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THE SPIRITUALITY OF MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY
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THE SPIRITUALITY OF MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY (ch.9)

The final chapter of *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love) takes for granted the basic Catholic teaching on Marriage and Family Life.

The spirituality of Marriage and Family life flows from the foundational basis of the sacramentality of Marriage. We all know that Marriage is one of the 7 Sacraments; not everyone is aware that any marriage between two baptized persons is a true Sacrament of the New Covenant. Of course, there are other conditions as well, but the basic truth remains: to receive the sacrament of marriage, one does not have to be a Catholic. This means that many marriages are sacraments and that all Christian marriages are steeped in grace and holiness, reflecting the unfailing love of Christ for the Church.

The specific grace from the sacrament of marriage for the married couples is “to help one another **to attain holiness** in their married life” (CCC 1641). Another detail of significance is that the spouses in a Christian marriage confer on each other the Sacrament of Marriage by expressing their **consent** before the Church. (CCC1623)

From this serious sacramental basis, it possible to sketch an inspiring Spirituality of Marriage and Family Life.

1 A SPIRITUALITY OF SUPERNATURAL COMMUNION.

It is a strong Catholic instinct to want to celebrate a marriage during a nuptial Mass; this instinct comes from the awareness of the intimate connection between the New Covenant in the Body and Blood of Christ and the new covenant being forged in the marriage -and therefore in the bodies of the

Bride and Groom. And this link between the Sacrament of the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Marriage shapes the lives of the newly-weds, and becomes part and parcel of their life together.

The Holy Trinity dwells “deep within the marital love that gives God glory” (AL.314). This high spirituality of marital communion is lived out in the family in “thousands of small but real gestures”. Day after day, throughout the adventure of marriage and family, the bonds of love are involved: sometimes tested, sometimes strengthened, sometime stretched to the limits, but, by the grace of the Sacrament, enduring. Pope Francis speak not only of daily sanctification through family communion, but even of **mystical growth** and ever deeper union with God. I think Francis could see spirituality becoming incarnate in the communion of the family (316).

2. A SPIRITUALITY OF PRAYER

A Catholic home is comfortable with having Catholic helps to prayer: a crucifix, a picture of Our Lady or other religious objects. All Christian homes should have Bible (Family Bible?) kept handy and well used.

Family prayer will differ from family to family and within families from time to time. If at all possible, a few minutes each day can be kept aside to be together before the living and loving God in our midst. It is good (and easy) to tell God our worries, to pray for the needs of the family, to pray for a friend or neighbour, to thank God for the grace of family....and to include a prayer to Mary, Help of Christians and our Perpetual Help.

In this spiritual atmosphere the culmination of family prayer at home comes with the Sunday Liturgy in the local Catholic Community of Faith. “The Food of the Eucharist offers the spouses the strength and incentive needed to live the marriage covenant each day as a ‘domestic church’”.

The Jewish faith places great importance on the religious and social role of the family. Because the first Christians were Jewish, they brought this sense of the centrality of the family into the Church and initially celebrated the Christian mysteries in family homes. These house gatherings were called “Little Churches” and “Domestic Churches”. (CCC1655-58)

These terms and practices were lost for over a thousand years. The Second Vatican Council reinstated both the terms and the practice. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) recognized that “It is in the bosom of the family that parents are by word and example the first heralds of the faith with regards to their children”. (LG 11)

It is also in the Domestic Church that the family exercises the **priesthood of the baptized** by their prayer, their reading the Scriptures, their practice of charity and forgiveness.

A significant number of people live **alone**, for whatever reason; the doors of the domestic churches and of the great churches must be **open to them all**. The Church is a home and family for everyone.

3. A SPIRITUALITY OF LOVE

Love is the defining virtue of Christianity. Therefore, we can expect to find love in its various aspects in those living “in a state of love”- in sacramental marriage. In Christian marriage we find family love (*storge*), we find romantic love (*eros*), we find friendship (*philia*) and we find divine love (*agape*).

Translated into daily life, married Christians wake up every morning to continue the adventure in which “each spouse is for the other a sign and instrument of the closeness of the Lord, who never abandons us” (319).

When we try to speak of the love of God and of our response, the New Testament uses the word **AGAPE**. This word includes the sense of love as **self-giving**: God gives Himself to us in Jesus, we give ourselves to another in marriage, and together as spouses we give ourselves to God.

God remains the most important Person in all marriages. This truth has implications for each spouse. The reality is that no one can replace **God** in the lives of any of us, even in marriage. Time will come when married couples will realise that “one spouse cannot presume that the other can completely satisfy his or her needs”. In the holiest of marriages, there remains a sacred solitude, a God-shaped space (320).

Sometimes married couples begin to sense this solitude as their prayer life takes different paths. Yet it remains the case that the spouses find in the love (agape) of God the deepest source of meaning in their own lives.

4. A SPIRITUALITY OF CARE, CONSOLATION AND INCENTIVE

Readers of the Bible will be familiar with what we could call “God’s dream” for humanity: to spread divine love and truth everywhere and to do so through those chosen and sent by his Son, Jesus.

Christian couples spread the gospel of God first in their own families, then among their relations and friends and then among any to whom they have access. The Christian family is meant to **radiate** love, kindness, fidelity, perseverance.

Every Christian knows that to be a disciple of Jesus is to become **a living witness** to Christ’s mercy, compassion, and to his vision for humanity.

In memorable phrase Pope Benedict 16 pointed out that “**closing our eyes to our neighbour also blinds us to God**”. Families can close their eyes to outsiders, migrants, ex-convicts, as easily as individuals do.

Pope Francis remains a realist as he says “No family drops down from heaven perfectly formed” but every family grows and matures in its vocation, born of the full communion with the Trinity.

“**To love at all is to be vulnerable**”, the famous words of C.S.Lewis (author of the Four Loves). He added “Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken”. Pope Francis never forgot those caught in a marriage where love has faltered or died. Such people are often the most abandoned and need the greatest compassion and support of their own families, their friends and their faith community.

Whatever our personal situation, whatever mistakes we have made, whatever evil we have done, Pope Francis reminds us that “**what we have been promised is greater than we can imagine**”.

“Before the world was made, he chose us, he chose us in Christ, to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in his presence.” (Ephesians 1:4)