

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Pope Francis has released an apostolic exhortation entitled “The Joy of Love.” It’s over 260 pages long, and it concerns love in the family. This exhortation is the result of meetings of bishops from around the world the past two Octobers. The bishops discussed the complex issues surrounding marriage and family life. These include a high divorce rate, couples living together, fathers who have abandoned their children, homosexual relationships, couples who do not want children, couples who do want children but have trouble conceiving, people too immature to marry, and people in a second marriage who would like to receive communion in the Catholic Church. The topic is too large for any one meeting or one papal exhortation to resolve. Pope Francis acknowledges the impossibility of making definitive statements about every circumstance.

He starts with a chapter inspired by the scriptures, and then examines the actual situation of families, some essential aspects of the church’s teachings on marriage and the family, and two chapters on the mystery of love. He discusses pastoral approaches to family life and spends an entire chapter on raising children. He concludes with an invitation to mercy, help for families that fall short of the ideal, and with family spirituality.

It’s long, but it is inspiring. You can read it online or you can purchase a printed copy. The pope encourages people to read it slowly and prayerfully, so even if you only study a few paragraphs, you will be glad you did.

For starters, let me quote you the very first paragraph, to give you a sense of how Pope Francis approaches his topic: “The joy of love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church. As the Synod Fathers noted, for all the many signs of crisis in the institution of marriage, ‘the desire to marry and form a family remains vibrant, especially among young people, and this is an inspiration to the Church.’ As a response to that desire, ‘the Christian proclamation on the family is good news indeed.’”

Engaged couples who come to see me do indeed have a sincere desire to marry and to form a vibrant family. They are not satisfied with a mere friendly relationship. They want to make their commitment publicly, they want to have children, and they want to raise those children in a stable household. Not every couple fulfills these dreams. But the dreams are alive. People discover within themselves not only the joy of love but the beauty of marriage and family. When they fall deeply in love, they feel called to a deeper kind of relationship that is public and permanent, and centered on God and the church.

Near the end of the Book of Revelation, John has a vision of the final days, the union of earth with heaven. He describes it in terms of a marriage: the new Jerusalem comes from heaven “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” As Christians, we are designed for union with God as surely as a wife and a husband are designed for each other.

If you have an interest, please read Pope Francis’s exhortation. But more importantly, renew your commitment to love and marriage. Build stable, committed, permanent relationships for the sake of your family, society and the church. You will find within the Christian family the joy of love.

Sunday, April 24, 2016