "Good News" of the couple's love refers to the fact that this love is an event, something that is given to us continuously, like an opportune gift. Before we chose it, conjugal love was given to us by a mysterious and benevolent fate: *... "she was set apart for you before the world existed."* (Tb 6:18).

Christian faith steps in afterwards to take us by the hand and lead us to the discovery of the unimaginable depth of this good news. In fact, it is the image and reflection of a much greater event that happened, the true "good news" of human history who is Jesus Christ (cf. Mark 1:1; 1 John 1:1). The two "gospels", that of Jesus Christ and that of the couple, are intimately linked to each other. The Good News of Jesus Christ – the good news that is Jesus – is, in fact, the source of the couple's love. Then again, the couple's love is a ray of Jesus's love which reaches us and touches us. It is as it should be, through these hands that embraced us, these kisses which welcomed us, this heart which desired us – of which the Song of Songs speaks - each of us has begun to experience, in a very concrete way, the tenderness of God. It is in the good news of the couple, that each of us received the first declaration of Jesus' Good News: love.

The conjugal dimension is the basis for building the family. So the purpose of our reflection is to discover that the foundation of a healthy family arises from the initial impetus of the love between a man and a woman. Here you have the "Good News of Marriage".

Do we recognise this choice as the expression of God's love in order to continue His creation? Do we try to use our memories to revitalise our emotive and affective world? Who were we before our marriage? What

emotions, feelings and other sensations have we experienced? Retracing our story from its beginnings, we can reassess the worth of our “Good News”, which will help us to become more conscious of our marriage, our family and our mission.

Even the sorrows and the difficulties of family life in our day can be endured and supported by the goodness of the love of the couple and the family.

III – Telling Reality



“Suddenly, I felt myself pushed towards Emanuele as if by a mysterious hand, a new force was given to me, a force that did not come from me, that pushed me towards him in an inexorable fashion, a force that did not need to wait for the answers or the questions that invaded my spirit: “like an apple tree among the trees of the forest”, Emanuele was revealed to me as the man with whom I would risk my existence from that day forward. I did not resist that force; I supported it, and I entirely abandoned myself to it after recognising in it perhaps something mysterious and inexplicable. It was as if I had reached the end of a long voyage for two which had changed my existence for ever.

Only after many years did I recognise the presence of God in our meeting, a God who placed his hand on my head, who pushed me into the arms of Emanuele, and that through him, He came to meet me at that moment and that meeting would be with me and nourish me as long as I lived.”

(Elena– « Coppie della Bibbia e di oggi: storie d’amore a confronto” - Gruppo La Vigna – EDB)

[Couples in the Bible and today: comparing love stories] (La Vigna Group– EDB)

“During our 20 years of marriage it happened and it still happens that we were and are at the mercy of our small storms and our little failings that make us feel distant and alone.

I am not at ease in spirit ...I am upset with you. When one is upset, it is quite difficult to think that something beautiful can be reborn between us. I do not succeed in answering back, but I know how to sulk. I remain imprisoned by my ideas, pensive and silent: I create enormous distances.

When I don't feel that you seek me out, when I no longer feel that I am among the most important things in your life, I am shattered. I miss your attention, chatting to you, your company.

When I am like that, you understand that it needs time to get beyond such moments...

Then when my unease fades, I think of you and see what is beautiful in you. I realise that I sometimes exaggerate.

I ask your pardon for sometimes acting in a cold and hostile way towards you; I'm sorry.

I still love you”

(Barbara and Donato Team members)

“... I do not have the strength to face up to a discussion! Lately in the silence of the night I have cried a lot. Sadness and solitude make a prisoner of me and make me incapable of talking to you. I feel alone. I am distraught because I do not feel understood, appreciated, loved... What is worse still is that I feel tired and I realise that I lack the strength to retrieve our union.

I no longer recognise the harmonious couple from a time when we looked forward to discussion and shared in the joy of everyday life. I am tired and I am afraid of the future because you are not there. You are too caught up in your work and your head and your heart are not here with me, in our home and in our family. What will become of us and our marriage? I hope that this letter can give us the strength to start a discussion. Please come back.”

(Renata and Edo Team members)

To learn more

Marc Chagall	<i>Chagall e la Bibbia</i>	I Cantico dei Cantici	[The Song of Songs]
	My Lyfe	Orion Press	1960
Antonio Canova	<i>Amore e Psiche</i>	Sculpture	
Apuleio	<i>"Le Metamorfosi"</i>	[Metamorphoses]	
Carol Waitila	<i>"La bottega dell'orefice"</i>	[The Jeweller's Shop]	
Zhang Ymou	<i>La strada verso casa</i>	[The Road Home]	Film

IV – Reflection



"It is only with a unified objective for life, creating a 'we' that grows and welcomes our fragility and confidence, that it is possible to recognise in the meeting of bodies the well-being that carries us beyond ourselves - the well-being of the other that always calls us to renewal »
(Coppie della Bibbia e di oggi: storie d'amore a confronto - Gruppo La Vigna – EDB)

The attraction and the involvement of the senses are the first shock that each man and woman feels and receives at the start of their love story. This sensory "tsunami" overturns both lives, which feel a vital need to seek each other out and to meet each other. In fact love is not an abstract concept or a philosophical idea, but rather an experience whose foundation is to be found in the first two chapters of Genesis. In fact, the truth of the conjugal relationship has been given to us through the Creation story: it is the supreme gift to bring mankind to complete fulfilment. After having moulded man from "the dust of the ground" and after transforming him with His breath into a "living being", God realises that something is missing. Adam is all alone in the wondrous garden, but he rejoices when the woman is presented to him and he recognises Eve:

"The Lord God said: It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suited to him. ...The Lord God cast a deep sleep on the man, and while he was asleep, he took out one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. The Lord God then built the rib that he had taken from the man into a woman. When he brought her to the man, the man said: 'This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh....' "

So what God stated at the end of the creation of the world is true: *"God looked at everything he had made, and found it very good"*.

The good news of marriage is therefore foreshadowed and based on creation. Right from creation day man and woman are called to an ambitious objective, that of developing and growing the worth of each of them through the exercise of mutual acceptance, respect for altruism, and confidence to recognise each other in a new reality that is "US".

The Word also tells us that God makes men and women procreators and entrusts to them the work of His hands: the "earthly Paradise".

God blessed them and God said to them: Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that crawl on the earth (Gen. 1:28).

So the family finds its long-standing origin in the dream of God, in the love given to men and women. That is why when we speak of the Good News of Marriage and the Family we should think of something that is radically "good". The love of the couple which is the origin of the family creates a reality that is so good and beautiful that it is defined as the "sanctuary of the relationship". Within the family, the human person is taken care of by love that is given and received. The family is the place where one experiences the most varied forms of care and attention, particularly that directed towards the most vulnerable people: children, the aged and the sick.

In our time *"people in many parts of the world are feeling a great need to take care of themselves, to know themselves better, to live in greater harmony with their emotions and feelings and to seek affective relationships of quality in the best manner possible. These proper aspirations can lead to a desire to put greater effort into building relationships of self-giving and creative reciprocity, which are empowering and supportive like those within a family."* (Synod 9)

The Gospel of the Family tastes like warm milk for breakfast, like comfortable slippers, At the same time families tell of frantic lives that sometimes have difficulty in intersecting, and are almost like a place of incommunicability, of hostile clashes between the sexes, and sometimes of aggression and violence, solitude and misunderstandings.

The media-dominated society in which we are immersed, brings to the fore the arguments and fragilities of the couple and the family.

In society today we are witnessing denigration or even a refusal of the various motivations behind the institutional dimension of marriage. Being experienced more and more as a “private affair”, the family seems to have begun a road that leads it to lose consciousness of its own institutional identity. For example, it is the very notion of the family that is often brought into question and misrepresented. “....*On the other hand, equal consideration needs to be given to the growing danger represented by a troubling individualism which deforms family bonds and ends up considering each component of the family as an isolated unit, leading, in some cases, to the idea that a person is formed according to his own desires, which are considered absolute. Added to this is the crisis of faith, witnessed among a great many Catholics, which oftentimes underlies the crisis in marriage and the family* (Relatio Synodi, paragraph 5)

It is easy to love when everything is going well, but inevitably difficulties creep into the conjugal relationship. Love between a man and a woman needs to be built up every day through the will, through care, devotion and forgiveness, if we are to live in harmony. Daily ordinary stresses lead married couples into crises which can go so far as to risk separation. Even in the first years of marriage, couples live through these difficulties in order to create an equilibrium in the quest for an “US”. The wonder, beauty and marvels experienced in the first stages of marriage are put to the test by objective difficulties; both parties run up against their respective limits and become aware of their incapacity to accept the other as they are. The world of the other, a world seen as a “dream”, seems difficult to explore and understand, and it becomes hostile, creating distance and lack of communication. This is the time to be faithful, for renewed confidence in the promise of love previously made to each other. “*You have endurance and have suffered for my name, and you have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: you have lost the love you had at first. Realise how far you have fallen. Repent, and do the works you did at first* (Rev 2:3-5).

Moreover, it is only appropriate that the **Good News of Marriage** can be expressed with great strength through these struggles: when we are capable of overcoming ourselves in order to accept the other as she/he is, without regard to limitations or failings, knowing how to celebrate her/his qualities; when we again rely on the other; when we have the courage to forgive ourselves. Then the Good News not only saves the couple, but also becomes a witness for those who observe them.

“Dear families, you know well that the true joy that we savour in the family is not something superficial, it does not come from objects or from favourable circumstances. The true joy comes from a profound harmony between the people that is heartfelt, and makes us appreciate the beauty of being together, of supporting each other on the journey of life. (Pope Francis)”.

Before ending this reflection we want to propose to you a quotation from the lecture delivered by Fr Caffarel in Rome on 5 May 1970:

“I think that you agree with me in recognising that the challenge posed to Christians by atheism demands an urgent response - that of our witness. However little one knows and loves God, how can we not find it intolerable that his true face is so disfigured, insulted and abused; however little one cares about others, how do we tolerate that they are plunged into anguish, into a state of agitation, into the absurd because they are unaware of the true God; however little sense of human solidarity one has, how can we not feel jointly responsible for the betrayal of God by of Christians? The mission to reveal the true face of God in our day is the responsibility of the whole Church. But in a certain sense it is a mission that is the responsibility of married couples in a very special way.

I guess your reaction: 'This is a massive mission, too massive; we have neither the time nor the ability'. And if I were to reply: You have been especially chosen, because you are couples who are able to accomplish this mission. You have a charism that belongs to you. Besides, in order to be the witnesses that the world awaits, there is no need to abandon your familial duties and professional responsibilities; nor to leave on a distant crusade.

I should like to explain more clearly: it is because of your conjugal love and your presence as a couple, that the atheistic world, without realising it, is awaiting witnesses such as you.”

To learn more

Ermes Ronchi e Marina Marcolini	<i>Una fede nuda</i> - Edizioni Romena – 2014 (A Naked Faith)
Antonietta Potente	<i>La fede</i> - Edizioni Icone – 2006 (Faith)
Arturo Paoli e Dino Biggio	<i>Mi formavi nel silenzio</i> - Edizioni Paoline - 2013
Giovanni Vannucci	<i>Nel cuore dell'essere</i> - Edizioni Romena – 2004 (In the Heart of Being)
Walter Kasper	<i>Il vangelo della famiglia</i> - Edizioni Queriniana, Brescia – 2014 (The Gospel of the Family)



V. Ideas for the Sit-down

- When were you “a marvel in my eyes” to me?
- When did we feel so close to each other that we thought we were truly ‘one?’

VI – Running the meeting

General Sharing – Some ideas

- What meetings did we find provided a witness to the “good news” of marriage?
- When did we try to witness to the beauty of our being together in the Lord?

Sharing - Some ideas

- What passage made us understand the “good news” of marriage?
- What spiritual experience caused us to grow in fidelity?

Discussion of the study topic - some ideas

- Have we understood the beauty and importance of the mission that God has entrusted to us?
How are we thinking of putting this into practice in our life as a couple?
- As we experience help from God, from our fellow team members and from those close to us at difficult times, how can we best stay beside those whose family life is proving difficult?

VI – Final Prayer

You have called our hearts by name.

You placed our feet on the same path.

You trace out our path to you,

and today your presence enfolds our love in a tender embrace.

You placed a “yes” on our lips to make known the infinite marvel of your action.

Watch over our union, strengthen these feet and lead us on this path.

Give us strength when human love loses its enthusiasm.

Speak to our hearts when silence makes itself felt.

(Elisa P.)

Meeting 2

"...HE TOOK THEM WITH HIM ..." – THE ART OF ACCOMPANYING

I – The Word of God

Luke: 9, 28-36

"About eight days after he said this, he took Peter, John and James and went up the mountain to pray. While he was praying, his face changed in appearance and his clothing became dazzling white. And behold, two men were conversing with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his exodus that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem. Peter and his companions had been overcome by sleep, but becoming fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. As they were about to part from him, Peter said to Jesus: 'Master, it is good that we are here; let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' But he did not know what he was saying. While he was still speaking, a cloud came and cast a shadow over them, and they became frightened when they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said: 'This is my chosen Son; listen to him.' After the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. They fell silent and did not tell anyone at that time what they had seen."

This is a difficult moment in the life of Jesus. He has to take the decision to head towards Jerusalem and he knows he is going to encounter painful situations and death. So he feels the need to climb the mountain, to be apart, to pray, with his friends. When it comes to making a choice that commits us and is sometimes difficult, we can be tempted to take the path towards a more comfortable life and not head 'towards Jerusalem' where insecurity and instability await us. But this Gospel of the Transfiguration invites us to pause, to discern before deciding, to seek the closeness of our dearest friends, to make sure we listen in order to make room for God. We also can live the experience of the hand of God which accompanies us towards our 'exodus': the road becomes accessible to us if we are 'accompanied' hand in hand by friends - fellow travellers, who go some of the way with us. We too may be asked to become companions to our brothers and sisters in turn. Jesus is accompanied in this experience of Grace by Moses and Elijah. Jesus' friends are present, and even if they do not fully understand what is happening, they are with him.

When someone takes care of us, we have a strong experience of consolation.

We meditate and reflect on the Word of God as a couple

1. *Presentation of the chapter*

The etymology of the word accompanying ('cum panis') reminds us of sharing bread and resources with others. That is what today's men and women are called to do.

Accompanying is the opposite of solitude and isolation, not just physical isolation but also at the spiritual level.

The action of accompanying assumes all the delicacy and respect possible for the other; it is not a matter of accompanying in the sense of 'bringing' the other where I think I should lead him, but means being his neighbour, listening carefully to him and being beside him while helping him to discover the truth so that he can follow his own road in a unique, exclusive, creative and personal way.

We must learn to "remove our sandals from our feet at the holy ground of the other" (cf. Ex 3:5), and "the pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life." (EG 169) We need to take account of this attitude within the couple and in relation to other couples and families, especially in difficult times of suffering and solitude. In delicate situations we "need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively occur. ... A small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties" (EG 44).

Accompanying is then truly an art; it will be lived on the tip of the toes, or better still 'on the tip of the heart'.

True accompanying leads to the faith, to self-discovery and discovery of truth, love and freedom. It must be purified of the temptation to judge the other, to want to make the other like me, by seeking to impose what is right and good for me. On the contrary, true accompanying means knowing how to wait for the other with compassion and tenderness, as God does with each of us.

Accompanying means opening oneself up to the solidarity between men and women; it means building an outgoing Church that knows how to welcome, support and practise compassion.

Accompanying means spreading evangelical hope, which is not a vague optimism, but means believing that God never abandons us and that good will end up conquering evil.

Accompanying means knowing how to make room for the other, knowing that it is not us but the Lord who will bring forth fruit in the life of each individual and in the small domestic Church that is the family.

Accompanying means sharing the Gospel, displaying it, witnessing to it with our lives, even when they are bruised by injuries.

Accompanying means building bridges between people, ideas, opinions and paths that are different for each of us.

Accompanying means establishing trust, where trust and hope are missing.

II. *Telling reality*



A couple that knows how to be companions move us to become companions who, together, look to the Most High:

Dear friends, as many of you already know, life has just made us face a very difficult test. I was diagnosed with a serious hepatic carcinoma and as you can readily imagine this news devastated our existence. We are still in shock and a cloud of scenarios, hypotheses, thoughts, fears and questions are rushing through my mind. Behind this disastrous and useless cloud from time to time I glimpse my spiritual soul - I see a place and I attempt to go there. In this place I find the world, my wife, my parents, and my faith in Jesus. But the most extraordinary thing, hope for a cure, strength of communion... is that you are there. Our friends. We feel that you are close by and you make us feel the presence of the Risen One.

...what can appear sparkling and alive from the outside, in us is uncertain and hesitant. We drone though prayers for salvation like people who are frightened and terrified. We weep and protest in our heart of hearts. It is hard to feel that we are in harmony with God in such circumstances, preoccupied as we are by the material aspects of this world. Grief and not the strength of our trust makes us spiritual, and, without hiding anything, this reveals how very slight our resources are. And yet – as the Gospel explains on many occasions - our true strength lies in weakness, and it is only when we feel overpowered that we succeed in giving priority to the spirit of God. It is only when our ego is down and out that we allow love to embrace us. This happens in concrete terms through the person of Jesus who is present in the people around us - present in each of you. How fortunate that he became incarnate in a man! Had it been otherwise I do not know how we would have been able to live and believe.

...the temptation of the devil is to close ourselves in, to become withdrawn and to see nothing but our own universe, as if we were not part of a great loving action that involves the world and all of humanity. I seek the presence of this love, and I find it immediately, concrete and tangible, near me, in my wife. It is undeniably Christ's love, and I am consoled straight away. And then there are my friends, all of you who are close to me, who bring the world to me here, with your families, stories of a thousand life journeys affected by joy and sorrow. We pray for all those who are undergoing hurt and suffering. May God take them tenderly into his arms.

...we are fortunate, we are never abandoned, not for so much as an instant. Jesus says of friendship that there is no greater love than giving one's life for a friend; these words have always resonated with us. Through this current of affection, it is God's love that is manifest in our daily lives and that causes us to say, without any fear, that we love each other more than ever, we are in love. I cannot describe what Dora does for me; she teaches me what selflessness in marriage means. Must one fall ill in order to fully live this dimension? Of course not! However it is undeniable that certain situations make us more attentive, and this is our current situation. We thank God that he made us meet.

... the temporal space that sometimes seems to expand into the future and then seems to contract and become short is the time to talk to each other. A time where it is possible to strip down and externalise everything that is hidden or folded away in the depths of our souls. It is the time where we must also try to find a calm, sincere and relaxed communication with people with whom we have had more difficulties.

(Bruno† and Dora, team members)

To learn more

Russian Icon	Friendship, Louvre Museum
Film	«Another Year», Mike Leigh, 2010 «The Butterfly Circus», short film, 2009
André Louf :	Engendrés par L'Esprit - Éditions Qiqajon 1994

III.

e *flection*



If accompanying is an art, we have to develop a ‘pedagogy’ of accompanying, which means finding a way of becoming a neighbour to the other, whether we are dealing with an individual, a couple or a family.

The art of accompanying belongs to the very nature of man who was born for a life of relationships, and therefore feels a need for this. Men and women, each in their own relationship journey, need to be **supported by each other** in order to resist fear of solitude, and to be helped and understood.

Accompanying means declaring to the world that in order to make progress we need to be at least a couple. There is no journey that can be undertaken in isolation. We must support and be supported. The Lord promised us that he would never abandon us, but how can we perceive his presence in concrete terms? We feel it in the one who is close to us, who takes us by the hand, who shares our joys and our sorrows. They must also accept being accompanied.

“We have to see the other with Jesus's eyes, but Jesus too allows himself to be seen. He is naked before us on the cross. His eyes see through all our disguises but he has the courage to allow himself to be looked at, even dead on the cross when he himself can no longer look. In a couple or even in the religious life, we learn the reciprocity of compassion. We allow ourselves to be touched by the other person's experiences. We look at him with our eyes open. But we must also dare to let ourselves be looked at by our husband or our wife. We must not hide our weaknesses, our doubts, our hesitations.” (T. Radcliffe, Brasilia 2012)

If we are to allow ourselves to be led and to be accompanied, we must nourish our trust in our neighbour and in God. The words of Pope Francis enlighten us on the themes of solitude and individualism that often accompany our daily existence: *“...From this point of view, we need a Church capable of walking at people's side, of doing more than simply listening to them; a Church which accompanies them on their journey; a Church able to make sense of the 'night' contained in the flight of so many of our brothers and sisters from Jerusalem; a Church which realizes that the reasons why people leave also contain reasons why they can eventually return. But we need to know how to interpret, with courage, the larger picture. Jesus warmed the hearts of the disciples of Emmaus. ...Are we still a Church capable of warming hearts?”* (to the Brazilian bishops, 2013).

In interpreting the notion of accompanying as *"taking care of"*, the passage dealing with the Good Samaritan provides us with an insight.

“The Samaritan saw the man lying by the side of the road and was seized by compassion. This literally means that he was 'grabbed by the guts'. The word compassion means 'feeling something with someone'. It is good to feel for someone. That is part of compassion, but alone it can be condescending and patronising. I must also feel with them, honouring how they feel and how they see things.

When love is considered in its general sense of agape, it implies that we approach the other intimately, but also that we leave the other some space to be themselves.

The greatest freedom is to give one's life. 'For freedom Christ has set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.' (Galatians 5:1). This is the freedom of marriage, in other words the risk of giving oneself to another person. A person who does not dare take this risk, but who always wants to be in control of everything is a prisoner of this fear.

Part of the family's mission in contemporary society is to encourage people to take the risk of loving. Perhaps young people sometimes cohabit because they are afraid of making this commitment. Or others who are in a second or third relationship are afraid of being hurt anew, and want to keep complete control of their lives. Let us encourage them to have the courage to let God overturn their plans!” (T. Radcliffe, Brasilia 2012)

Accompanying is **being attentive** to the other/others, principally with the heart. Sometimes we run the risk of listening with the head and then acting from our point of view and our convictions, without being truly attentive in a profound way to the other. This can also happen within the couple, family or team.

Pope Francis (EG 45) affirms that it is inevitable that the Gospel encounters people *"within the limitations of their circumstances"*, in other words in specific situations, marked by limitations, weakness and often also by sin. Whoever wants to become a companion to his neighbour on the Gospel path *"is aware of these limits and makes himself 'weak with the weak...' (1 Cor 9:22) They" constantly seek to communicate more effectively the truth of the Gospel in a specific context, without renouncing the truth, the goodness and the light which they can bring whenever perfection is not possible....so they always do what good they can, even if in the process, their shoes get soiled by the mud of the street"*.

Father Caffarel tells us that *"knowing how to listen is a great art, even Christ warns us: 'Take care, then, how you listen' (Luke 8:18). Listening is not only an exercise in intelligence. The word 'listen' does not refer to a solitary activity but a meeting, an exchange, a heart to heart which in its essence is prayer"* (Cahier sur l'oraison, 1966).

Clearly the art of accompaniment is not some sort of cut-rate indulgence, or cheap forgiveness which, because of human weakness, would play down the level of the Gospel's demands. On the contrary *"Although it sounds obvious, spiritual accompaniment must lead others ever closer to God... To accompany them would be counterproductive if it became a sort of therapy supporting their self-absorption, and ceased to be a pilgrimage with Christ to the Father."* (EG 170) *"Someone good at such accompaniment does not give in to frustrations or fears. He or she invites others to let themselves be healed, to take up their mat, embrace the cross, leave all behind and go forth ever anew to proclaim the Gospel."* (EG 172). Contenting oneself and others with mediocrity, using human weakness as an excuse, makes us no longer **'pilgrims' hurt and restored on the path towards God**, but *'drifters, flitting around themselves and never getting anywhere.'* (EG 170).

Accompanying our brothers and sisters along Gospel paths requires the necessary human qualities of attentiveness, intelligence and tenderness which emanate from the heart of Christ when He draws near to the poor, sinners and marginalised people. Pope Francis exhorts us, too, to take on these sentiments from Christ's heart. He does so while remarking, not without a certain bitterness, that all too often evangelical mercy is undermined by forms of rigidity and harshness which obscure the proclamation of the Good News, making us act *"as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father."* (EG47)

To learn more

Relatio Sinody - Lineamenta
Familiaris Consortio
Lumen Gentium
Papal letter to families



IV. *Ideas for the Sit-down*

In our marriages we should never cease looking at our spouse. But after some years of marriage, we think we know the other so well that we no longer need to look at them!

- Fear often makes us blind: do I succeed in looking at the other and allowing myself to be looked at by the other? What difficulties do I encounter?
- In an open and deep dialogue, do I first of all address things that have to be said and done instead of starting from what 'I feel'?

- Is prayer for us a time for communicating deeply with the other? Do we give ourselves over unambiguously to the action of the Spirit?

V. *Running the meeting*

General sharing – Some ideas

“If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans”. Love unravels the plans we have carefully developed for our lives. If we love we must lose control of our lives in a certain sense because we cannot foresee what love will ask of us.

- Do we know how to interpret the social changes that affect the family in our day? Are we involved in our daily lives in the light of faith?
- Do we let ourselves be accompanied confidently by the Father “in order that he alone may weave the canvas of our lives?” (H. Camara).

Sharing - Some ideas

Journeying within couples and with other families requires us to look beyond ourselves in order to speak truthfully to others; it is not easy but we can find the necessary strength when we meet Jesus.

- Do I orient myself and journey towards choosing a rule of life?
- I hear and I read the Word, but do I ‘savour’ it, and ‘ponder’ and what response does the Word evoke in me?

Discussion of the study topic - some ideas

- Each of us carries within us the memory of a special person whose closeness we experienced at some stage of his/her own story. Did this experience have an influence on me, on you, on us as a couple?
- Am I capable of being a companion, witness and prophet in my family? What obstacles are there today to walking "alongside the other"?

VI. *Final Prayer*

Walk with the one you love but never get ahead of them, because you would not realise that that they had stopped because of some problem.

Never lag behind, because in the happy times you will not succeed in seeing the joy on their face and at sad times you would not see their tears.

Walk at their side and remember to help them if they should fall ...

Never be a hindrance for those you love, but a cheerful companion on life's path.

Meeting 3

"HE BLESSED THEM AND SAID TO THEM..." – THE MARRIED VOCATION

I. The Word of God Genesis 1:26 - 28

Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth. God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and God said to them: Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that crawl on the earth.

Genesis 2:22-25

The LORD God then built the rib that he had taken from the man into a woman. When he brought her to the man, the man said: "This one, at last, is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called 'woman,' for out of man this one has been taken. "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body. The man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame.

"When we read the account of Creation in Genesis, we risk imagining that God was a magician, complete with an all-powerful magic wand. But that was not so. He created beings and he let them develop according to the internal laws with which He endowed each one, that they might develop, and reach their fullness. He gave autonomy to the beings of the universe at the same time as He assured them of his continual presence, giving life to every reality. And thus Creation has been progressing for centuries and centuries, millennia and millennia, until becoming as we know it today. As for man, however, there is a change and a novelty. When, on the sixth day in the account of Genesis, comes the moment of the creation of man, God gives the human being another autonomy, an autonomy different from that of nature, which is freedom. And he tells man to give a name to all things and to go forth through history. He makes him the steward of Creation, even that he rule over Creation, that he develop it until the end of time..." (Pope Francis – 27 October 2014)

By this divine gesture, which marks the break between human beings and the rest of creation, God places man in the challenging territory of freedom, addressing himself "to the *ish*" (man) in an idiom comprised of dignity and responsibility that He gives man in equal quantities. Then God leaves the stage and leaves Adam astounded by the creation of Eve: *"This one, at last, is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh."* Adam does not see something different from him, but something that resembles him, the same flesh, the same bones and recognises her as part of him. Now men and women have the same dignity and are the sole rulers of creation. They are free to answer God's call.

Meditation and reflection as a couple on the Word of God

II. Presentation of the chapter

In this third chapter we continue our reflection in order to understand what the married vocation means.

From the start of adolescence we have asked ourselves the meaning of our life and we still ask the same question. Our response as Christians is that life is a vocation to Love. What does it mean to be called to Love?

In the figurative sense the word vocation means *to be naturally inclined towards something*, or more simply one sees it as meaning: *attitude, disposition, inclination, propensity*.

Gaudium et Spes, in proclaiming the grandeur of the vocation of man who is called to communion and dialogue with God, provides us with a ready-made focus for reflection: *God is love (John 1:4,8) 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 (Familiaris Consortio 11).* Consequently love is the fundamental and innate vocation of each human being.

In paragraph 11 of *Familiaris Consortio* we find: *"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 embodiment of the most profound truth of man, of his being 'created in the image of God' ".concretization

The book of Genesis states: *God created mankind in his image... male and female he created them.* The human being God had in mind was a person, a sexual person, an inseparable unity: body and soul. Being endowed with a body, we feel a natural inclination towards the other sex and the desire to have someone at our side.

As an adolescent, we began to ask ourselves «who are we and why do we exist». We experienced progressively, our physical body, our emotional life and discovered we are sexual beings. We experienced the different phases of love that went from love turned inwards to more adult love: self-sacrificing love (*agape*) where the physio-biological and emotional-psychological levels are found. Now as a couple we understand the depths of the truth of love. The couple experiences the firmest bond that human beings can forge. Amongst other things, being married in the Church means that we are putting ourselves and our own love at God's disposal so that it can be transformed into a proclamation of His Love. Pope Francis reminds us that it is because of this love that “the spouses are invested with a true and proper mission, so that starting with the simple ordinary things of life, they may make visible the love with which Christ loves His Church”. (Pope Francis, 2 April 2014).

III. *Telling reality*



Very dear friends,

Before beginning our celebration we should like to share our thoughts with you... and how many we have had about this day! We had dreams and wishes right from our adolescence, but the face alongside our own was never clearly defined until we met.

Sometimes we have found ourselves thinking:

Carlo: What if I had not met you?

Marta: What if our paths had not crossed? We would have been lacking something! Our lives would have been incomplete....

But, you know, we understood that what we would have been lacking would not have been the other half of the apple, the one which always matches perfectly.... No, we would have lacked the one who chooses us - every morning, as soon as we wake up, every evening when we return home tired after a day's work, after every argument or every misunderstanding!

Today we are here to say, before God and before you, that we CHOOSE each other...

I, Marta, choose you, just you, Carlo...

I, Carlo, choose you, just you, Marta, to be by my side...

All of you experienced our journey with us, some of you near at hand, some of you a little more distant ... And today we ask you to live with us from this new starting point....

We know that if you walk with us, our marriage will last and be firm and strong!

Because marriage is not a private matter, but a relationship between two people who are open to the world, that is why we ask you, you who are our world, to be with us today and to be part of our future lives!

(Marta and Carlo)

God says: Christian couple, you are my pride and my hope.

When I created heaven and earth and the great stars in the heavens, I saw in my creatures traces of my perfections, and I found that this was good. When I had covered the earth with my great mantle of fields and forests, I saw that this was good. When I had created the innumerable animals each according to their species, I contemplated in these living and abundant beings a reflection of my bountiful life, and I found that this was good. A great solemn and jubilant hymn then rose from all my creation celebrating my glory and my perfections.

Nonetheless I did not see anywhere the image of what is my most secret and fervent life.

*Then there developed in me a need to reveal the best of myself, and it was my finest invention. That is how I created you, the human couple, “in my image and likeness”, and I saw that this was **very good**. In the midst of this universe in which each creature announces my glory and celebrates my perfections, at last love had emerged, to reveal my Love.*

Human couple, my beloved creature, my favoured witness, do you understand why you are dear to me above all creatures? Do you understand the immense hope I have for you? You are the bearer of my reputation, my glory, you are the great reason for hope for the universe... because you are Love.

(H. Caffarel)

I have been with my partner for two years now. He's a nice guy. Of course we do have arguments, but, all in all, we get on. Still, I sometimes catch myself wondering whether there is someone more suited to me. Would I be happy with him? How am I to understand if he is the man of my life?

(Andreina)

"...I take this opportunity to express my opinion on marriage - this institution which seems to have run its course. I begin by saying that the problem, as such, is not marriage. I think of those who live as de factos and the problems are the same. The fact is that there should be a contract that is renewable, for example, every five years. We often get married very young, and, being in love, that seems to us the right thing to do; but after ten, fifteen or twenty years are we sure that we are the same person? Often we change or we discover what really pleases us or what we are deep down, or that the person beside us does not measure up to what we were expecting. But in the meantime there are children, mortgages and various practical issues besides affection for the person who has been a part of your life for so long.... If we had other lives it would be easier. The truth is that we are all teetering between reality and what we should like.... When it is just a question of sex, things become easier or at least, less painful.... This is what ought to be removed once the marriage contract has been entered into: the possibility of falling in love with another, and everything would be easier..."

Letter to Natalia Aspesi in "Vendredi de Repubblica"

To learn more

J. Allemand

Henri Caffarel – Un homme saisi par Dieu. (A man chosen by God),
Equipes Notre Dame 1997

Bernadette et Bernard Chovelon

The Adventure of Marriage. Ed. Qiqajon. Magnano (BI) 2013

Film:

Tutti i santi giorni (Every single day), Director: Paolo Virzi Italy 2012

The Way, Director: Emilio Estevez USA 2010

Calling of Saint Matthew

(Caravaggio: Saint Louis des Français Rome 1599-1600)

Interview with Pope Francis

by Antonio Spadaro Santa Marta, 19 August 2013

IV. Reflection



How can I tell if he is the man of my life?

Andreina's question is the result of inner reflection which is necessary in order to succeed in understanding "who we are". Mankind has always sought his innermost identity, the voice that calls him "to be": but he cannot succeed all on his own in understanding the mystery of his identity. He can only do so in a relationship with the other. From the outset, he does not give himself life but receives it from others. It is always thus, on life's journey: his deepest identity is born of and defined by his relationship with others. Mankind is called to freedom, to be the protagonist of his life, but always starting from an initial connection with someone. He is not a *self-made man*, a self-referential person.

For this reason, we say that life is a "vocation or calling". Our deepest identity is awoken and called forth by others. It is as if everything is animated from within by a voice that leads a person towards the principle and its promises. This 'calling' changes us. It is as if we are uprooted; it is a break with the past; almost a death. We must abandon everything to become what God wants. Vocation is like a new name: "*Let anyone who can hear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches: to those who prove victorious I will give some hidden manna and a white stone, with a new name written on it, known only to the person who receives it.*" (Rev. 2:17). This voice that calls us to our true identity comes from God. **Our vocation is to attain union with the will of God**, and only in the light of that union do we truly know ourselves. Vocation is not the expression of something that already exists, but is the accomplishment, through grace, of what we are called to be. 'Grace'

means that my vocation is given to me without my having any power over it or right to it, but it alone makes me what I want to be. Through our vocation, we are called to be ourselves.

At the same time, something in us protests, because we think that God can put forward a plan for us to follow, drawn up without us, without even giving us any reliable way of knowing what it is.

Mankind is constantly surprised by life (in the literal sense of «sur-prise», taken from above), which “happens” beyond any calculation or foresight and one is called on to respond freely. **Your ethical path** does not begin with what you would want to be, but is based on what you are, in order to become what you should be. It is useless and foolish to dream of a different starting point. You are called to freely become who you are. You are the result of whatever life opens up to you at every step and of how you choose to deal with life’s opportunities. In other words, we could also say that, by creating us in his image, God calls each of us to be a reflection of himself. This is God's expectation and hope; it is the grandeur and the risk of our life - that of being called to awaken God's joy through the quality and generosity of our response.

The Bible story of Tobit and Sarah gives us an example of this inner journey. They establish their marriage on God's plan as described in Genesis. They recognise that their love story conforms to the plan that God has for them. Their life as a couple is founded on the word of God and it is in the light of this Word that they are able to discover their own deepest identity and their vocation. In order to meet Sarah, Tobit sets out on a journey; he seeks, he gambles, and finally with the help of an angel, he understands that a route has been set out for him. It is up to him to follow it.

In this vocational vision of life, the encounter of a man with a woman and of the woman with the man is decisive. This vocation is not for everyone, but, yes, it is for most humans. It is the path which, starting from the first meeting (falling in love), leads to a free choice to build together a story, a plan, and **to become “one flesh”** (Gen. 2:24). It is no longer one person alone, but two people who decide on a common life journey; in the intertwining of their lives they draw the definitive fulfilment of their respective identities as husband and wife (and later as father and mother in the fruitful openness of their love). Becoming “one flesh” does not exist of its own accord, on the contrary, it must be continually wanted, renewed, constructed and defended. (R. Guardini, *Etica*)

In today's reality, sometimes the passage of time and a train of events bring the vocational reality to crisis point.

The heart of the married vocation – like all vocations – is love. It is not only emotions, feelings and affection. It is that, too. But conjugal love is essentially also decision-making, choice, will and planning. It is a response to an invitation made by God as part of your life together.

After an initial period of varying duration, it can happen that the love (*eros*) diminishes, changes or is transformed: this is truly the decisive moment to grasp whether a true marriage will be born or whether the promise of the first meeting will end up as a flash in the pan. Through marriage, the couple become “one flesh”, sharing a life in common that defies and surpasses time, not only through feelings but also through deeds, actions and destiny. It is in this way that each spouse fulfils their identity; not just in the moments of fantasy, dream and enthusiasm, but also in the reality of everyday life. Marriage gradually permeates the reality: its positive and negative qualities, the family and the home built together.

Do we know how to discern, accompany and let ourselves be accompanied along the road of weakness as a couple and as a family?

To learn more

Vatican Council II

R. Guardini,

P. Ricoeur,

C. Theobald,

C. Yannaras,

Gaudium et Spes

Accettare se stessi, (Accept yourself), Morcelliana, Brescia 1992

Etica, (Ethics), Morcelliana, Brescia 2001

La persona, (The person), Morcelliana, Brescia 2013

Vocazione, (Vocation), EDB, Bologna 2011

La libertà dell'etos, Qiqajon, Magnano (BI) 2015



V. *Ideas for the Sit-down*

Let us try to recall the feelings that we experienced when we practised discernment regarding our call to marriage.

In our relationship as a couple what are the effects of marriage from the point of view “*of identity*” and “*otherness*”?

What values have we as our couple “re-discovered” in marriage in recent times?

What changes have we accepted in order to stay faithful to our marriage?

VI. *Running the meeting*

General sharing – Some ideas

The word ‘vocation’ presupposes a call coming from ‘on-high’. It is a message addressed to mankind so that we will commit ourselves to the path that God himself has traced out for us.

Are we capable of listening to the divine call and silencing our own will?

Sharing – Some ideas

What *new name* (quality/essence) did you find/seek in the *white stone* that was given to you? (Rev. 2:17)

Discussion of the study topic - some ideas

Why do all too many communities and believers no longer know what an experience of vocation can be?

Why do we not know how to link our Christian faith to a vocation, and still less how to understand this faith as a way of experiencing our “purpose in life”?

VII. *Final prayer*

My “yes”

I was created for a particular purpose,

And no-one else was created like me.

I take my place in God’s plan,

A place occupied by no-one else.

What does it matter whether I am rich or poor,

Scorned or respected by others:

God knows me and calls me by my name.

He has entrusted a task to me.

I have my mission.

In some ways I am necessary to his purpose,

Just as necessary in my place

As an archangel is in his.

He did not create me in vain:

I shall do good; I shall do his work.

I shall be an angel of peace,

A preacher of truth,

In the place he designated for me

And that he has not entrusted to anyone else;

Doing his will without being aware of it,

Provided that I follow his commandments

And serve him in my vocation.

John Henry Newman

Meeting 4

"I SHALL MAKE YOU MY SPOUSE FOR EVER" – EDUCATION IN FAITHFULNESS

I- Word of God

Hosea 2:16-17; 21-22

Oracle of the Lord:

"But look, I am going to seduce her

And lead her into the desert

And speak to her heart.

...There she will respond as when she was young,

As on the day when she came up from Egypt.

I shall betroth you to myself for ever,

I shall betroth you

in uprightness and justice, and faithful love and tenderness.

Yes, I shall betroth you to myself in loyalty

and in the knowledge of the Lord."

Fidelity is a fundamental issue. That is what the sacred text seems to want to tell us. It introduces knowledge of the true reality of God.

The Old Testament book of the prophet Hosea is a truly dramatic text that deals with a subject which is the antithesis of the love-relationship, in other words infidelity.

The dimension of a promise that is not kept is part of the challenge implicit in every loving relationship; one might say that they are part of the very experience of love. Love is very much desired, and as such, it is so full of expectations that it naturally results in disappointments, falls and injuries. In addition, love must constantly be defended, because there are few things that are so much under attack as is love.

At a difficult time in his family life, when his love must face up to the betrayal of the loved one, Hosea understands the deepest meaning of God's love for his people, and makes it the subject of his prophetic preaching.

With regard to Israel, the Lord is like a spouse who has been betrayed, yet continues to love his spouse and does everything he can so that she will abandon her lovers and return to him. In so far as he is a spouse betrayed, Hosea is called upon to follow the same path of faithfulness.

In the light of this insight and seen from the perspective of God's faithfulness, the relationship between spouses acquires fresh nuances of love and tenderness. Having become the symbol of the covenant between God and his people, human love is ennobled and deepened: it becomes the indissoluble bond that unites two people, leading them to communicate and share all the aspects of their lives.

Meditation and Reflection on the Word of God as a couple

II. *Presentation of the chapter*

Nature continues to amaze us as scientific studies reveal new aspects: animals that remain faithful for life! The animal world suggests that what can sometimes seem to restrict us and bind us, can become a stimulus and a source of salvation.

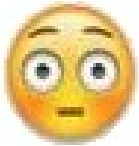
Being faithful means keeping to one's commitment. It means sharing every aspect of our lives. It means continuing to be amazed by the gift of our spouse in order to refresh our passion. It means remaining steadfast even when we find ourselves in uncertain times. In short, faithfulness is one of those values which has a little of the scent of the old photos we look at when we want to recall someone who was important to us. It tastes of the traditional country food that has a definite flavour because it is prepared through tiredness and sweat, one that has overcome fear of torrential rain after the planting or drought that burns the shoots. We can have the impression that fidelity is like wearing an old dress sanctioned by tradition; it can seem unfashionable when everyone else is wearing the latest designs.

Fidelity is the value that reminds us not of our nature but of our calling, our vocation. This is because too often we deny the genetics of being faithful. And we do not want to refer exclusively to the sexual aspect. On

the contrary, in addressing this chapter we should like everyone to make an effort to see sexual fidelity as a logical consequence of a deeper, more firmly entrenched, one might say, more complete fidelity.

This path towards virtue is strewn with obstacles and difficulties; one comes across various forms of infidelities relating to the abandonment of the original promise to each other, of reciprocal care and understanding, confidence and respect, of the feeling of being united and unique: egoism and arrogance are like woodworms that eat away at the couple and make the individual grow as a solitary being who refers only to himself. Indifference and lack of interest in the other and in the couple's future are the mirror in which we see only ourselves; the difficulty of communicating freely and openly becomes the stronghold in which we enclose ourselves, surrounded by our own absolute truths; failure to work together and escape from shared responsibility are the illusion of eternal and unconditional freedom.

III. *Telling reality*



I betrayed Mimmo, I was unfaithful!

I realise what I am saying and I should like you to hear me out without being harsh. I betrayed him each time I did not welcome him as a person, a husband, a lover and a father. I betrayed him when I thought I was only a mother, forgetting that I was first of all his friend and his wife. I betrayed him when I allowed my work to blot out our relationship; when I wearily prepared a dull and tasteless dinner; when my hair seemed

to be more tired than I was. I betrayed him when my basic laziness transformed the living room into a massive “wash-clean-iron” room, with baskets of laundry which constantly moved from one place to another. I betrayed him when I let him watch the sunset through the window on his own, in order to chase down the last stubborn speck of dust. I betrayed him when I embarrassed him through my exuberance, sacrificing his wish to be an understated presence. I betrayed him when I allowed my gluttony to become so obvious.

“The other's truth lies not in what he reveals to you, but in what he is not capable of revealing to you. So if you want to know him, don't just listen to what he says to you, but also listen to what he does not say to you” (Luigi Verdi).

We are faithful when we advance slowly, despite eyes that do not see, senses that do not feel, emotions that do not throb. But it is there, present in order to preserve what we continue to believe in: faithfulness seems to be static, but it makes progress. It only seems static because it makes slow progress, in the dark and with no apparent reference points. Staying faithful does not mean immobilizing life, it is the fact of waiting simply and consciously to achieve it.

Times of emptiness, suffering and misunderstanding in our love are those that prevented our relationship from coming to a stop; on the contrary, they permitted it to evolve into new forms of encounter that enabled us to look further.

(Francesca and Mimmo, team members).

To learn more

Painting:	<i>Joseph and the wife of Potiphar – Painted by Battistello Caracciolo</i>
Film :	<i>Hachi, a dog's tale – by Lasse Hallström, 2009</i>
	<i>Fidelity – by Andrzej Zulawski</i>
Theatre :	<i>a Fedeltà (To Fidelity) – by Giorgio Gaber</i>

IV *Reflection*



In general terms the etymology of the word "fidelity" comes from the Latin *fides* (*faith*) which becomes the word *fideles* (*faithful*), to end up as *fidelitas* (*fidelity*). It points the way to a coherent, unchanging attitude in adhering to the ideal values of love, goodness and justice; but one can also consider it as the commitment by which a person binds himself/herself so that the relationship with the other is stable and long-lasting. That is why the value of faithfulness has always found its most perfect expression in faithfulness between husband and wife, through the **exclusivity and uniqueness of the loving relationship consecrated by marriage.**

In Christian theology, the fidelity of God the Father to the promise of salvation for his children, is the highest expression of His love for us. A firm, strong, definitive love, a love that offers itself to us as a gift and only

asks to be accepted. In modern times, on the contrary, the idea of a gift is struggling to assert itself, giving way to a concept of fidelity in which one has the impression the person one loves should deserve this love. So when the other acts in such a way as to no longer deserve to be loved, we feel entitled to dissolve the bond of fidelity.

So education in fidelity means first of all stimulating and promoting an enduring relationship between us and God, because it is only He who can teach us the art of fidelity. For us, education in fidelity means asking for the gift of faith before that of fidelity. In this sense the sacrament of marriage is itself a force that supports the husband and wife and their desire to stay together in faithfulness, while respecting the love they promised each other.

Love is not just a feeling, but the response to a reciprocal vocation, where each finds precisely in his or her spouse a way to carry the same yoke together, walking at the same speed throughout their entire existence. From this perspective love is not a search for pleasure, without ever making a decision, but is the capacity to decide on a definitive and exclusive gift. It is a promise to give to your loved one your own future that you holds in your hands. So we understand why the most important aspect of fidelity is trust: trust in the future; trust in the other to whom one gives oneself.

Having been introduced in this way to this delightful path towards an education in fidelity, let us try a few different routes, being conscious all the while that each of them, woven in with the others, leads to an improved understanding of the true face of fidelity.

Fidelity to oneself

The first and immediate objective, the one we put to ourselves from the age when we achieve self-consciousness, is to follow the path of life with the aim of self-fulfilment; to simplify one might say “to want to become something or someone”.

This is the fundamental problem that whole generations continue to confront. Education in fidelity to oneself has not only an egoistic value, but also a social value, because when people discover themselves, they enrich the whole community. A famous song by an Italian singer says, “I believe in human beings who have the courage to be human”. This is a marvellous synthesis that tells of fidelity to the plan for creating mankind who is no longer self-authored, but shares in God's plan

Fidelity to the other

Education in fidelity to the other means being schooled in respect. It is like saying that being faithful is a matter of exercise and that we must train if we are to achieve results. Fidelity to the other is a total gift of a complete existence – unconditionally, without any interest, a complete and utter loss. We must all educate ourselves in fidelity to the other by following three directions:

- Fidelity to the other's diversity. Faced by the other's diversity, we defend ourselves by distancing them or failing that, we get closer to them in an effort to make them identical (what relationship is possible between two identical people?). *Fidelity to the other means, above all, respect for their otherness and their difference.* The spouse who recognises and appreciates the values, gifts and possibilities of the other and who pushes them and helps them to live and realise their values, overcoming any kind of competition, is a faithful spouse.
- Fidelity to the other's future. One does not love the beloved only for what they are right now, but for the wonder they can become over the course of their existence. “*Grounded in this love, a man and a woman can promise each other mutual love in a gesture which engages their entire lives [...]. Promising love for ever is possible when we perceive a plan bigger than our own ideas and undertakings, a plan which sustains us and enables us to surrender our future entirely to the one we love.*” (Pope Francis *Lumen Fidei* n. 53). Past and present are part of the person, but all in all the lesser part. The pre-eminent part is the future. The human person has more future than they have past. Each person has boundless possibilities to be discovered and brought to light; they possess a creative drive. Fidelity to the other consists of switching on this creativity.
- Fidelity to the other's distance. However closely we approach the other, they always continue to be other. Levinas writes: “We are called to love the other without understanding them, *before understanding them, without any need to understand them*”; the word “understand” here means ‘taking inside’, and points to the attitude of someone who wants to reduce the other into an understanding of the world as they see it: but, on the contrary, the other is incomprehensible, they cannot be captured.

The faithful couple, through its fidelity, bears witness to the fidelity of God the Father who pardons and welcomes all his children, waiting for them to be united with Him.

Husbands and wives can experience episodes of infidelity from day to day like those mentioned in the introduction. Each spouse claims, more or less consciously, an individual space. There can be numerous forms of infidelity and betrayal and they are not necessarily connected to one's sexual life. The couple can find itself in crisis, deny itself and decide to separate, in which case the only way to change track is through a capacity to forgive. Forgiveness is love that remembers that it is stronger than evil.

"Only real forgiveness, born of a very pure love, can give rise to a living spring in the heart of the unfaithful party: it can regenerate the party who has betrayed the other and cause them to be reborn to love. For God, too, for God above all, to forgive is to love. To love so much that a completely fresh love is born in the night and in the imperfection of the soul, purifies it, transforms it and it journeys towards a fresh perfection" (H. Caffarel – Aux Carrefours de l'Amour (At Love's Crossroads)

Fidelity to the Other

God creates man and woman and entrusts them with his kingdom: the whole of creation. In this way it is the couple who is a custodian of the Father's fidelity. This expresses an agreement on trust and thus gives the couple the process that generates the whole of humanity. Everything starts from there. Because this is the faithfulness "for all eternity".

Faithfulness to the Other finds its natural source of inspiration in the faithfulness that the Other has shown us for all eternity. Man betrays this confidence. God reveals all his disappointment: faithfulness betrayed is always the source of distress and pain.

Despite this, love prevails. He is a Father who chooses to love and not to break his relationship with us. The relationship of faithfulness to the Other begins in Eden and leads us back there. So it is not man who generates it in order to return to God, it is a response to His action.

"Faith is not primarily a human action but rather a freely given gift of God which is rooted in his faithfulness, in his 'yes', which makes us understand how to live our life, loving him and our brethren". In this case we can state that we are dealing with a "theocentric" faithfulness. "The whole history of salvation is a gradual revelation of this faithfulness of God, in spite of our infidelity and denials in the certainty that 'the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable!', as the Apostle declares in his Letter to the Romans (11:29)". (Benedict XVI, 30 May 2012). God's faithfulness is reflected in the couple's faithfulness.

But if faithfulness is a virtue that is essential to all interpersonal relationships, perseverance is the virtue that is specific to our day. For what is justice without the faithfulness of just men? What is liberty without the perseverance of free men? Without perseverance and without liberty, neither virtues nor values exist! Similarly, without faithfulness, a shared history developed together, does not exist. Nowadays, in a period that is fragmented and lacks constraints, these realities represent a challenge for mankind and more particularly for Christians. In fact the latter is very conscious of the fact that their God is a faithful God, who made clear his faithfulness in his Son, Jesus Christ.

Do we know how to discern, accompany and let ourselves be accompanied along the path of education in faithfulness?

To learn more

Pope Benedict XVI	<i>Encyclical Letter Deus caritas est (God is Love)</i>
Pope Francis	<i>Lumen Fidei</i>
Enzo Bianchi	<i>Lessico della vita interiore (Lexicon of the Inner Life)</i>
Gabriella Gambino	<i>Lo straordinario potere della fedeltà coniugale (The Extraordinary Power of Conjugal Fidelity)</i>
Susanna Tamaro	<i>Per sempre, (Forever), Ed. Giunti</i>
Jean-Christophe Rufin	<i>Le Collier rouge. (The Red Necklace) Ed. Gallimard</i>



V. *Ideas for the Sit-down*

Let us make an effort to tell our story and remember what has happened to us: what specific experiences have we been through to stay faithful to our “being a couple”? When were the difficult and distressing moments, or those where we thought “we have made a mistake”?

Do we think we have been faithful to our commitment to enable the growth of our spouse?

VI. *Running the meeting*

General sharing – Some ideas

- At this stage in our love story are we faithful to our original commitment?
- How do we succeed in “fully freeing up” the “us” in ourselves, while living faithfully?

Sharing – Some ideas

- If I look back on my story, can I state that the Lord has been faithful with me? Do I remember some periods during which I was particularly aware of his faithfulness, and of some signs by which I recognised this? What about periods during which, on the contrary, I perceived Him as being more distant?

Discussion of the study topic - some ideas

- Whoever is not faithful in small things is also not faithful in big things. Whoever "mistreats" day to day affairs, "mistreats" love. What are the day to day joys and struggles that we as a couple experience in our gift to each other?

VII. *Final Prayer*

Choosing each day

Lord, teach me that faithfulness is about making choices afresh every day. It is the discovery of unexpected paths in our souls.

It is living together, not with yesterday's love, but with today's.

Lord, teach me that faithfulness cannot be locked up or smothered by fixed patterns or structures.

Faithfulness must be reinvented all the time, in order to understand that true love requires ongoing personal demands.

Without this, love is dead.

Teach me that faithfulness is a difficult victory. It means ploughing a deep furrow together: one that cannot be eroded; a furrow on which neither the wind nor the tides have any effect;

A furrow ploughed in the reality of existence and that always goes on in the same direction: that of love.

"...More than victorious" – THE FRAGILITY OF THE COUPLE AND OF THE FAMILY

I. Word of God Epistle of Saint Paul to the Romans (8:35-39)

Can anything cut us off from the love of Christ - can hardships or distress, or persecution, or lack of food and clothing, or threats or violence? As scripture says: For your sake we are being massacred all day long, treated as sheep to be slaughtered? No; we come through all these things triumphantly victorious, by the power of him who loved us. For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nothing already in existence and nothing still to come, nor any power, nor the heights nor the depths, nor any created thing whatever, will be able to come between us and the love of God, known to us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Saint Paul outlines for us a series of realities that correspond to the small and great difficulties of life. Beyond these images, which refer to relationships between people, there are just as many other realities (life and death) that do not depend on our will, but that influence our loving relationship with God and with each other.

These two lists of dangers overcome by love can be applied to the conjugal experience. Nuptial love, enriched by divine love, faces up to the darkness of being tested; succeeds in overcoming our weaknesses and external pressures; and overcomes crises. Spouses who are believers start on their life's journey together, conscious that there will be times of difficulty and indifference. But they are equally certain that "love is as strong as Death" (Song of Songs 8:6).

In the last part of his reflection, Saint Paul delivers his readers a last message of hope, based on the immensity of the love that God revealed in his divine plan for salvation. By virtue of the choice that God has made, he will never leave his people. Through the infusion of the Holy Spirit into the hearts of believers, this new relationship with God creates a radical transformation of the whole of our being. As a result, through our trust in God, we have the conviction that nothing can ever separate us from the love that God shows us in Christ. The fact of being a Christian does not lessen the wound of suffering, but gives us the strength to preserve our sense of security and dignity.

So if nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, we can be sure that by staying in this love, we can face up to our weaknesses, accept those of our spouse and of our other companions on the journey. Similarly, we will also succeed in not condemning the errors of others. We can even become their faithful companions in their trials.

Let us meditate and reflect as couples on the Word of God

II. Presentation of the chapter

In the age in which we are living, we are witnessing an increase in situations of weakness. It is as if man is living without any certainty. Pope Francis' call to be more compassionate proposes a new construction of mankind by giving us back the certainty that love will enable us to overcome all these difficulties.

Let us turn our attention to the contemporary challenges that affect many aspects of our lives. The development of an exaggerated individualism perverts family bonds. It makes the idea that we should only follow our own desires a dominant theme, thereby suppressing the strength of all relationships.

"Cultural tendencies in today's world seem to set no limits on a person's emotions in which every aspect needs to be explored, even those which are highly complex. Indeed, nowadays the question of emotional fragility is a pressing one; narcissistic, unstable or changeable emotions do not always allow a person to grow to maturity. [...] In this context, couples are often uncertain, hesitant and struggling to find ways to grow. Many tend to remain in the early stages of their emotional and sexual life. A crisis in a couple's relationship destabilizes the family and may lead, through separation and divorce, to serious consequences for adults, children and society as a whole, weakening its individual and social bonds. [...]" (Synod, 4-33).

To these facts one must add the crisis of faith which has affected numerous Catholics and which is often the origin of crises in marriages and families. Marriage as a "vocation" can become more and more a "pact" and a "contract" that can readily be declared void. Choosing the married vocation is either not accepted (co-

habiting is more and more common), or it is adopted out of habit or a sense of tradition, without true motivation.

This is the principal ground where the Church needs to work. Over and above the specific questions and any potential changes, the Synod exhorts us to deepen the desire to choose the sacrament of marriage which requires the heart's full commitment.

This type of heart will know how to help us with reconciliation, and in seeking a new life after making mistakes.

We can try to see in the fragility of individuals, couples and the Church, an opportunity to change our life (conversion) because God uses it as the basis on which he builds sanctity.

III. *Telling reality*



"I am Anna. I have been separated for five years. I have a daughter from the marriage. Now I am deeply bound to another man, in joy and pain, in health and in sickness, even if we are not united by marriage.

I climbed the long, very long painful path that led me to the decision to separate: 10 years of attempts, hopes, efforts, disappointments and tears. The decision was not made lightly; it was not easy.

We took our daughter, our family, our world, the values, the certainties that no longer exist into this abyss. After 18 years of marriage, the wound of saying goodbye was truly deep and harrowing.

Similarly, appearing before the community where I had grown up was not easy. I saw myself as 'excluded' from the rules of the Church. I felt like the 'woman taken in adultery' whom the Gospel speaks about. The one-time catechist for teenagers, parish worker, celebrations with the choir, preparing children for the sacraments, all fine words... but were they merely words? How could I appear to the community in my situation as a separated woman?

I felt the embrace of Mother Church through priests who welcomed me and listened to me. I learned then that:

CHARITY is a smiling and welcoming expression that is offered and accepted, above and beyond the situations that life has us live through

CHARITY means sitting down beside someone and letting them know that 'you are there'

CHARITY means approaching the other in a silence that is welcoming and that does not express any judgement and knows how to listen

CHARITY means keeping prejudices at a distance and opening one's heart even to a wounded heart

CHARITY means pardoning, while above all trying to accept his history"

(Anna)

"Andrea and I had a church wedding 11 years ago, following a faith journey and believing intensely. After 7 years the crisis burst! We asked ourselves so many questions at that time and amongst others we asked: Why did this happen to us? Where did we go wrong? Then we thought: but this woman is not the one I married, this man is not the one I married. Each of us represented disappointment to the other, and our relationship had become a great disillusionment that led us to brood over a feeling of anger that took over, and drove us apart until we were no longer capable of communicating. All that led us to a complete and painful separation where each of us was living in darkness and we had reached the rock bottom of sadness. At that very moment our upward journey began, but separately, because we had made efforts to use marriage guidance as a couple but it had not worked.

At the same time as we were on this journey, in parallel with professional counsellors, we intensified our faith, and our relationship with God was reinforced. As great as our requests were for help from spiritual companions, the responses that helped us rediscover the right path were just as great and always up to the task.

These two parallel journeys enabled us to succeed in glimpsing a little light...and in our faith journey we felt ourselves loved and accepted by the Lord, despite our limitations, our weaknesses and our human errors. Feeling loved and forgiven, we were able to experience reciprocal forgiveness and our consciousness matured. This enabled us to rediscover each other two years after the crisis with a renewed heart, and love managed to reappear between us. We once again set out on the journey as a married couple but with a different awareness when compared to the past."

(Federica and Andrea – Rediscovery)

To know more

Film:	«A separation» by Asghar Farhadi, 2011 «Fireproof» Alex Kendrick, 2008 « Casomai» Alessandro D'Alatri 2002
Livre:	Peccatori amati – Il cammino umano tra famiglia e valori –Anna Bissi. (Sinners loved - The human journey between family and values)

IV. *Reflection*



“In today’s socio-cultural crisis, the family, the basic human community, is painfully being weakened and is exhibiting signs of its fragile nature. Nonetheless, the family is also demonstrating its ability to find in itself the courage to confront the inadequacy and failure of institutions in the formation of the person, the quality of social ties and the care of the most vulnerable. Therefore, a proper appreciation of the resilience of the family is particularly necessary in order to be able to strengthen its fragile character. Such strength lies in the family’s capacity to love and to teach how to love. As wounded as the family may be, it can always grow, beginning with love.” (Final Report on the family of the Synod of Bishops to Pope Francis, paragraph 10)

It is thanks to these words of hope that we must not believe what we often hear: “It was better before,” or “There is no more that can be done”.

There are weaknesses within couples and the family in their relationships with other families and society.

In today's world we find widespread diffusion of the commercialisation of the body, a mentality against having children; practices thanks to which human life and the character of the natural father have become realities that can be arranged and broken down, principally according to the desires of individuals or couples. All this has profound repercussions for the dynamics of relationships, the structure of life in society and on juridical arrangements... In this context, couples are sometimes uncertain and hesitant, and struggle to find ways of maturing. (cf Synod Final Report, 32-33)

Human weakness in its many forms is normally accepted with resignation as the area where mankind's limitations are expressed; the struggle is therefore to simply get through it by overcoming the various situations as best we can. On the other hand, Pope Francis, with his urgent call to mercy, turns us towards an interpretation of weakness as the place where the liberating strength of God is manifest. It creates an opportunity for us to experience God’s saving power.

Our weaknesses are or can become important instruments for our growth in love, provided they are recognised and welcomed with simplicity, shared within the couple and made a focus of our prayer.

Faced by the weaknesses within the couple, we are supported as a result of our acceptance of a methodology that helps us to overcome them and to be sanctified through them. This methodology is none other than living with the same love as Christ. Of course not everything will be easy. We shall need time, but the joy is making progress together even if we encounter difficulties. Recognising that we are weak is the first step in being able to ask for and accept help from the other, and this also changes the way we view the other. As a result, we recognise that we cannot succeed on our own and that above all we need God's love.

“Caffarel sometimes seems to remain at the level of the ideal, but he does not forget human weakness. On meeting couples who have been damaged by several failures, he states that hope can be the fruit of reconciliation. The penitent couple are part of the great penitent community, the Church, which implores the Lord for faithfulness to his creatures - the faithfulness of the Lord who loves and saves. God's forgiveness encourages the forgiveness and reconciliation of husband and wife, leading to a renewal of their love towards a more perfect communion.” (Msr. Fleischmann – Sassone, 8.11.2004)

Nowadays, the source of the frailty of many couples is due to the individual character of feelings; the way we interpret them privately; as well as the conception of marriage as purely a contract. Once a clause in the contract is broken, there is no longer any reason to stay together, relationships become argumentative, each party tries to claim their own rights and as a result they can end up arguing over children.

On the other hand, it is the practice of forgiveness which will always keep us alert and open to the other's arguments. It enables us to welcome the other and to see beyond external appearances.

The fundamental issue for Christian families is the challenge of giving witness to the beauty of family life, and the way it gives meaning to human life in general. Marriage is where humanity opens up to a life full of meaning, an experience of life that sets in motion affection, responsibility and consciousness.

We must remind ourselves that the experience of weakness becomes a challenge for the Christian's capacity to welcome and support others. Faced by the numerous situations of separated and divorced people, we must draw near to them without judging but with the love that brings closeness, that is, knowing how to suffer alongside those who suffer and how to rejoice with those who are happy.

"...The slogan you use is interesting: 'Not a movement of action, but of active people.' What is meant by 'active people' needs clear definition; that is to say, people who cultivate a spirituality and bear witness to it, and who succeed in pre-empting difficult situations or caring for people in those situations.

The Church today has an important mission in respect to couples, marriage and the family: that of intervening to care for it like a doctor, wherever it has not succeeded in pre-empting the ailment. However, we are still not well equipped for this mission as our efforts are directed at prevention (marriage preparation courses in parishes, family groups...etc. But when the worst happens, we are stymied.

In this sense, I believe that the definition of 'a movement of active people' should be reinforced, although I do not know how. If you will forgive me, I shall return to my first concern: How can we help couples in difficulties, who are about to enter or have already entered into a time of crisis? I believe that the doctor's role applies particularly to you, because you have the gift of an experience of sanctity in the couple relationship, so that you are able to intervene in several ways to care for ailing relationships.

So I do not intend to predefine what sort of action you should take; rather I invite you to ask yourselves how your identity is called to react in terms of the massive crisis in which the contemporary world finds itself. I believe that you need to be inventive and creative in order to be able to give the Church a language capable of dealing with the crisis, with the attentive benevolence of the doctor and the mercy of God, without losing your own identity" (Card. Carlo Maria Martini – Speech to Teams of Our Lady 1998).

"Secondly, I invite the couples, fortified by Team meetings to the missionary commitment. [...] You are certainly already missionaries by the radiation of your family life to the spheres of your friendships and relationships, and also other areas. In fact, a happy and balanced family, inhabited by the presence of God, speaks on its own of God's love for all mankind. I also invite you to commit yourselves, if possible, in an ever more concrete way and with ever renewed creativity, to the activities that can be organized to welcome, form and support in the faith young couples in particular, before and after marriage....

I also exhort you to continue 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, materially, humanly or spiritually, in those circumstances where they are most vulnerable.

I cannot but encourage the couples of the Équipes 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 the suffering caused by abandonment, betrayal and a failure of love. Therefore, it is necessary that you be able to bring your testimony and your experience to help Christian communities to discern the 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. Nor should you forget the unspeakable suffering of youngsters who experience these painful family situations: you can give them much." (Pope Francis – to participants at the Teams International Regional Couples' Gathering in Rome - 10 September 2015)

This should serve as motivation for finding a way of meeting the many couples co-habiting or united only by a civil union and passing on to them the Good News of marriage. While trying, take the good that is certainly present in these relationships and say through our lives that there is a greater good that awaits them.

We can be aware of difficult situations for couples which, more and more often, touch us closely and sometimes also involve our family and Teams members. We should have the courage to find the best ways of intervening which should be as gentle as the breath of the Holy Spirit, deeply charitable and concerned for the people involved.

Do we know how to discern, accompany and let ourselves be accompanied through the various weaknesses in couples and in families?

To learn more

Synod of Bishops

John-Paul II,

Benedict XVI

Card. D. Tettamanti,

Final Report – September 2015

Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris consortio n. 84 (1981)

Sacramentum caritatis n. 29

Pastoral letter: the Lord is beside those with broken hearts



V. *Ideas for the Sit-down*

How much space does forgiveness take up on our married lives? When have we felt welcomed in our weakness?

How have we faced up to difficult times?

VI. *Running the meeting*

General Sharing – some ideas

- What sort of experience have we had with separated and divorced friends?
- How do we react to our children when they begin to live together or get married outside the Church?

Sharing – some ideas

- What words of scripture have brought us relief and brought mercy to our hearts?
- What spiritual experiences have we undertaken in order to welcome and be close to our partner's weaknesses, and those of our fellow Team members or others?

Discussion of the study topic - some ideas

- How can we combine mercy and truth in our life as a couple?
- Have we understood the beauty and necessity of the mission that God has entrusted to us? How do we expect to give effect to this in our life as a couple?
- Having experienced God's help, and that of our fellow Team members and other people when we were in difficult times, how can we stay close to those who experience family difficulties?

VII. *Final prayer*

*Come Holy Spirit
And provide us with the energy to do good,
Driving force of everyday life,
Guardian of the content and quality
Of each day,
Source of confidence in the future.
Help us always to trust in the power of good
That we have found through our marriage -
The good that reigns over us and accompanies us,
That blesses us and protects us,
Not through our personal commitment,
But through the power of God who acts in human history
And sometimes speaks through the smallest voice.*

Ambrosian Catholic Action

Meeting 6

"...WE SAW IT AND ARE GIVING OUR TESTIMONY..." –

EDUCATION IN THE FAITH

I – Word of God First Epistle of Saint John, 1-4

Something which has existed since the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes, which we have looked at and touched with our own hands -- this we proclaim concerning the Word of Life . It was made visible; we saw it and are giving our testimony, declaring to you the eternal life which was with the Father and has been revealed to us. We are proclaiming to you what we have seen and heard, so that you too may share our life. Our life is shared with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing this to you so that our joy may be complete.

We chose this passage because in it we found the passionate path of the human being who passes on what he believes in: a faith linked to everyday life, tangible and palpable, that speaks of communion and Communion and, above all, prepares us for joy. *"A witness does not merely pass on information but they are personally involved in the truth and, through the consistency of their life experience, they become a trustworthy reference point. However, they do not refer to themselves but to Someone infinitely greater whom they have trusted and whose total love they have experienced"* (Benedict XVI).

Recounting and witnessing are the privilege of human beings: each of us with our gifts, our beauty, our troubles and the wonder of our resources and proposals. Consequently, *"without the joyous testimony of married people and families, domestic churches, the proclamation, even if done in its proper way, risks being misunderstood or lost in a flurry of words that is characteristic of society today"* (Synod, 30).

We meditate and reflect as couples on the Word of God

II. *Presentation of the chapter*

Education in faith is a complex assertion. In fact, the etymologies of the words that make it up (education and faith) indicate two contrasting situations - **movement and stability**.

Education (movement) comes from the Latin e-ducere, literally “to lead out”, in other words, to liberate, to bring to light something that is hidden. The Christian family welcomes the idea and the commitment of not only being the “promoter” that brings out the best in their children, but also taking care to advise, to tell and to transmit what is regarded as important for their growth. It is important to become the protagonists of our own education, understood in an autonomous and mature way, as if we were letting go of what we have, in order to seek out who we are.

Faith (stability) in the scriptures is an attitude, an experience, a relationship. Its “vital, human depth” means that the Hebrew language of the Old Testament, has to use numerous terms to define it. In Hebrew, there is first of all the verb *batach*, which evokes a sense of security, a foundation on which one can stand, a sense of tranquillity. Then there is the verb *amàn* which comes from the term indicating the waistband mothers use to bind their children to them. So the verb *amàn* indicates bonding.

In the phrase “education in faith” the two states of movement and stability continue. We are of the view that study is called for, if education and faith are to be united in an ideal way.

“The true path of faith begins when we discover that no thing, no person, no situation answers in any definitive way the deep tension we carry in our hearts (C. Molari)”.

Before being the place of education in the Christian faith, the family is the natural place in which we experience trust for the very first time: every child, straight after they are born, abandons themselves instinctively to their mother. One might say that they believe in their mother and even need to do so if they are to survive. The woman's maternal feelings, too, activate a relationship of trust in her child. And even the man believes in the woman who has made him a father, and also he believes in his child.

In its daily life the family, as the domestic church, embodies the faith because it is made up of people who believe in each other.

This fundamental trust that is experienced in family relationships, becomes the source of growth of education in the Christian faith. The educational process is no longer down to the action of a single person but is the result of the interaction of individuals who function as a network, according to a logic of true collaboration (father, mother, priest and teacher). Education in the faith passes through numerous relationship structures, because it is always relational and must take place through interpersonal relationships.

III. *Telling reality*



Here, I am telling you intentionally as a paradox, my father was able to teach us, without going through the usual process of trying to convince us of something. Of course he wanted to teach us about life, and I am sure he prayed for it, but it was as if he was challenging us: “I am happy. Look at my life. See if you can find anything better and make up your minds”.

He single-mindedly pursued his holiness, but not ours. He knew that we, in our turn, could become saints only through a free choice.

It often happens that a crisis accompanies growth. When this occurs, the educator must bear witness to mercy. This identification of education with mercy carries with it consequences that I think are decisive. Education is not based on psychological, pedagogical or sociological techniques, but means offering one's own life for the life of the other. It is the offer of a significant and convincing life option that has its roots in the joyous and assured experience of the one who gives witness.

(Prof. Nembrini, Rome diocese meeting)

...In my case religion was not at all solemn. It was restricted to reciting the evening prayers together every day. However, there is one particular thing that I remember very clearly and I shall remember it as long as I live. Prayers were led by my sister and, because they were too long for us smaller children, it often happened that our “deaconess” would speed up and she would get mixed up, skipping words, until my father would break in and make her start again from the beginning.

It was then I learned that when dealing with God, you have to speak slowly, wisely and delicately. The position my father took up at these prayerful moments is also vividly engraved in my memory. He used to come home tired from working in the fields. After the evening meal he knelt on the floor, leaning his elbows on a chair and with his head in his hands, without looking at us, without moving, or giving the least sign of impatience.

It was then that I used to think: my father who is so strong, who is in charge of the household, who leads the cattle, who does not bow down to the mayor, or the rich or bad men... my father becomes like a child before God. How he changes when he begins to talk to him! God must be great if my father kneels before him! But he must be very nice, if we can talk to him without changing our clothes. On the other hand, I never saw my mother kneel down. By evening she was too tired to do so. She sat down in our midst, with the youngest child in her arms... She too recited the prayers from beginning to end and not for one moment did she stop looking at us, one after another, looking longest at the youngest. Even if the youngest disturbed her, she would not say a word, even if a storm was blowing or the cat got up to some mischief. And I used to think: God must be very down-to-earth, if you can talk to him while holding a child in your arms with an apron on. He must also be a very important person if my mother pays no attention to the cat or to the storm when she is talking to him! My father's hands and my mother's lips taught me very important things about God!

(P. Duval – Text quoted in the Service of the Word, October-November 1998)

To learn more

Painting :	<i>Education of Mary</i> – Jean Baptiste Tiepolo – Venice Church of Santa Maria della Fava
Film :	<i>Life is Beautiful</i> – Roberto Begnini – 1997
Poetry :	<i>To all youth</i> – Alda Merini – La vita facile [The Easy Life]– Bompiani Editeur 1996
Song:	<i>La Cura</i> – Franco Battiato – La emboscada – 1996 – www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLip-YJeuzc

IV. *Reflection*



Pope Francis has this to say about the education of children: “[Today we will pause to reflect on] an essential characteristic of the family, the natural vocation to educate children so they may grow up to be responsible for themselves and for others. [...] ‘Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged’ (Col 3:20-21). [...] the relationship between parents and children must be one of wisdom, of a great balance. [...] It is hard to educate when parents only see their children in the evening, when they come home tired from work. [...] It is even more difficult for parents who are separated [...] but the children should not be the ones to carry the weight of this separation; they should not be used as hostages against the other spouse. [...] This is very important and very difficult, but they can do it.”

Love makes it possible. For if it is true that no parent is perfect. “There are mistakes that only parents are allowed to make, because they can compensate for them in a way that is impossible for anyone else. [...] Many parents are [...] uncomfortable with the new needs of their children [...] and they find themselves as if paralyzed by the fear of making a mistake. The problem, however, is not just talking. Superficial ‘dialogue’ does not lead to a true meeting of mind and heart. Let us ask instead: do we seek to understand ‘where’ our children really are in their journey? Where is their soul? Do we really know? And above all: do we want to know? Are we convinced that they, in reality, aren’t waiting for something else? [...] At the foundation of everything is love, which God gives us, and which ‘is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; [...] but ... bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things’ (1 Cor 13:5-7)”.

The Pope's words give rise to great hope for mankind in his quest. There is a call to be open to **the most exciting challenge**: educating one's children in the faith, because this implies agreeing to set out in search of God's love, and being open to all possible help on the path to meeting God.

“We must learn how Jesus educated others in the faith, how he led men and women whom he met on the roads of Palestine to the faith, so that we, ourselves, become more confident in telling others about the faith. Jesus had no prejudices. He knew how to create a place of trust and freedom into which the other could enter without being afraid and without feeling they were being judged. Jesus used to create a welcoming space between him and the other who was coming towards him, or whom he himself sought out on the roads, along the seashore, in homes and synagogues. He listened to the other, seeking what was in his heart and what he needed. When Jesus met the other, he met them as a person and not as sinful, sick or poor. Jesus took care of the whole person and sought their faith in him, because he knew that faith is a personal act to which each of us must commit: no-one can believe for someone else. Through His presence as a dependable and welcoming man, Jesus made faith possible. He caused it to emerge just by being close to the other» (E. Bianchi – La pedagogia di Gesù nell’educare alla fede [Jesus’ pedagogy in teaching the faith].

Trust as a personal act is the key to the **search for God**. We strongly believe in those who walk in faith and are able to give witness to it. We do not ask where they came from, whether their families supported them or pressured them, whether they knew important people or not, whether their relationships were strong or must be strengthened. Probably at a given moment, it was God who sought them out.

I used to seek God in books // in the miracle of speaking but little about myself...// in the garden where a blackbird flitted about // in the fields where wheat matures and yellows in June // in the church when no one was there // and suddenly he arrived unexpectedly // with his heart in his hands // and he says // why are you looking for me?// Sometimes you have to be able to wait for me. (J. Twardowski –: Cercavo da Affrettiamoci ad amare) (I Tried to Make Haste to Love)

We become happy through the sole fact of having discovered God. He makes us happy through his closeness and fills us with joy. He makes us capable of loving and therefore of witnessing to our encounter.

Education in the faith is about the transmission of love. Adolescence, often a difficult phase, can seem to interrupt this transmission. And still at this stage we must continue to hope and to love.

“There are the nights of faith, during which it seems that the seed has died under winter's frozen earth. However God does not sleep, he is not conquered by the night, he is not stopped by frost: he will call to life the good seed at the appropriate time. At the stage during which our children seem to have been transformed into ‘extra-terrestrials’, we have to stay close to them not only with all our educational intelligence, but

above all with a soul that is reverential in prayer and uplifted by the sure hope that God loves 'extra-terrestrials' much more than we do.

...Stopping before the Tabernacle and allowing our hearts to be transformed in order to see and hear what God is saying. Education means having the same sentiments as the Lord.

Then again, helping children to love the sacraments from their childhood, is a treasure of grace that leads us to freedom despite ourselves. So, as parents, we are asked not to forget how we were as adolescents, with our doubts and our lies. This memory helps us to have a hopeful view of young people. Just as we were dragged out of the quagmire of adolescence by God, wounded and bandaged, but we got through it, so it will be for them.” (Sister Roberta Vinerba, for the monthly column, “What your children do not tell” - Supplement “We parents and children”).

The family that accompanies its own children, that listens to them and does not criticise them, that educates them in seeking hope, charity and faith, is a family that already welcomes in itself attentiveness and openness to the world.

“In social life, in politics, in the economic crisis, there is always work to be done to improve the situation. I like to see the people of faith as tireless workers. The root of their commitment is the Gospel which arouses wakefulness in them”. (M. Bellett).

“Christian life is more than a community, it is a communion. With faith – surely a living faith – Christians enter into communion with Divine thought... In charity they love God, with the very Heart of God... Their faith is a passion to know – to know God and his thoughts. They make an effort to keep their faith alive and growing through meditation on God’s Word and by paying attention to what God wants to say to them through daily events.” (H. Caffarel – Anneau d’Or, n° 56 – April 1954)

Do we know how to discern, accompany and let ourselves be accompanied along the road of education in the faith?

To know more

Ermes Ronchi and Maria Marcolini

Una fede nuda [Naked faith] – Ed. Romena, 2014

Antonietta Potente

La fede [The faith]– Ed. Icone – 2006

Arturo Paoli and Dino Biggio

Mi formavi nel silenzio [I was formed in silence]- Ed. Paoline - 2013

Giovanni Vannucci

Nel cuore dell’essere [In the heart of being]- E. Romena - 2004

Walter Kasper

Il vangelo della famiglia [The Gospel of the family]- Ed Queriniana, Brescia - 2014



V. Ideas for the Sit-down

Once upon a time, in a love story, we were first of all engaged, that is, people who give and receive faith; then we sealed our romance with a ring called, not surprisingly, faith. Throughout our lives we must have faith, to trust and believe in someone. As for you, do you believe in me?

VI. Running the meeting

General sharing – some ideas.

- Is it possible to grow without trusting someone, starting with our parents?
- Is it possible to begin a love story or a friendship without having faith in the other person?

Sharing – some ideas

- Let us share how the Endeavours affected our lives during the month: “Among Christians who become open to each other, the communion of Saints is no longer just a dogma we believe in, but an experience that we live.

Discussion of the study topic - some ideas

- Is it possible to educate or to educate oneself in the faith, if faith is a gift?
- If it is possible, on what basis can this be stated in the light of the divine plan revealed in history?

VII. *Final prayer*

The Wisdom of Neophytes (Beginners)

I love those at the beginning, the riot of youth who refuse all compromise; sparks of straw that crumble the gigantic walls of the world.

They are a peaceful outlet, free and naive, ready and docile, in need of the unexpected. They follow signs and urges without precision, light that engenders light, a way that suggests another way. They look beyond the horizon, where eternity touches beauty.

They try to lift a finger, even if it is not exactly what the world would want.

Shivering inside, a gust of wind full in the face, amalgam of dust and tears, memories of the sea.

Those who sail have no need of an anchor, rudder or oars, nor even of the fear of capsizing.

They only have feet, hands and eyes. Feet like the wings of migrants, paces of people on the march, courageous hands even when dreaming, a house with bread for all. Roaming eyes, the gold of their expression as their only wealth.

I love you as you are, continue to look after your crazy dreams, your prophetic fever, your freedom maintained on burnt dunes. The wind uproots you and carries you away, opens your heart and scatters the seedlings, and sprouts.

They tell you that the roots are still weak, that there is little shade; do not believe them, the shoots are already cooling the air and you hear the autumn wind in their leaves. Take heart, the year's winter has been transformed into spring.

May a deep sigh protect your dream and keep spring in your soul, like a flame that enfolds another. Give voice to the deepest recess of your heart, the breath of feelings, so that love and joy lead you to the treasure.

May the Spirit descend and continue to scare the heart of those who have no way of being but quite simply exist.

Do not let the oil in their lamp run out.

Don L. Verdi

Meeting 7

"AND THERE WAS LIGHT" - THE SOCIAL VALUE OF MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

I. The Word of God

Gospel of Saint Matthew 5 :13-16

"You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father".

Read Pope Francis's commentary, while trying to replace Christians/ Christian with spouse/family.

"If we are to better understand these images, we must take into account the fact that Jewish law required a little salt be put on each offering that was made to God, as a sign of union. Light for Israël was the symbol of the messianic revelation that triumphs over the darkness of paganism. Christians, the new Israël, are therefore responsible for a mission for all mankind: with faith and charity they can guide humanity, consecrate it and make it fruitful. We, who have been baptised, are missionary disciples and we are called to become a living gospel in the world: through a holy existence we will instil "flavour" into the heart of various environments and protect them from corruption, as salt does; we shall bear the light of Christ through the witness of a natural charity. But if we Christians become bland and we lack salt and light, we shall lose effectiveness. What a fine mission it is to bring light to the world! This is our mission. It's beautiful! It is also magnificent to keep the light that we received from Jesus, to protect and preserve it. A Christian should be a person who shines, who bears the light, who always gives light! A light that does not belong to him because it is the gift of God, it is the gift of Jesus. And we bear that light. If a Christian extinguishes that light, his life no longer has meaning, he is a Christian only in name. He no longer bears the light, he has a life without meaning. So I should like to ask you how do you want to live today? Like a lamp that is lit or a lamp that has been turned off? How do you want to live? As a lamp that is lit! And it is God who gives us this light and we give it to others. As a lamp that is lit! That is the Christian vocation."

Let us meditate and reflect as a couple on the Word of God

II. Presentation of the chapter

"The family founded on marriage is a wise institution by the Creator in order to achieve his plan for love in humanity" (HV 8). In this chapter we should like to make evident the reasons that make marriage/the married couple and the family (identifiable by the existence of a parent/child relationship), the basis for the building of society, as compared to the plurality of types of "family" that exist today.

Faced by the anonymity and individualism of numerous contemporary societies that reduce the family to a private concept, we should like to underline, on the contrary, that *the married couple/the family* are its most important resource. Globalised society will have a solid future as a civilisation, if it proves capable of promoting a new culture of the family, because it is in the family and thanks to its specific charism that we begin to construct, to diffuse and promote the "we" of humanity. The «family» dimension in this way can be enlarged to become the family of peoples.

The fruitfulness of the couple comes to fruition in three ways:

Firstly, conjugal fertility, that is fulfilled by building up the couple's relationship.

The second and most obvious and recognised fertility since time immemorial is the biological and parental one through which we pass on life and educate our children. The third is social fertility: we are called to witness to the world, as spouses/families, the specific values of the conjugal relationship *"as an effective way of humanising and personalising society"* (FC 43).

III. *Telling Reality*



On our return from Albania, we found ourselves back home, still stunned by the wave of emotions experienced in the youth camp where we had lived for a while as volunteers, open to the world and in the world. A family experience we had wanted and pursued with determination and strength, but also with some concerns and tensions. It was a return to a past that Enza and I had already seen when we were scarcely engaged, in that country that was still in revolt. When we told our daughters in May that we wanted to go as a family, Eléonora, who was 14, found a way of showing her disagreement and rebellion. "What are we going to do in a place where

there is nothing, where we don't know anyone?... You two are always doing this! As if it is not enough that we are surrounded by people at home!..." Seeing our lifestyle rejected was like salt on a wound. ... Enza and I looked at each other, not sure whether we had to respond and explain our motivations and convictions. In this silence, successive images and emotions from our twenty years of living together came to mind. Since our engagement, we found we were in agreement in recognising as a couple, then as a family, a gift we had received that had to be repaid. We had expressed this by opening up our house, our time and our lives to others. We are conscious of not owning a lot, but we want to share it with others.

For us, Albania was our next door neighbour, and the beginning... Afterwards there was Tiziana, who as a child became "a ward";, Khadim and his visas that got more and more complicated; Miriam, a friend of our daughter, looking for a house with her family; Tat and his oriental world that was so different from ours; our parents who are at that age of becoming like children again; and two weeks yet again in the land of eagles.

When we got home from Albania, Eléonora got the whole family together in the kitchen, while Sofia looked at some group photos and Carla sang the 'Our Father' in an incomprehensible language, but which reminds us of the friends we have just left. "I wanted to ask you something," Eléonora begins, blushing and twisting her fingers in improbable knots, "I had so much fun!!! Can we go back there again next year?"

(Enza and Michele, Team members)

We knew Sara, an unemployed single mother, who lives in public housing near our place, and we wondered whether she would succeed in providing what her little daughter, Cristina, needed. Our neighbours are Mohamed and Fatima, and then Karim, a new baby who has just arrived. His daddy has lost his job and has not been able to pay his rent for several months. Will they be able to keep their place? The economic crisis, that touches the lives of numerous individuals and families in a very concrete way, does not discriminate by nationality. And sadly, there is also Luca, one of our friends from the period when the parish encouraged community support, who has lost his job, and his wife left her position at the call centre while she was pregnant. Now she does not know whether she will be able to return to paid employment because she must look after their baby, Giorgio.

The birth of children is a joy that has been changed into a source of worry, even apprehension for the future, for our friends. A blessing? We think so because life is a blessing, whatever the conditions in which it sees the light of day. We are called to come together. Together, that's the secret; sharing what we have received. Telling and exchanging our experiences as young parents unites us, and despite our difficulties, makes us happy. We have to face up to difficulties together. We help each other because we are living in the same situation. We have the same needs connected to the education of our children, but most of all we need relationships and fellowship. Regional laws may allow us set up parent-run crèches? Yes, so we made our house available and asked Sara, the single mother, and Lucia, who had a teaching diploma, to look after our son Marco, Karim and friends' children, in addition to their own. At the crèche Fatima got to know Paola, who became a «mother-friend» who supports her and accompanies her, helping her to integrate and find her way around in a world which is still foreign to her.

We did not keep the gift of being a family to ourselves; we shared it, just as others do, and in this way promote solidarity, friendship, fellowship.

(Families: energy for life, Ambrosian Catholic Action).

To learn more

Film: Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu [What have we done to the Good God], 2014.
Peinture: *I primi passi*, di Van Gogh [Van Gogh's first steps], 1890.

IV. *Reflection*



Sociologists emphasise that the family is the first cell of socialisation; that is to say, the place where one learns the values, habits and customs of the society we live in.

On the other hand, it is quite obvious that contemporary societies are undergoing a process of “individualism” that urges *me* to carry more weight than *us*, *the individual more than society*, and that involves the erosion of stable and lasting social ties.

We believe that societies like ours have a spasmodic need for the family. In fact there is no “functional equivalent” for the family for reproducing resources such as reciprocity, confidence, a sense of connection to others, and as a result, a feeling for the common good. The family can contribute to creating and diffusing the “culture of encounter” that Pope Francis proposes as a “salve” to care for the wounds of contemporary humanity, in order to make the world a true home for all. *“If the family is fully vital, society will be too. And if the family is strong, society too will be strong”* (Speech by Mgr Vincenzo Paglia to the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia, 2015).

We cannot consider the human person as an isolated individual, on the contrary he is “a being in a relationship”. Families are unique in their capacity for generating relationships. Pope Francis reminded us of this in his Speech to the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Family (2013): *“the family [...] is the place where one learns to love, it is the natural centre of human life. It is made up of faces, of people who love, dialogue, make self-sacrifices for one another and defend life, especially of the most vulnerable and the weakest. One could say, without exaggeration, that the family is the driving force of the world and of history.”* The family is the first natural society, the origin and source of all other social aggregations intended by God, from the beginning of the world. In fact in the story of Genesis (1:27-28), God entrusts his Creation to the couple.

We hope to underline the fundamental social role that the spouses take on, by virtue of their specific charism of communion and gift of life. *“...From the depth of the obligation assumed by the spouses who accept to enter a total communion of life”* (EG 66), there is born “a plural subject” that transcends individuality to create an “us” that faces up to the building of a common future. *“Fostering of an authentic communion of people within the family becomes a fundamental and irreplaceable apprenticeship in social living, an example and a stimulus for broader community relationships, characterised by respect, justice, a sense of dialogue and love.”* (FC 43). So, *“the Christian family is called to play an active and responsible role... by placing itself at the service of the Church and of society in its essence and in its actions, inasmuch as it is an intimate community of life and love”* (FC 50).

Mgr Renzo Bonetti draws attention to four aspects that characterise, in an original way, conjugal communion /conjugal love: complementarity, sharing, co-responsibility and co-presence.

Spouses experience *complementarity* because they support each other fully, welcoming their differences and comprising a unity. This complementarity does not devalue the person's fulfilment, but gives them the dimension of reciprocity and relationship. This capacity of the spouses can be offered to society as a resource for unity so that each member is fulfilled in a relationship with the rest of the community. On the contrary, it seems obvious that isolation is in the process of becoming an ever more widespread way of life in our contemporary societies. The art of being a community allows us to construct a social life on a human scale, where each is valued because they are accepted in their diversity.

Sharing: this is a matter of a real lifestyle that the spouses give effect to by sharing their whole existence and individuality. This school of sharing can become a lifestyle that is constructed around the family, in the bosom of the Church and society. By welcoming each other intimately, spouses can share the joys and sorrows, the troubles and successes of those they meet throughout their lives.

Family life requires the *co-responsibility* of the spouses as far as the organisation of daily affairs, management of children and financial resources is concerned. The two spouses are aware that they are cooperating for the good of the couple and the family. Taking care of the other's well-being is good for everyone. Also, learning co-responsibility within the couple means drawing attention to the common good of humanity, becoming accustomed to bearing each other's burdens, to taking on a broader responsibility at the ecclesial and civil level.

The last dimension, perhaps the most important, which synthesises all the others, is *co-presence*, the marriage of souls, that is to say, being intimately present to each another, welcoming the other in and of themselves, to the extent that even without their physical presence, the other is there and their presence is felt. My love is so strong that you live in me, I make room for you in me, I am but one with you. This coexistence is experienced with the children, too, in a different way of course. Our civil communities are

sadly marked by a weak sense of belonging, such that life in society is restricted to seeking balance and compromises between the numerous individualisms. Witnessing to coexistence to those in society who no longer feel closeness or neighbourliness, means increasing social cohesion.

The social value of the family is expressed essentially in the fact that the family is the **sanctuary of life**, the place *par excellence* where the existence of human beings is developed, supported and protected in every stage of its history, from its origins in the mother's womb to growth, decline into illness and death.

And the family provides schooling in socialisation. The individual within the family grows in freedom and a sense of responsibility, both indispensable bases for all involvement in society, and witnesses respect, a sense of welcome, forgiveness and reconciliation, selflessness and justice. These are attitudes that can humanise our societies. Observing these values and teaching them, means responding to the most topical issues in our societies: interest in the common good, trust in one's neighbour and relationships with other cultures.

Pope Francis suggests three phrases that can contribute to our education in this direction.

Please! This expression illustrates an attitude of respect, with all its components: gentleness, discretion, patience, welcome, that speak of a capacity to recognise the other as a precious reality. The family is the ideal place to incline our disposition towards respect, particularly towards the most vulnerable (children, the elderly, the sick).

Pope Francis tells us: *“the brotherly bonds that are formed in the family between children, if it takes place in an atmosphere of education in openness towards others, provides great schooling in freedom and peace. Within the family, as brothers and sisters, we learn about human cohabitation and how to live together in society. Perhaps we are not always conscious of this, but it is the family that introduces brotherliness into the world! Starting from this first experience of fraternity, nourished by affection and education in and by the family, a fraternal style radiates like a promise throughout the whole of society and throughout relationships between peoples”*.

Sorry! This word expresses a request for forgiveness that means realising that we have made a mistake, have used offensive words or adopted offensive attitudes, have betrayed the trust of the other, have overlooked their needs. This is the basis for living with an equal measure of mercy and understanding in social relationships. But in a family we go beyond *sorry*, because the loving atmosphere implies and supports a deep reconciliation that renews the relationships while becoming a source of life refreshed.

Thank you! Requires our consciousness of not being the centre of the world, of leaving room for the other, of recognising all that has been done by others, who lived before us.

On this topic Pope Francis emphasises: *“We must become intransigent where education in gratitude is concerned: individual dignity and social justice depend on this. If family life neglects this approach, social life will lose it as well. For a believer, gratitude is at the very heart of the faith: a Christian who does not know how to say thank you is someone who has forgotten the very language of God.”*

Besides, *“relationships between the members of the family community are inspired and the guided by the law of ‘freely giving’... which takes the form of encounter and dialogue, disinterested availability, generous service and profound solidarity.”* (FC 43)

The people of God need to progress daily in the faith, in the love and in the hope of spouses and families, with all the joys and grief that this process involves. *“In order to respond fully to the married vocation and guide fruitfulness, it is essential to grow in consciousness that each couple is part of a much greater human history - a history that includes all mankind from every part of the world, their past history, as well as the present and the future. Christian spouses make history and their history with humanity, with an evangelical approach.”* (Équipes Notre Dame [Teams of Our Lady], *Amour et Mariage* [Love and Marriage], 1997) To give effect to this social mission, we must go out and *“just live, simply loving each other but with such strength and transparency that those around you will be touched unconsciously by this, to the extent of saying: “but look, in our world where, even young people lose confidence in love, this witness of conjugal love by Christian couples, is of very great value.”* (H. Caffarel)

Do we know how to discern, accompany and let ourselves be accompanied along the road of openness to the world?



To learn more

Davide Oreglia. *Famille, source de communion, (Family, Source of Communion), 2004*
Famille, crois en ce que tu es, (Family, believe what you are), 2008.
Familiaris Consortio, 1981.
Papal Encyclical for Justice and Peace *Résumé of the Church's Social Doctrine, 2006.*

V. *Ideas for the Sit-down*

Do we as a couple experience the complementarity, sharing, co-responsibility and coexistence that characterise our charism as spouses?

VI. *Running the meeting*

General sharing – some ideas

- In what social context are we committed as Christian spouses/family to “just live, simply loving each other...” (more than just doing...).

Sharing - some ideas

- Do we entrust to God, our difficulty in leaving the happy reality of our family?

Discussion of the study topic - some ideas

- Are we conscious that our fruitfulness as a couple is the source of parental and social fruitfulness?

VII. *Final prayer*

We want to build a house with you, Lord,
a house where we are content because it is where we love,
Where no-one wants to be greater and more important,
but where all are at the service of the others,
just as Jesus washed the feet of the members of the family that comprised his friends.

A house that withstands difficulties and numerous dangers,
for our love is true and faithful:
the children's and the parents' love, the father's and the mother's love,
just as Jesus gave himself for the great family of humanity.

A welcoming house where everyone can come and go,
poor and rich, who are joyous and who seek reassurance,
just as Jesus drew near to everyone and rubbed shoulders with the poor and the suffering.

Help us to make our house into a little church, Lord,
so that we can live together, united in your love.

Meeting 8

"HOW CAN YOU NOT RECOGNISE THE PRESENT AGE?" – CULTURAL DYNAMICS

I – Word of God

Gospel of Saint Luke (12:54-57).

He also said to the crowds, "When you see [a] cloud rising in the west, you say immediately that it is going to rain—and so it does; and when you notice that the wind is blowing from the south, you say that it is going to be hot—and so it is. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky; why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?"

Vatican Council II expresses it like this: "[...] the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language appropriate to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which we ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its expectations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics." (GS 4). In the Gospel of Saint Luke, Jesus asks his contemporaries to recognise the signs of the times. Are we capable of doing this? Are we capable of understanding what you tell us today, Lord, of reading your presence in our midst?

"You are quite right, Lord: we are hypocrites, we pretend not to see, not to realise what is going on. We play games in the face of events that oblige us to understand and believe. We act as if nothing must change, as if the Church was immovable, as if everything had been foreseen."(Commentaries by Paolo Curtaz).

These are strong words that oblige us to reflect on how comfortable it is to rely on laws and rules to follow, without thinking that real people, people of flesh and blood, come before the law. The Lord Jesus asks us why we do not accept responsibility to face the changing realities in the time and place in which we live.

Let us meditate and reflect as couples on the Word of God

II. ***Presentation of the chapter***

This chapter asks us to consider the changes in the existence and relationships of couples and families as they live their lives.

We are helped in this reflection by the words of Pope Francis in the homily of 23 October 2015 at Saint Martha: *we stick with conformity, we reassure ourselves with (words like) 'they told us; I heard; people said they read....' In this way we are reassured. But what is the truth? What is the message that the Lord wants to give me with this sign of the times? First of all, in order to understand the signs of the times, we need silence: to be silent and observe. And afterwards we need to reflect within ourselves. One example: why are there so many wars nowadays? Why did something happen? And pray... silence, reflection and prayer. It's only in this way that we can understand the signs of the times, and what Jesus wants to tell us.*

Understanding the signs of the times, noted the Pope, should not be confined to an elite cultural group. He recalled how Jesus didn't tell us *"to look at how the professors, the doctors and the intellectuals do things but instead, urged us to look at the farm labourer who knows how to 'separate the wheat from the chaff'."*

"Times are changing and we Christians must change continually. We must change whilst remaining fixed to our faith in Jesus Christ, fixed to the truth of the Gospel, but we must adapt our attitude continuously according to the signs of the times. We are free. We are free thanks to the gift of freedom given to us by Jesus Christ."

After these preliminary remarks we suggest that we reflect and share our thoughts on the cultural challenges that affect the family, particularly on thinking associated with the different ways of understanding the family and its evolution. As Pope Francis desires – we can reflect together with an attitude of humility, attentive to the truth of which the other may be the bearer.

III. ***Telling reality***



Next spring we shall get married in the church. We have been living under the same roof for five years and we have a beautiful baby, Mattia, who is two and a half. We decided to live together after a year and a half of going out together because we were very keen to begin to build something that was more meaningful and concrete. Living together helped us to know each other better and to understand the ingredients

necessary to make a couple relationship work. Then Mattia, who was much wanted, arrived. With him, the family we had wanted to build together had finally expanded. Of course the dream and the desire to marry had always existed from the very beginning of our relationship, but we put it off for various reasons, mainly economic and work, which would not even allow us to ensure that our wedding was a really great party shared with friends and family.

Now we have completed a journey in preparation for marriage involving eight meetings, accompanied by two married couples and a priest. There were seven other couples with us preparing for marriage, all of us living together as couples. It was good not to feel that we were being judged but simply taken by the hand by people who made themselves available and cared. Meeting the other couples preparing for marriage was very positive: who knows, we may even be able to keep up these meetings with the others after we are married...?

(Alessandro and Silvia – testimony from a group preparing for marriage)

I never thought of having an abortion; to me T. was and is a child born of love. Now our family consists of me and my daughter, aged sixteen. Yes, my story, which is both painful and marvellous, began at the end of the 90s when I fell in love with the wrong person... This relationship ended in pregnancy after we had dated for a year, a pregnancy that made me happy even when he told me that I should have an abortion. He even tried to make me abort with a violent sexual relationship.

With the psychological support of my sister and parents, my pregnancy went to full term. I was made welcome in their house for six years. Afterwards I decided to live on my own with my daughter, because the two of us were the real family.

I had to deal with numerous economic and organisational issues. Even my friends in the parish, after the first stage of being curious, became distant from my life. We had some hard times; my daughter, in particular, felt rejected by her father who did not want to meet her... As a result I suffered through this. On top of all these problems, ten years ago I was diagnosed with a tumour. After these challenging difficulties, who am I? I am a woman who has had to handle the important choices in life practically all on her own. That's my life, and even if it is hard to believe, thanks to everything I learned about myself, thanks to everyone I came across, and thanks to my marvellous daughter, I would never have wanted to have lived any other.

Although I am very much a believer, I must say, regretfully, that I only began to live properly when I overcame my sense of guilt that had been passed on to me by my religious education; in fact the friends who welcomed and accepted me, showing me compassion and friendship, were those I met at work and, certainly, outside the setting of the parish where I had grown up.

(Virginia)

To learn more

Films:

Mine vaganti, (Loose Cannons) by Ferzan Ozpetek

Le fate ignoranti, (The Ignorant Fairies) by Ferzan Ozpetek

I ragazzi stanno bene, (The Kids are all right) by Lisa Cholodenko

IV.

Reflection



“The family is experiencing a profound cultural crisis, as are all communities and social bonds. ... Marriage now tends to be viewed as a form of mere emotional satisfaction that can be constructed in any way or modified at will. But the indispensable contribution of marriage to society transcends the feelings and momentary needs of the couple. As the French bishops have taught, it is not born 'of loving sentiment, ephemeral by definition, but from the depth of the obligation assumed by the spouses who accept to enter a total communion of life'.... “. (EG 66).

The fragility of relationships is evidenced by the growing number of separations and divorces. In many cases people prefer to avoid the married relationship, and we observe that the number of civil marriages now exceeds church marriages. Couples who are living together and who come to get married are more and more numerous and some have children; separations and divorces exceed marriages, particularly in the West; the marriage crisis is not restricted to the young (there are many couples who have been married for years who

decide to separate); the difficulty of conceiving children is growing, taking into account that children are wanted at a later age.

Without entering into moralistic judgements, we, **as the Church in our time, must live in the present** and welcome this complexity. We have to live the life of today without regret and without interpretations that are nostalgic, defeatist or worse still, that make everything 'the work of the devil'.

In this regard Saint Pope Paul XXIII, in the opening address to Vatican Council II on 11 October 1962, used strong language about Christians whom he calls "prophets of gloom": *"In the daily exercise of our pastoral ministry, we sometimes have to listen, much to our regret, to voices of persons who, though burning with zeal, are not endowed with too much sense of discretion or measure. In these modern times they can see nothing but prevarication and ruin. They say that our era, in comparison with past eras, is getting worse, and they behave as though they had learned nothing from history, which is, none the less, the teacher of life. They behave as though at the time of former Councils everything was a full triumph with regard to Christian doctrine, morality and for proper religious liberty.*

We feel we must disagree with those prophets of gloom, who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand. ..."

Let us examine some realities that, even if in different guises and to differing extents, are emerging around the world.

Faced by the growing number of **unmarried couples (or couples simply living together)**, the Final Report on the family of the Synod of Bishops to Pope Francis, affirms in point 7 that: *"In today's society, we observe a multiplicity of challenges which manifest themselves to a greater or lesser degree in various parts of the world. In different cultures, many young people demonstrate a resistance to making definitive commitments in relationships, and often choose to live together or simply to engage in casual relationships. [...] Consumerism may also deter people from having children, simply so they can maintain a certain freedom and life-style."*

For us as Christians, there is no question about even the social validity of marriage. So what are the reasons that keep two people who love each other from taking this step, even though they consider their choice to be final and they do not lack respect for each other, a commitment to live together and openness to life. Perhaps an earlier marriage that failed, perhaps fear of not having sufficient funds, even if only to meet the costs of the ceremony, or unreliable job prospects, perhaps fear of failure. There can be many reasons. Often couples who are living together proceed bit by bit. They decide on "religious or civil" marriage only when, in the meantime, certain conditions have come together (commonly the arrival of a child). Cohabitation rarely occurs without any mutual commitment: the image of totally free love, without any bond and inclined only to profit from the passing moment, is largely a stereotype and an "urban myth" (even cohabiting relationships express, in their own way, stresses related to stability and duration). However, the rebuilding of the bond between love and relationship, between feelings and commitment, is shown to be one of the most pressing necessities of our time. The "fluid" generation, (that is, those inclined to create relationships without commitment), have to relearn the language of love that requires commitment, and not just emotion.

Choosing marriage allows the couple to benefit from the grace received with the sacrament. This gives us a special strength to face the path of life together. Why do so many couples, even those who say they are Christians, refuse such a great gift? The first answer may be the fragility of their faith. It is fair to ask ourselves this question as this phenomenon is so widespread. It is important to ask ourselves if grace, which is a free gift of God that is not influenced by our will, may not, in some way known only to God, reach each couple where there is mutual love, respect and care, and is open to life.

The breakdown of many families associated with separation and divorce brings us face to face with the reality of so called **"one-parent" families**. Parents are alone for different reasons; it is often the result of divorce, but can result from a pregnancy outside marriage or the death of one of the two parents, or violent situations. These families live in difficult conditions because they result from trauma that brings suffering.

In our Movement there are people living on their own who experience loneliness, particularly widows. Teams offer them special kindnesses to ease the pain of separation. As for the other situations that affect families and that are "entrusted" to us (Pope Francis – Speech to Regional Responsible Couples of the world 10/09/2015), such as common-law partnerships or cohabiting couples, we have to pray for these situations if we are to be able to discern "the signs of the times". In our Movement, even in such cases, there arise opportunities for interventions in order to help them and be close to them.

Do I experience or know situations of this kind in my family network or among my friends?

“Whatever the cause, the parent who lives with the child(ren) must find support and comfort from the other families that form the Christian community, as well as through the pastoral programmes provided by the parish.” (Final Report of the Synod of Bishops, 80). As a couple and as a team, do we take responsibility for the support, even the economic support, of these family realities?

Another reality that emerges is that associated with **homosexual unions**.

The Final Report of the Synod of Bishops has this to say: “Regarding proposals to place unions of homosexual persons on the same level as marriage, there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family' ” (Final Report of the Synod of Bishops, 76).

That said, the complex question of homosexuality remains open, and particularly unions between people of the same sex. We think that it would be useful for Teams couples to reflect on this, given their immediate experience of relationships as a couple and as a family.

This reflection finds a key to interpretation in the words of Pope Francis: *“If someone is homosexual and seeks the Lord and is of good will, who am I to judge them? Once a person asked me, in a provocative way, if I approved of homosexuality. I answered him with another question: 'Tell me: When God looks at a homosexual person, does he condemn them and push them away?' ”.*

We believe we can agree that the following statements can provide a basis for calm consideration of people with a different sexual orientation:

- The whole of mankind, without qualification, is the greatest expression of God's creativity and love, is the image of God, and the brother of Our Lord Jesus Christ;
- It is hard to affirm with any certainty whether homosexual tendencies result from fate or from a choice. What is certain, in any event, is that it is not a disease.

These statements can help us to put out of our minds the eternal fear of what is "different", which has inflicted so much suffering everywhere and in all cultures.

The gradual change of the **role of women** in society is experienced in different ways in different parts of the world. Pope Francis told the participants in the plenary session of the Pontifical Council on Culture: *“For quite some time, at least in western societies, we have left behind the model of social subordination of women to men; it is, however, an age-old model that has never completely exhausted its negative effect. We have even overcome a second model, that of pure and simple parity, applied mechanically, and of absolute equality. And thus a new paradigm has emerged, that of reciprocal equivalence and difference”.* Later, the Pope declared that: *“The man/woman relationship must therefore recognize that both are necessary inasmuch as they possess an identical nature, but in its own way. One is necessary for the other, and vice versa, for they truly complete the fullness of the person”.*

Also among the arguments addressed by Pope Francis is the topic of women's bodies: *“The female body in culture and biology, reminds us of the beauty and harmony of the body which God gave to woman, but also of the painful wounds inflicted upon her, at times with brutal violence, for simply being woman. A symbol of life, the female body is also, unfortunately, often assaulted and disfigured by those who should take care of her and be life partners. The many forms of slavery, of prostitution, of mutilation of the female body, require us to set to work to defeat these forms of degradation which reduce it to purely an object to be sold on the various markets.”*

Finally, being part of a Movement that we like to define as “prophetic”, leads us to reflect whether this enhancement of women in society can equate to a renewed understanding of their role in the Church. There is a lot of resistance and fear in response to this question, which is perhaps also linked to residual fears of a weakening of the male role that, in many societies, has represented a real and definite power of men over women.

Do we know how to discern, accompany and let ourselves be accompanied along the road of the cultural dynamics of the family?

To learn more

Synod of Bishops:

Pope Francis:

Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council:

Final report

Evangelii Gaudium

Gaudium et Spes



V. *Ideas for the Sit-down*

Do we feel ready for personal change and change toward our spouse?

What are we doing in respect to the increasing number of couples who are not married but living together.

Does complete respect for the role of women exist in our family?

VI. *Running the meeting*

General sharing – some ideas

- In the light of the reflection dealt with in this chapter, what has been our experience of friends who live together, single-parent families and homosexuals?

Sharing – some ideas

- Does God's word, which invites us to read the signs of the times, make us accountable or frighten us?

Discussion of the study topic - some ideas

- What is our attitude to new ideas and practices: fear, mistrust, judgement, prudence, attentiveness, welcome?
- Do we strive to understand changes in customs or habits in order to pick out the good that is hidden within the folds of each change?

VII. *Final prayer*

Prayer to the Holy Spirit by Brother Pierre-Yves de Taizé

*Spirit who moves over the water,
calm in us all discordance,
the agitated waves, the noise of the words,
the whirlwind of vanity,
and make the Word which recreates,
arise in silence.*

*Spirit who in a sigh whispers
to our spirit the Name of the Father,
come and gather together all our desires,
make them grow in a beam of light
which will be a response to your light,
the Word of the new Day.*

*Spirit of God, the sap of love
of the immense tree on which you graft us,
so that all our brothers
may seem to us to be a gift
in the great Body in which
the Word of communion matures.*

NOT WALLS BUT BRIDGES

PASTORAL CHALLENGES FOR THE FAMILY IN THE NEW EVANGELISATION

I – The Word of God

Epistle of Saint Paul to the Romans (12:1-2)

“I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.”

The apostle's words remind us of the age-old practice of sacrifice in worship. In the former covenant, this was manifest through the offering of animals, such as oxen or cattle, but now it is through the offering of our own bodies: this “rational sacrifice” (as the original Greek text puts it) is the consecration of our life, our relationships, our deepest expression, our affection and our hearts to God the Father – in Christ, through Christ and with Christ, in the strength of the Spirit.

This age-old practice by the laity, clearly reveals the beauty and joy of Christian life, but also bears the imprint of the ambiguity and contradiction of the world, created by God but sometimes dominated by the power of sin. Hence the need for conversion continues: conversion of “spirit” (that is to say of outlook, of reflection and thought) even before “actions”.

Jesus gave us the Gospel so that we could evangelise the world, but we must always be alert to the risk of ‘worldifying’ the Gospel! We must not conform to the mentality, the platitudes, and the standards of this world. Naturally this does not make us into implacable judges, because we know all too well that the fragility of the world belongs to us and involves us. Rather, we are called to make the full joy and beauty of the Christian world shine out, in such a way that one can perceive the errors and imperfections of the world. In doing this, we do not want to build walls but to build public meeting places and bridges.

Reflection



In order to prepare the review meeting for this year, we can look back on the path travelled during the year.

In the first two chapters we focussed on the “centre”: above all the *gospel of marriage and the family*, the divine light that illuminates the profoundly human experience of love between a man and a woman. Then *the art of accompanying*, which brings together truth and compassion. We tried, once more, to contemplate the marvel that is God's plan for human love, to see how it measures up to a purely human vision of the relationship between men and women. At the same time we sought to grasp the Lord's presence, even in human experiences that are still under-way and imperfect, often far from their fullness, although sustained by the Spirit, in a way that God alone knows.

We can ask ourselves whether, during our Team's journey, our thoughts and our prayers this year were capable of truly reading reality, interpreting it through God's eyes and translating it into practical pathways. First of all, we tried to do so in terms of the relationship between man and woman, the great vocation to love (Chap.3) that, over time and through time, is capable of building a fidelity that is forever renewed (Chap.4). In our day this means a fidelity to the various aspects that are being undermined, most of all in the consumer and well-being culture that tend to also reduce relationships, to fit the logic of having or possessing. Here we measured the extent of the Christian challenge, as well as the negative impact of a secular view of marriage.

We are faced by the sometimes heart-breaking mystery of the fragility of the couple and the family (Chap.5), a fragility that is apparent not only in divisions and marital failures, but also in the fatigue and inability to communicate that we find in couples who are still trying to hold their relationship together. Above all, this chapter calls us to a wise understanding of the reality of the family, in order to see the positive aspects to be found despite the collapse of so many certainties, and to start on a path leading towards growth and consolidation in the fullness of Christian love.

Interpretation of reality, fundamental reference to the Gospel and the prospect of progressive growth, characterised the consideration of two ‘classic’ family tasks: education in the faith (Chap 6) and education in

socialisation (Chap7). We also considered certain cultural dynamics that hold sway in our day (Chap 8). Even here, we tried to read the signs of the times, with the Word of God as a beacon of light, capable of illuminating the depth and breadth of the Christian vocation, and at the same time able to guide us like a small torch, on the narrow and, at times, dark paths of life.

In our reflections on marriage and the family, we referred to *inductive-inclusive-itinerant* methodology. That is, starting from a critical and wise interpretation of reality; bringing together scattered fragments of reality to that fullness – the mystery of Christ – which is the foundation and fulfilment; and acting as a pilgrim Church on the highways of the kingdom which itself becomes a companion on the journey – “with a mother’s heart”.

These three segments correspond to the three great characteristics of Christian revelation: *truth, beauty and compassion*.

Interpretation of reality (we have here the *inductive* stage) always implies a discernment capable of drawing out all the positive aspects, the talents and graces of our day; or the limits, contradictions and mechanisms for degrading and fragmenting. Reference to the *truth* of man and goodness, then appears indispensable, if we are to be able to untangle the web of our time, separating the good grain from the chaff. However, it would be a serious error – as Pope Francis insists on reminding us – to take a stance before the reality of the world that reflects a negative, whining, scowling attitude. More important than true judgement – which is needed despite everything – today’s world asks Christians for a positive, rich, beautiful, witness that enthuses it, reflecting the hope that dwells in them.

The *beauty* of Christian life, starting with the couple and the family, must shine forth in all its charm and all its attractiveness, well beyond its limits and its distortions which must be denounced in any event. The joy of messianic times, the “new wine” of the Kingdom that Christ came to inaugurate, represent this fullness of humanity. It takes into itself all that is best in human history; frees it from the confinement of frailty and sin; and lifts it up to the final and perfect standard of God. (We have here the *inclusive* stage)

On the way to this fullness, the Lord is at our side and accompanies us. The smooth balm of his companionship has a name: *compassion*. God is greater than our frailties, our limitations and our falls. He unveils his all-powerfulness in the capacity to heal our wounds, and allow the grace of reconciliation and forgiveness to abound in situations where evil had once abounded with its divisive force. Compassion is the heart of the Gospel of the “good news”: it is the true name of God and an inexhaustible source of hope for us. Our journey can always start over again, after each fall and misfortune, accompanied by the closeness and support of fellow believers. (We have here the *itinerant* stage)

We ask ourselves :



- In our team meetings have we been guided by this truth-beauty-compassion method? In our meetings, are we capable of always bringing forward the positive side, of judging without condemning, of discovering possible paths for humanisation and growth, for so many situations of fragility, as we are representatives of the Church.

- Pope Francis exhorts us to be a more maternal Church: teacher of a *truth* that does not belong to her and that she received through grace, but also capable of being a *mother* who welcomes, who caresses, who is in search of her sons and daughters. Are we able to immerse ourselves in this maternal understanding of the mystery of the Church?

- It is not just a matter of changing the way we think about problems or interpret reality, but more about changing our lifestyles, our behaviour and our actions, so that these reflect a Church that walks with mankind, that seeks the best solutions with us and accompanies us in the different stages of growth. Can we say that we have taken this direction, as a couple and as a team? Have we become more capable of being not only beacons of truth that illuminate the way ahead, but also the torch that indicates the path and the steps that are really possible? Do we know how to show a maternal face to the different situations of fragility, of division, of separation that we meet? Have we become capable, as Pope Francis says, of conveying a stimulus, encouragement, an impulse towards growth to all?

- Starting from our fatigue and our frailty, have we been able to grasp and apply to ourselves and to our team (not just to others), the art of gradual and progressive growth?

To learn more:

Pope Francis,

Apostolic Exhortation *EVANGELII GAUDIUM* – 50, 51, 276, 278