

Specific Features of Marital Spirituality

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Is there an adequate spiritual path in the Church for Christian spouses? Does holiness within marriage have specific characteristics? How can we identify the characteristics common to all Christian vocations as distinguished from those specific to spouses? We will try to answer these questions in this brief article.

The foundation of Christian life for all men and women is established by Baptism and Confirmation. Through these sacraments, the Spirit bestows the gifts that configure men and women to Christ and make them part of his body, which is the Church, making them sharers in Christ's priestly, royal and prophetic mission. Thus all the baptized form the people of God and actively participate in the common evangelizing mission. All are priests, that is, they can sanctify themselves and help sanctify others by receiving the sacraments, by praying and by offering their works to God. All are kings, that is, they can lead the world to Christ, exercising justice and preparing for the coming of his Kingdom, which is not of this world (cf. *Jn* 18:36). And all are prophets, that is, they can teach the truth that is Jesus (cf. *Jn* 14:6) by their example and words. Within this common path, there are various specifications of sacramental or charismatic order. There are two sacramental specifications deriving from the sacraments of Holy Orders and Matrimony, which configure the baptized to Christ and give them a specific mission that the Catechism presents in the following terms: "Those who receive the sacrament of Holy Orders are consecrated in Christ's name 'to feed the Church by the word and grace of God' (LG 11). On their part, 'Christian spouses are fortified and, as it were, "consecrated"

for the duties and dignity of their state by a special sacrament' (GS 48,2)."^[1]

a) *Sacramental origin*

The first element that characterizes the spirituality of spouses is, therefore, its sacramental origin. Thanks to the sacrament of marriage, spouses receive a specific gift that makes them bearers of a mission that the Second Vatican Council, in *Lumen Gentium*, delineates as follows: "Christian spouses, in virtue of the sacrament of Matrimony, whereby they signify and partake of the mystery of that unity and fruitful love which exists between Christ and his Church (cf. *Eph* 5:32), help each other to attain to holiness in their married life and in the rearing and education of their children. By reason of their state and rank in life they have their own special gift among the people of God (cf. *1 Cor* 7:7) . . . The family is, so to speak, the domestic church. In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children; they should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each of them, fostering with special care vocation to a sacred state."^[2] To speak of a "sacramental origin" might seem to be the same as speaking of a "divine origin," but in truth the latter can also be said of marriage between unbaptized persons, that is, of non-sacramental marriage. For it is God who gave the first couple the possibility of undertaking this form of life (cf. *Gen* 2:24), becoming a visible sign of his love in the world. Through their stable and fruitful union, God's love is made present and manifested in the world, whatever religion the spouses profess.^[3]

Knowing that it was God who is the source of the very idea of marriage, that it is not a human invention linked to a specific historical period or culture, is a source of hope. For we can trust that God will certainly take care of those who embark on this path, if they rely on him as an important element of their relationship. In the Latin Church, the bride and groom themselves are considered ministers of the sacrament, because it is their consent that sanctions the marriage covenant. In the Eastern Churches, in contrast, the priest who blesses the union is considered the minister, since he is the most evident sign of Christ's presence in marriage. In any case, the principal celebrant of the sacrament, the one who truly administers it, is Jesus, who acts through his ministers (as happens in all the

sacraments). In both churches, moreover, both the presence of the contracting parties and that of the priest are indispensable for the sacrament to be validly celebrated. But it is Christ who gives the woman to the man and the man to the woman, so that they may love each other and become one flesh and care for each other.

Is Christ's action limited to sanctioning the union of the spouses, consecrating and blessing it, or does he also accompany the common journey that begins with marriage?

The Second Vatican Council answers this question in its pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*: "Christ the Lord abundantly blessed this many-faceted love, welling up as it does from the fountain of divine love and structured as it is on the model of his union with his Church. For as God of old made himself present to his people through a covenant of love and fidelity, so now the Savior of men and the Spouse of the Church comes into the lives of married Christians through the sacrament of matrimony. He abides with them thereafter so that just as he loved the Church and handed himself over on her behalf, the spouses may love each other with perpetual fidelity through mutual self-bestowal."^[4]

The Council suggests, in this regard, the presence of an abundant outpouring of blessings, and evokes the wedding at Cana, when our Lord provided a wedding with an incredible quantity of excellent wine: some 600 liters (cf. *Jn* 2:1-12)! This was the sign of the definitive covenant, brought about thanks to the intervention of his Mother, who was not the protagonist of the scene, but not a mere spectator either. Christ's presence at the wedding, and the joyful miracle he performed there, reveal that Christian spouses, in celebrating their marriage, receive many graces from Heaven. However, Jesus' action is not limited to the moment of the celebration. He remains with the bride and groom so that their love does not die along the way, but grows, is purified and becomes life-giving.

Moreover, the sacramental origin of marriage confers on the married state a special dignity in the Church and places it above charisms of non-sacramental origin. It is not a question of making classifications or rankings among the various paths in the Church, since they are all inspired by the same Spirit and have as their purpose the building up of the Kingdom of

Christ in charity. But we need to keep in mind that the charisms of sacramental origin not only support a spiritual path, but also have a structuring value for the Church herself. The Church is built up by Baptism and Confirmation, receives the services essential to her life through Holy Orders and Marriage, and is sustained and nourished by Penance, the Anointing of the Sick and, above all, the Eucharist, the pledge of eternal life for all the baptized. The sacraments are not only means of personal grace; they structure the bonds by which the baptized form one body of which Christ is the Head.

b) Consecration of the marital relationship

Let us turn to the second characteristic feature of the matrimonial journey. Matrimony is the relationship of the spouses that becomes a sign of the “mystery of that unity and fruitful love which exists between Christ and his Church.”^[5]

Already in the Old Testament it was revealed, albeit in a veiled way, that the human couple, and not only the individual person, is the image of God. The sacred author states that “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (*Gen* 1:27).^[6] In the light of the New Testament, Pope Francis explains: “Marriage is a precious sign, for ‘when a man and a woman celebrate the sacrament of marriage, God is, as it were, ‘mirrored’ in them; he impresses in them his own features and the indelible character of his love. Marriage is the icon of God’s love for us. Indeed, God is also communion: the three Persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit live eternally in perfect unity. And this is precisely the mystery of marriage: God makes of the two spouses one single existence’ (Catechesis of April 2, 2014).”^[7]

What does it mean to say that God “makes of the two spouses one single existence”? What is the image of God that the couple united by the sacrament of marriage offers to the Church? In spite of their weaknesses, and perhaps precisely because of them,^[8] The “we” of the spouses acquires the value of a revelation of God’s faithful and merciful love. Moreover, we could say that, through marriage, the whole Church is enriched by the revelation of specific characteristics of the Creator’s love. God loves not only with a Father’s love, who begets children, educates them and prepares

an inheritance for them, but also with the love of a Bridegroom who gives his life for his Bride and makes her fruitful.

Marriage, therefore, is a sign precisely insofar as it is a relationship. In fact, it is the only sacrament that is necessarily celebrated “in pairs.” It is impossible to marry alone, while one can be baptized or receive first communion alone. And this is also the case even when many people receive these sacraments in the same ceremony. But only two people, a man and a woman, can contract matrimony, in order to sanctify a specific relationship: the relationship of two sexually distinct, potentially fruitful persons, through which the two fundamental modes of being human, with their own specific characteristics, come together to form a stable communion.

In *Familiaris Consortio*, St. John Paul II identified four main tasks of the family in the Church and in the world. In first place he had pointed to the “formation of a community of persons”^[9]; then came the service to life, to society and to the Church. Pope Francis, in turn, has often addressed engaged couples or young married couples, admiring their courage^[10] and exhorting them to believe that it is possible to live together, to love each other, and that there is a force greater than personal interests that tend to isolate and separate.^[11] This love is stronger than pride, than attempts to control, than impatience with one’s own and other people’s limitations. He encourages spouses to make their lives a sign of the love that overcomes hatred and indifference, that rises above self-referential egoism, that purifies and overcomes the desire to possess and that is the true response to the drama of loneliness. At a time when individualism and self-assertion seem to be the supreme commandment to which everything must yield, including even the most beautiful bonds when they become too difficult or demanding, married couples are a sign that love is greater than the sin that disunites, that it is possible to live together, to find common ground, to give in without losing one’s identity, to give up some of one’s desires and even some of one’s passions in order to acquire new passions, develop new desires and nourish aspects of one’s personality that would not have arisen without this relationship; in short, that it is possible to assert oneself in a different way than one had envisaged.

The first task of those who marry is to generate the “we” that previously did not exist when they were two close but not yet combined

individualities, sharers in the same fate. In fact, the two engaged people already know each other, already love each other, but by getting married they affirm that they want to remain and grow together, to become one flesh. The “we” is the first fruit of marriage; it is the bond that unites ontologically and not only formally, and gives the man and the woman a new identity: that of being the husband of... and the wife of.... However, it is not enough to form the bond through the celebration of the sacrament. The two persons need to live it and make it a reality in specific choices of greater or lesser importance in order to build up a “common heart,”^[12] so that each of them, in their work and in the cultivation of their interests, act in the context of the shared project, which reorganizes priorities and resources according to the union between the two. In an audience, Pope Francis spoke of this process: “In order to get married, the wedding ceremony does not suffice! We must make the journey from I to we, from thinking alone to thinking together, from living alone to living together: it is a good journey; it is a beautiful journey. Once we succeed at decentralizing ourselves, all action is spousal: we work, we speak, we decide, we meet others with a welcoming and oblatinal attitude.”^[13]

This does not mean that for those who receive the sacrament everything will go well. Unfortunately, in many cases the spouses find themselves at odds with each other, sometimes even leading to a situation of definitive separation. Faced with this reality, the ecclesiastical tribunals have to determine which marriages are null and void, that is, not truly celebrated in spite of appearances. Generating the “we” of the spouses means striving to make love grow both when the relationship is easy and when it is difficult, knowing that moments of difficulty are often more useful for growth than those of easy satisfaction, since they are an opportunity to change perspective, to seek solutions, to listen more attentively to the requests of the other spouse, to patiently accept that there will be times when communication between the two becomes more difficult. In short, the spouses need to develop qualities of openness, patience, creativity, humility and, above all, to grow in the virtues of hope and charity. Everyone admires older couples, because with their understanding they show the strength of a love that has won many battles and has grown through difficulties. Marital fidelity should never be confused with a frozen relationship: it is the mature fruit of a humble, kind

and creative love. Even when separation is the only feasible path, the Church praises the spouse who remains faithful to the marriage and continues to honor the commitment made.^[14] In these cases, the faithful spouse is especially a sign of Christ the bridegroom who gives his life to his spouse in a way that keeps alive the hope of the resurrection.

This specific element of the spirituality of marriage, that is, the generation of the conjugal “we,” was recognized by the Church when she began to promote the canonization processes of some marriages with the husband and wife viewed not separately but together, to signify that Christian spouses can become saints precisely through marriage. Their path of sanctification follows a specific path: that of love in the commitments proper to married life, of Christian virtues lived in the perspective of fidelity to the mission received, and of communion in service and assistance. This will be the theme of the communications here today, each of which will present a couple whose process of beatification has been completed or is still in progress: Blessed Maria Corsini and Luigi Beltrame Quattrocchi, and the Servants of God Jozef and Wiktorja Ulma, Giovanni Gheddo and Rosa Franzi, Laura Busca and Eduardo Ortiz de Landázuri, Maria Rosaria De Angelis and Franco Bono, Daphrose Mukasanga and Cyprien Rugamba.

c) Forming “one flesh”

A third feature of marital spirituality is the fact that the conjugal “we” is made a reality not only in the spiritual but also in the corporal union of the spouses. The Christian tradition points to this union with a strong expression, when it says that they are called to form one flesh (*una caro* in Latin). Although we speak of *caro*, flesh, what is meant by this expression is the whole life, which in a man and a woman is necessarily both bodily and spiritual. An essential part of the dialogue between spouses is the union of bodies, which St. John Paul II helped us to consider as a language, a form of non-verbal self-expression capable of greater or lesser sincerity and intimacy^[15]; it is a personal and not simply physical dimension. Pope Francis wrote that “in his catecheses on the theology of the body, Saint John Paul II taught that sexual differentiation not only is ‘a source of fruitfulness and procreation,’ but also possesses ‘the capacity of expressing love: that love precisely in which the human person becomes a gift.’”^[16]

Thus the sexual dimension needs to be viewed and lived with its properly human dignity, willed by the Creator; it is a positive reality not only in view to procreation, but also because it is the expression of love between spouses.^[17]

Through the sacrament that they have celebrated, the spouses exercise their common priesthood also in the sexual act, offering their union and joy to God, rejecting the temptation to use each other for selfish ends, putting the legitimate needs of the other spouse first and welcoming the possibility of children. Then the conjugal act is truly a priestly act, by which each spouse renders worship to God, the source of love and life. With this conviction, St. Josemaría Escrivá had the audacity to say: “I see the conjugal bed as an altar; the matter of the sacrament is there.”^[18] There God acts, making two into one flesh, sometimes granting the gift of life, increasing the love between the spouses, strengthening communion in the family and in the Church.

However, we cannot be naïve and go directly from the widespread suspicion of the selfishness inherent in sexuality during many centuries of Christianity, to its uncritical legitimization, following the trend of the dominant culture. Also in this area, spouses are called to grow, progressively refining their mutual bodily self-giving, living it with ever greater love. Pope Francis warns that “we also know that, within marriage itself, sex can become a source of suffering and manipulation.”^[19] Spouses too are open to the danger of “using sex as form of escapism and renounce the beauty of conjugal union,^[20] and it is important to reject clearly “every form of sexual submission.”^[21] In this regard, one cannot overlook the importance of the norm enunciated in the encyclical *Humanae vitae*, where St. Paul VI taught that it is wrong to voluntarily separate the unitive meaning of the sexual act from the procreative one,^[22] because this intentional manipulation degrades the whole act. The more than fifty years since the publication of the encyclical provide the clearest proof of the validity of this papal teaching. In fact, the “liberation” of sex from fertility soon led to irresponsible sex, which in turn resulted in the depersonalization of the act, reduced to merely the mutual use of two bodies.^[23] In the case of spouses, contraception has not only prevented procreation, but has also distorted the language of their union, so that often

spouses have found themselves living in a “complicity” that is a caricature of communion.

To avoid births that, responsibly, they consider imprudent, Paul VI’s advice to spouses was that they should get to know the cyclical periods of a woman’s fertility, and abstain from sexual intercourse if it is likely to be fruitful. Abstaining from the sexual act when a new life cannot be welcomed requires practicing self-mastery, which is difficult in this area mainly for two reasons. On the one hand, because of the objective inner weakness that is always experienced in the management of sexual impulses and feelings, aggravated by the current devaluation of such a choice at the cultural level, in the name of self-referential spontaneity as an absolute good.^[24] On the other hand, this requires perceiving the body as a personal reality and not as an object that can be used and manipulated like the rest of nature. Self-mastery is born of dialogue with God; and, in the case of the spouses, it is nourished by the dialogue between them, who remain open to the Creator and to each other, both when they decide to unite and when they decide to abstain from union. By avoiding union when they cannot accept procreation, they reach an understanding that is not easy, but perhaps for that very reason it is deeper.

St. Paul VI’s teaching was taken up by St. John Paul II, who, at the end of his four-year catechesis on the theology of the body and marriage, revealed that the aim of all his teaching was precisely to deepen and develop the doctrine contained in *Humanae vitae*.^[25] St. John Paul II offered a broader perspective for understanding the norm of *Humanae vitae*, clarifying that its value is not simply moral, but also anthropological and spiritual. Speaking of conjugal life animated by the Holy Spirit, he said: “If the key element of the spirituality of spouses and parents is *love*, this love, as is clear from the text of the Encyclical (cf. HV 20) is by its nature *united to chastity, which manifests itself as self-mastery, that is, as continence*: in particular, as periodic continence.”^[26] In a later discourse he reiterated that “at the heart of conjugal spirituality is therefore chastity, not only as a moral virtue (formed by love), but at the same time as a virtue linked to the gifts of the Holy Spirit – above *all, to the gift of respect for what comes from God (donum pietatis)*.”^[27]

These words are now almost 40 years old, and yet today it is still rare to hear marital chastity spoken of in terms of a choice inspired by the gift of piety, with which we honor the fatherhood of God, the origin of all human fatherhood and motherhood. “The whole *practice of honest regulation of fertility*, so intimately linked to responsible fatherhood and motherhood, is *part of Christian conjugal and family spirituality*; and only by living ‘according to the Spirit’ does it become inwardly true and authentic.”^[28]

d) The first heralds of the faith for their children

In the text of *Lumen Gentium* that is guiding us here, we read that “the family is, so to speak, the domestic church. In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children; they should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each of them, fostering with special care vocation to a sacred state.”^[29] The mission of Christian spouses culminates in passing on the faith to their children, accompanying them to receive baptism and the other sacraments of Christian initiation, and teaching them to love God, to give thanks and ask for forgiveness, to have a filial dialogue with Him. Not only with explanations, but above all with their example, Christian parents pass on the Christian way of life, fundamental for any subsequent teaching to be accepted and lived. In this period of “educational emergency” that we have been experiencing for years now,^[30] Pope Francis has often exhorted parents not to consider themselves incapable of carrying it out, even if there are obstacles, both practical and cultural, that make it especially difficult today.^[31] We can consider here the lack of time parents have to spend with their children, the digital revolution that has opened up new scenarios of connections and content, the proliferation of experts for every area of life that can make parents feel incapable of taking responsibility for their children.

In spite of all this, the educational mission, with its consequent responsibility, is still a serious duty for fathers and mothers, whose authority precedes that of others responsible – to varying degrees – for education, namely, the Church and the state. Only the parents can transmit to their child the fundamental convictions needed in life, namely, that he or she deserves to be loved and respected at all times, not in order to foster a narcissistic self-satisfaction, but to develop the gifts each one has received

and use them for the benefit of others. Only when an atmosphere of gratuitousness characterizes the family can children grow in their self-giving; only when an environment of total acceptance is present will the corrections indispensable in any educational effort be effective.

But I don't want to dwell here on the difficulties presented by the current cultural context. What I would like to focus on now is that, in their work of educating their children, spouses exercise the prophetic task proper to Christian parents and live by the Holy Spirit. St. John Paul II spoke of this in a passage from *Familiaris consortio* that is worth quoting even if it is a bit long: "For Christian parents the mission to educate, a mission rooted, as we have said, in their participation in God's creating activity, has a new specific source in the sacrament of marriage, which consecrates them for the strictly Christian education of their children: that is to say, it calls upon them to share in the very authority and love of God the Father and Christ the Shepherd, and in the motherly love of the Church, and it enriches them with wisdom, counsel, fortitude and all the other gifts of the Holy Spirit in order to help the children in their growth as human beings and as Christians. The sacrament of marriage gives to the educational role the dignity and vocation of being really and truly a 'ministry' of the Church at the service of the building up of her members. So great and splendid is the educational ministry of Christian parents that Saint Thomas has no hesitation in comparing it with the ministry of priests: 'Some only propagate and guard spiritual life by a spiritual ministry: this is the role of the sacrament of Orders; others do this for both corporal and spiritual life, and this is brought about by the sacrament of marriage, by which a man and a woman join in order to beget offspring and bring them up to worship God.' (*Summa contra Gentiles* IV, 58)."^[32]

I would like to consider briefly only two points in this quote. First, the fact that the specifically Christian educational task of parents flows from the sacrament of marriage, which enables them to express, as we saw earlier, the love of Christ for the Church – a love shown in total self-giving and sacrifice, and which then culminates in the joy of the Resurrection. Therefore the specific educational task of the family consists in transmitting to the children the "ethos" of gift, that is, the awareness and joy of having been born through love and being destined to love as the

meaning for one's own life.^[33] Obviously, this can only be fulfilled in the context of freedom, without which it is impossible to love; but not a self-referential freedom oriented to the selfish affirmation of oneself, but a freedom open to others in order to meet them in a humanly meaningful and true way. No true education would take place if parents were to push children to act according to their own desires. Any form of manipulation is contrary to true education, which is always also an act of trust in the persons God has entrusted to the educators, in this case in the children.

The second point I would like to consider is the reference to the action of the Holy Spirit, who enriches parents with his gifts, among which the Pope highlights the gifts of wisdom, counsel and fortitude, considering them particularly important for those who have the mission to educate. Indeed, the gift of wisdom opens the eyes of the mind and heart to a deeper understanding of reality, in its ultimate reference to God and also to the true human good. Thanks to this gift, parents can help their children to discover a world full of meaning and to admire God's plan, his goodness and wisdom, as well as guide them in the desire to contribute to it through the use of their freedom. Thanks to the gift of wisdom, all life is naturally oriented towards goodness, truth and beauty; it seeks them instinctively, without being satisfied with the substitutes that this world so readily offers.

The gift of counsel, in turn, is necessary in many specific situations, when doubts arise about what to do, or when judgment is unclear. Through this gift, parents can help their children understand what values are really at stake in their choices. Of course, advice must always be given in a way that the child feels that he or she is the true protagonist of his or her actions; it will also have to take into account differences of age and stages of life, whether one is addressing a young child, an adolescent or an adult child. Finally, the gift of fortitude is also very important in the educational effort. Unfortunately, many people confuse fortitude with authoritarianism, and based on this misunderstanding they give up in the task of educating their children. They think that manifesting a clear judgment is opposed to the child's legitimate freedom and they limit themselves to saying "do what you want, what you feel like doing," without providing criteria for a correct judgment. And thus they renounce their task of making clear what is good and what is bad in a given situation, which is fundamental to be able to act

freely. An important act of fortitude is correction, of which Pope Francis spoke in relation to the need for fathers to be more present in the family, to be “a father who is always present. To say ‘present’ is not to say ‘controlling’ . . . A good father *knows how to wait and knows how to forgive* from the depths of his heart. Certainly, he also knows how to correct with firmness: he is not a weak father, submissive and sentimental. The father who *knows how to correct without humiliating* is the one who knows how to protect without sparing himself.”^[34] And, as we know well, sometimes a look of sorrow or disappointment is enough to correct effectively.

e) Supporting the needs of the family: work

In convoking the 7th World Meeting of Families on the topic “Family, Work and Celebration,” Benedict XVI wrote: “Work and celebration are closely connected with the lives of families: they condition decisions, influence relations between spouses and between parents and children and affect the relationship of the family with society and with the Church. Sacred Scripture (cf. *Gen* 1-2) tells us that the family, work and holidays are gifts and blessings to help us to live a fully human life.”^[35]

In outlining the essential features of marital spirituality, we cannot overlook the command to work, given by God right from the beginning to the man and woman who formed the first human family (cf. *Gen* 1:28). Work is indispensable for spouses to bring forward their family, first of all because, without it, it is impossible to even think of getting married and forming a family, but also because its dynamics have an important impact on family equilibrium.^[36]

The work of a father and mother of a family is part of their daily offering to God. But it also has a family dimension: it is no longer the work of a man or a woman who are only answerable to themselves for their professional choices. Spouses cannot consider their work only in terms of personal fulfillment. They must also take other parameters into account: for example, the time devoted to work must permit sufficient time to fulfill their family duties with serenity; time needs to be set aside for rest, making it compatible with the interests of the other members of the family and enabling them to share moments of worship, leisure, cultural interests, sports, etc. The salary is not a personal good, but a common good, and has

to be sufficient to guarantee family life.^[37] Possible moves for professional reasons also have to be evaluated in the light of the needs of the other members of the family; some professions entail risks to one's health or life whose family repercussions should not be ignored. Marriage brings with it the transition from working for oneself to working for the family, and here too the spouses are called upon to build up the "we" as the subject of professional decisions.

Clement of Alexandria, a Christian author of the first centuries who wrote in defense of Catholic teaching against the Gnostics, compared celibate life with married life and affirmed the superiority of those who follow the latter path, at least in relation to one's personal and Christian maturation. Of the man who marries, he says that "he shows himself to be a man by not assuming a solitary life, for he who wins out among men is he who with difficulty but without sorrow exercises himself in marriage, in procreation and in the care of the home and rises victorious over every trial that comes his way because of his children, his wife, his relatives and his possessions. He who has no home, on the other hand, is not tempted by these things, and so, because he cares only for himself, he is certainly inferior to the one who surpasses him in the conduct of his life, who preserves without artifice a small image of the authentic Providence."^[38] Spouses cooperate with the work of the Creator and, in providing for their family, they also become a sign of God the Father, who does not abandon his creatures, but provides for all of them.^[39]

Among the most important assets for any family is the home, where family ties are shaped and strengthened: "Families and homes go together."^[40] The home is not only a protected and peaceful space, but perhaps the first manifestation of the "we" that is born with marriage. The home of a true family is not a series of spaces that each person inhabits in an autonomous way with respect to those they live with, as in a student residence. The home is not just a place, but an expression of the people who live there and of their relationships. The home is a space that expresses the value of family time, because it preserves the memory of the past, reflects communion in the present and is open to plans for the future.^[41]

For the home to be more than a dormitory, a place where individuals pass by each other, those living there need to share time and thoughts, to

create a common living space so that the home becomes a place of growth. Also the material aspects – the order of material objects, the distribution of space, the careful preparation of shared meals, the cleanliness of clothes, etc.– are a sign of respect and communion and in turn foster mutual gratitude and service. It is only fair, in this respect, that all members of the family offer their collaboration, each according to his or her abilities. Teaching children to take care of their home environment is an important aspect of their education, because it develops a sense of responsibility for their own possessions and those of common use, an awareness of the effort required to keep them in good condition, and gratitude for the services they enjoy.^[42]

At the beginning of this article we raised the question of whether marital holiness has its own specific characteristics. One of the features in which it differs most clearly from the spiritualities of religious is its relationship with the material goods that are obtained by working. In fact, it can be said that the holiness of spouses “is not a holiness of renunciation, but of possession and use of human goods.”^[43] The virtue of poverty, necessary for all Christians, is not expressed for spouses by renouncing material goods, but by administering them according to the values of charity and justice.

Spouses have the duty to provide the necessary resources for themselves and for the support of their children. The husband and wife, with their work inside and outside the home, support the family financially and contribute to the good of society, while the children study in order to prepare themselves to work and one day form their own family. Nor should we forget the immense task carried out by families as social “shock absorbers” – as the only support, at times, for sick, disabled or unemployed relatives. Pope Francis said in this regard: “The boundless work of the family is not quoted in financial statements, obviously! Indeed economics and politics are misers in regards to acknowledging this. Yet, the interior formation of the person and the social flow of affections have their mainstay precisely there.”^[44]

Sometimes families find themselves confronting poverty, and in such cases precarious economic conditions can be a serious test of family ties: “There are many poor families who try to live their daily lives with dignity,

often openly entrusting themselves to God's blessing. It is almost a miracle that, even in poverty, the family continues to form, and even preserve –as much as it can– the special humanity of those bonds,”^[45] To carry the family forward in conditions of poverty, with precarious or poorly paid work, without losing the dignity and quality of human relationships, is an authentic path of purification in which faith in God, the hope of overcoming difficulties and the mutual love of the spouses are strengthened. In such a situation they will often have to offer up the pain of not being able to buy their spouse or their children the goods they need, the humiliation of having to borrow money or postpone the purchase of an important asset, and the uncertainty about their own future and that of their children. Achieving financial stability is very important not only for the material but also for the spiritual life of the family.

Wealthier families, on their part, cannot ignore the needs of the more needy. They must, first of all, take up a temperate and generous lifestyle and educate their children in these values, for example by avoiding excessively expensive gifts and helping their children to get involved in charitable works, in soup kitchens, in long-distance networks to support a child's studies, etc. It is worthwhile remembering that private property is not an absolute right, and it is not unrelated to the right of each person to own what is necessary for a dignified life. Indeed, it brings with it a responsibility towards families with fewer resources.^[46] Hence the importance of the contribution to society of enterprising families who create family-run businesses through which, in addition to ensuring their own well-being, they provide work for other families, thus triggering a virtuous circle.

f) Vocation to marriage

From all that we have briefly considered above, we can conclude that marriage and the family constitute a true Christian vocation with very specific characteristics.

God calls a man and a woman to unite as spouses in a communion of life animated by love, and Christ accompanies them on their journey so that this love matures through the inevitable difficulties that arise. Spouses exercise their royal priesthood by collaborating with God the Creator

through the transmission of life to new children of God; they carry out their prophetic mission by educating them in an environment of faith and love so that the Christian vocation may also flourish in them. Through their work, they not only transform the world for their own benefit, but also humanize it, and also guarantee the necessary goods for their children, and often also for relatives and other people close to them. They are a sign of Christ's love for the Church and of God's providential love, and as such, as a couple, they can show this love to the Church and the world.

Greater consideration should be given to the marvelous value of the vocation to marriage in the Church. For example, when praying for vocations, besides asking God to raise up people for the priesthood or for lives of consecrated celibacy, we should also ask him to raise up Christian spouses, who will follow Christ on the path of marriage.

The words of St. Josemaría Escrivá in *The Way*, written in the early 1930s, are still very relevant today: "You laugh because I tell you that you have a 'vocation for marriage'? Well, you have just that: a vocation."^[47]

[1] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1535.

[2] LG [Second Vatican Council, Const. *Lumen gentium*, November 21, 1964], no. 11.

[3] This is why St. John Paul II speaks of marriage as the primordial sacrament: cf. *Audience*, February 20, 1980, nos. 4-5.

[4] GS [Second Vatican Council, Const. *Gaudium et spes*, December 7, 1965], no. 48.

[5] LG, no. 11.

[6] Cf. St. John Paul II, Letter to Families *Gratissimam Sane*, February 2, 1994, no. 6.

[7] AL [Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, March 19, 2016], no. 121.

[8] Cf. AL, no. 122.

[9] FC [St. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, November 22, 1981], no. 17.

[10] Cf. Francis, *Audience*, May 6, 2015.

[11] Cf. Francis, *Audience*, May 27, 2015.

[12] Cfr. Cosimo Luigi Russo, *Il cuore comune*, ESD, Bologna 2016.

[13] Francis, *Audience*, October 31, 2018.

[14] Cf. AL, nos. 241-242.

[15] Cf., for example, the audiences of January 2 and 16, 1980, in which St. John Paul II speaks of the *spousal meaning* of the body, that is, he considers the sexual body as the bearer of a language and the subject of communication. Later, in the audiences of January and February 1983, he will speak explicitly of the language of the body in the sacrament of Matrimony.

[16] AL, no. 151. The internal quotation is from the audience of January 16, 1980.

[17] Cf. AL, no. 152.

[18] Quoted in Marta Brancatisano, “Familia, Santificación de la,” in *Diccionario de san Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer* (coord. José Luis Illanes), Monte Carmelo - Istituto Storico San Josemaría Escrivá, Burgos 2013, p. 490.

[19] AL, no. 154.

[20] AL, no. 155.

[21] AL, no. 156.

[22] Cf. HV [St. Paul VI, Enc. *Humanae vitae*, July 25, 1968], no. 11.

[23] AL, no. 284. Proof of this can be found in the fact that (at least in Italian) the expression “to make love” (*fare l'amore*) has been replaced by “to have sex” (*fare sesso*), a manifestation of the reduction of the act to the exclusively corporeal dimension.

[24] Cf. HV, nos. 17-18. It should be remembered that it is not enough to have a good intention in order to do what is morally good, even though today's culture tends to reduce the goodness of an action to this single condition. It is also necessary that the subject chooses to do what is objectively good.

[25] Cf. St. John Paul II, *Audience*, November 28, 1984, no. 2.

[26] Idem, *Audiencia*, October 10, 1984, no. 5.

[27] Idem, *Audiencia*, November 14, 1984, no. 2.

[28] Idem, *Audiencia*, November 14, 1984, no. 6.

[29] LG, no. 11.

[30] Cf. Benedict XVI, *Letter to the Diocese and City of Rome*, January 21, 2008.

[31] Cf. Francis, *Audience*, May 20, 2015.

[32] FC, no. 38.

[33] Cf. FC, no. 11.

[34] Francis, *Audience*, February 4, 2015.

[35] Benedict XVI, *Letter to the President of the Pontifical Council for the Family*, August 23, 2010.

[36] Cf. St. John Paul II, Encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, September 14, 1981, no. 10. Cf. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 249.

[37] The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 250, speaks of a “family wage.”

[38] Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* VII,12,70,6-8.

[39] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 306-308.

[40] AL, no. 44.

[41] Cf. Carlo Rocchetta, *Teologia della famiglia: fondamenta e prospettive*, EDB, Bologna 2011, pp. 557-566; Maria Ajroldi, *Dimensione casa. Cultura e cura della vita domestica*, Ares, Milano 2011.

[42] Cf. Francis, *Audience*, November 11, 2015. Cf. also AL, no. 50.

[43] Giovanni Moioli, *La spiritualità familiare. Frammenti di riflessione*, In *Dialogo*, Milano 2008, p. 34.

[44] Francis, *Audience*, June 3, 2015.

[45] Francis, *Audience*, June 3, 2015.

[46] Cf. Francis, Enc. *Fratelli tutti*, Oct. 3, 2020, nos. 109-111 and 118-120. Cf. also *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, nos. 176-181, 339 and 345.

[47] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 27.

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