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DICASTERIUM  
PRO LAICIS, FAMILIA ET VITA

WE GO WITH A BURNING HEART

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Dearly beloved,

With deep joy, I address you after these four days of reflection, listening, and dialogue in the Spirit. You have had a *transformative* inner experience of your hearts. You have allowed yourselves to be shaped by the wise hands of the Lord. You walked along the road to Emmaus, not alone, but as spouses, hand in hand, you welcomed Jesus, who walked among you, in the midst of your couple. You allowed yourselves to be led and felt *your hearts burning*. You have recognized Christ at the Eucharistic Table and now you feel overflowing with joy, with a renewed faith, fruit of the communion you have experienced during these days. You have made yourselves beggars, taken all you could take, gathered bread and crumbs to fill your hearts with Jesus, to nourish the love of your couple and be fruitful together.

Go, then, from today with a burning heart! Go and give the gifts you have received, moved in your hearts by the ardor, warmth and deep strength that comes from your personal and conjugal encounter with Jesus Jesus.

Let us remember that *ardor* (*ardor-oris*) is an impetus, but it is also a thirst that can be felt in the mouth and that can only be satisfied by the continuous feeding on the Body of Christ and His Blood. It is a thirst that you will have to quench every day by returning to the Eucharist, the source and summit of our Christian life.

Therefore, starting from here, from the beauty of this ardor, I would like to reflect with you on two points, in order to figure out together how to keep it alive in the coming years and not let the flame that has been kindled in your hearts be extinguished.

***First point: the Christian ardor of our hearts grows and is rekindled every time we participate in the Breaking of Bread.***

The ardor does not remain alive by force of will, nor by the effort of reasoning, nor by remembrance. The heart burns as *Christ converses with us in intimacy*. And the place of this dialogue is the Eucharist: there we recognize him and meet him again each time. As individual baptized believers and as spouses.

These days you have meditated on the mystery of the Eucharist: it makes the faithful one body. Jesuit Father Henry de Lubac said "the Eucharist makes the Church" ("*Eucharistia facit ecclesiam*"); "it is the event that sustains the Church in its becoming itself", in growing stronger as Church (ecclesia). This is even more true for spouses and the Christian family, which in No. 11, *Lumen Gentium* defines as the "domestic Church", what St. Augustine and St. John Chrysostom also called the *minuscule ecclesia*, in which family relationships encapsulate the dynamism of the larger ecclesial life.

In order to understand the deep connection between our being Christian families and the Eucharist, indispensable nourishment to keep our hearts burning, let us dwell for a moment on the



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meaning of the domestic Church. The Catechism states that it is the "specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion", the image and participation of the love between Christ and the Church. As such, it is capable of manifesting the presence of Christ in the world - it is a sign of his presence - and the genuine nature of the Church," *Gaudium et Spes* 48 specifies: it is an effective sign of what the great Church is, by virtue of the love between man and woman taken as a sacrament (Jn 13:35). Each of your families is a community with a mission to become more and more what it is: *intimate communion of persons* capable of becoming *fraternal communion* in the Church. That is, a model of communion and relationship for the whole Church: a place where the gospel is transmitted and from which the gospel radiates. Concretely, the love that spouses experience with each other shapes the way they relate to each other inside and outside the family. The sacramentality of your relationship is the sacramentality of your entire marital existence. And it becomes a *ministerial sacramentality of love*: your life is marked by the vocation to serve you *by loving you* and to *love you by serving you*. And this expands around you.

The event that makes this possible is precisely the Eucharist: as with the *magna ecclesia*, the Body of Christ is the source and summit of its fullness. Through the Eucharist, the couple regains awareness of its ecclesial vocation and receives *the grace, nourishing it each time*, to be domestic Church. Jesus knocks at the door of your families to share the Eucharistic Supper with you. He desires to be at the heart of your little domestic Church. The covenant the Lord has established with you, he has expressed in nuptial form: on your wedding day you experienced an authentic Pentecost, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that abides, but love needs to be continually renewed and saved.

As St. John Paul II told your movement in 1982, "Attendance at the Eucharist enables spouses to make their trials a path of communion, [...]" to re-access joy each time: "*Christian marriage is an Easter.*"

In marriage and the Eucharist, the covenant between Jesus and his little bride, the domestic Church, is revived and celebrated: with the Eucharist, the love of the spouses is inhabited by Christ, who becomes present in and between the spouses, and through them extends to the children, and then all around the family. The extraordinary enters the ordinary. He points the way and makes it possible with his Grace. Love is transfigured, that is, transformed in its appearance and expression. It takes on a new form, imbued with His love through the Spirit. Spouses thus become *domus Domini*, home of Christ who dwells with them, knocks and waits for them to open their hearts, to sustain them with the ardor of His love.

The reference to the heart is not accidental: just as the pupil of the eye is the point of contact between the two worlds-external and internal to the body - so there is in man a mysterious place through which God enters man's life and transforms it. This place is the *heart*, which is not a faculty, such as the intellect or will, but the integrity of the person, the cooperation of all the faculties, the disposition of the individual's whole being. Starting from the heart we can love God with all our strength, with our whole soul, with our whole being. Zélie Martin, the mother of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, wrote that in the Eucharist she felt united to Christ like a "branch to the vine." This is what made her always fruitful toward her family and others, free from sadness even in the most difficult moments of suffering and illness. Louis, her husband, would remain kneeling for hours when receiving the Eucharist, and Teresa was enraptured before this image of her father, so much so that she went so far as to say that, according to her, the angels envy us the happiness of feeding ourselves with the Eucharist.

"Nothing shocking then if the sacrament of marriage engages spouses on a path where they will encounter the cross. Crosses within the couple, [...] because of each one's selfishness, rejection, weakness, disappointments that ask for forgiveness, ruptures." Christ can save us. He sustains us, in the Eucharist, He shines forth our vocation to unity, not fragmentation and loneliness.

This you will have to suggest to the families in crisis that you accompany. This is the foundation of the *pastoral care of the bond* that Pope Francis speaks of in *Amoris laetitia*. In Christ, our life can once again become a source of light, even in the darkness of fatigue and pain. "The Eucharist," Pope Francis tells us, "[...] is strength for the weak, for sinners. It is forgiveness, it is the viaticum that helps us



to go, to walk". Bread is for the hungry, not for the full. It is what makes us *viatores*, always on the way. We know from experience how marriage without Christ is a human affair bordering on the impossible: our fragile human love has little resistance in the difficulties of a life of two. But Jesus "comes to meet Christian spouses in the sacrament of marriage" and remains with them. The Holy Spirit transforms the couple from within and becomes a living presence in daily life.

It is a permanent covenant between God and the bride and groom, expressing that fidelity that reminds us of *the wedding ring*, which resonates not only with our fragile mutual love but God's extraordinary faithfulness to us. The ring is not an empty symbol, but *res*, that is, a visible reality of the invisible, of the *virtus*, the real power and strength (*grace*) that Christ's presence among the bride and groom gives them every day, which keeps them united in their destinies. As St. Paul teaches, we must not "fix our gaze on visible things, but on invisible things" (2 Cor. 4:18), which, St. Ambrose continues, can be contemplated, not understood with reason. The mysteries are not to be understood with the eyes of the flesh and the brain, but with the inner eyes of the heart: this is why St. Ambrose suggests that to understand the sacraments, including marriage, we must not open our eyes, but close them.

Therefore, in the Eucharist Christ comes to save us every time. He enters our stories and redirects them to the Father. Thus, gradually everything is brightened, our gaze is lifted to Heaven, and we find in the desire for forgiveness those we love.

The meaning of family life is inferred, then, from the Eucharist, from the extent to which we are able to grow Christ's presence in our daily lives. The presupposition of our Christian life, as spouses and families, is Christocentric: it is Christ who defines us and not we who define Christ. It is He who gives sacramental meaning to our lives and not the concrete situations of our lives that determine the meaning of grace.

Therefore, frequent participation in the Eucharist is essential for spouses: it "shapes" our love from within. We learn to love not only *as* Christ loved, but *from Christ's own love*, since his Spirit is given to us.

By taking the initiative to be "eaten" by us, He nourishes us with Himself. Thus, our hearts continue to burn and our actions in the family and the larger Church become a living *for Christ, with Christ, and in Christ*. Pointing our eyes and hearts to the one food, Christ, on which the Church must feed is necessary for us to know how to feed His people. To know how to go on a mission!

That is why the Eucharist should be celebrated, but also adored. The word adore comes from the Latin *ad-orare*, to pray, to address someone. But *orare* comes from *os-oris*, mouth. To adore then means to stand before the Lord in silence, to listen from his mouth. To adore is not, then, our praying by speaking, but by listening, placing ourselves before God to hear His Word, to *enter into the Father* and come to "rest in the tenderness of His arms.". As Pope Francis explains in *Evangelii gaudium*, God's tenderness for us is the desire for us to care for one another, it is God's *contentment* to dialogue with us, the *moving of His heart* when we become "leaven" of His love.

In the biography of the Holy Curé d'Ars, a story is told of a peasant, who could neither read nor write, who every day, at the same hour, entered the Church, sat in the last pew and stared fixedly at the Tabernacle. St. John Mary Vianney, intrigued, approached him one day and asked what he was doing, every day, in that same place, at the same hour. The peasant replied, "Nothing, pastor... I look at Him and He looks at me." And he resumed staring at the Tabernacle. And St. Teresa of Avila wrote, "See that Christ desires only that we fix our gaze on Him."

To understand this mystery of God waiting for us yearning for our love, an ancient Jewish story tells that a rabbi had a grandson. One day, playing hide-and-seek with another child, he hid, but the other refused to look for him and left. The child, his eyes filled with tears, ran to his grandfather, who also saddened, exclaimed, "God says the same thing: I hide, but no one comes looking for me. God is the Eternal One, which in Hebrew comes from *alam*, meaning to hide.

The purpose of evangelization is, therefore, to foster those conditions that can awaken the desire for God in people's lives. To foster the heart's adherence to the Father in those entrusted to us.



It is the principle of "*cor ad cor loquitur*": arousing the desire to be heart to heart with God. It is a path that can be proposed to every Christian couple.

Here, then, is the second point: the mission is to make the world permeable to God and His Grace. We can fulfill this mission if we keep our hearts burning. But this happens if we, first, remain permeable to the Father's love.

There is a very beautiful image that makes this idea, that of coal and diamond: two chemically identical realities that because of their molecular structure - one that smothers light, the other that reflects it - are so different. We are like coal when we bring to others ourselves, our ideas, our plans, our reasoning. When we generate divisions, conflicts or let them stagnate. But we can be like diamonds if we empty ourselves to reflect Jesus' desire to transform our family lives to give them fullness.

To make the secularized world we live in Christian, it is not enough to preach Christ, we must *be Christians in life. Concrete witnesses of the joy* of the Spirit received. Alexander Schmemmann writes in this regard, "Modern man is a mortally serious adult, conscious of his sufferings [...] but not of joy; conscious of sex, but not of love; conscious of science, but not of 'mystery.' Because it knows that there is no 'heaven,' it cannot understand the prayer of the Our Father." Secularism is a tragedy, a lie about the world.

The Christian, on the other hand, is the one who knows that Christ has already 'filled all things with Himself,' who discovers Christ everywhere and rejoices, and this joy transforms his plans, his decisions, his actions, putting them back into His hands. And so, it returns to Him every time. The *Eucharistic liturgy* thus makes possible the *liturgy of mission*. The Eucharist is the Church's entry into the joy of God. And this is shared by helping other families recognize God's presence in their lives. Accompanying them, so that they learn *the art of discernment*, which is not just for experts, for those in charge of family ministry, but a way of life, a *Christian way of life*. Every family needs to learn to live in discernment, in small and big decisions, that inner attitude - Pope Francis called it - rooted in *a continuous act of faith*. It is the art of "choosing by separating." "It is based on the conviction that God is at work in the history of the world, in the events of life, in the people I meet." This conviction asks us to learn to think of reality not according to us, but *according to God*.

Discernment is not only about those who are in difficulty, but it is a personal and only then, ecclesial way of life, which is why the Church is a Body in which each of us is a member of this body, where we count and make a difference. In this sense, I think it is important to start again from proclaiming the beauty of our being Christians, from knowing that we *belong to Christ* and that we must "make the decision to let Him meet us."

The mission, then, is to create the conditions for each person to stand before Him with an open heart, letting Him also contemplate us! Making us transparent to Him. This is how *paths of conversion* are activated. Thus, *those in suffering see with God's gaze, which does not annul suffering but transforms its meaning*. How beautiful to recognize in us the gaze of love that Nathanael discovered on the day when Jesus made himself present and said to him, "I saw you when you were under the fig tree" (Jn. 1:48). How sweet it is to stand before a crucified one, [...] and simply be before His eyes! How good it does us, to let Him come back and touch our existence."

Let's help other families discover this gift. Don't keep it to yourselves, take it to parishes, to communities. Make yourselves *hearts that serve*. Your charism exalts marriage as a sacrament in mission! Practice it, then, with joy and share it. Let it not be a privilege for you, but a *task* to witness the beauty of marriage at a time when young people no longer marry. As *Evangelii gaudium* urges us, we must accompany humanity in processes, accompany people in that inner revolution that *only God can accomplish*.

The hunger of families today is really a spiritual hunger for Christ, a need for trust, for comfort, for the ability to feel loved and welcomed with their shortcomings and frailties. And the desires, especially the uncontrolled ones, the ones that today create devastating forms of dependence on the



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things of the world, are actually desires for God, for the satiety that only feeling loved by God can give. May your mission be to accompany and welcome people, without allowing that dangerous juxtaposition to remain between their concrete needs, which we seek to remedy, and the transcendent, that is, Christ, who renews and changes everything. To relieve human needs without transmitting the grace of the Spirit is only philanthropy.

In pastoral ministry, therefore, *forming* families - which we know is an urgent need - must translate into accompanying them to form the minds, consciences, hearts, and behaviors of spouses and their children to *a truly Christian way of life; they must be made familiar with Jesus*. Educating families in the awareness that they are *churches* means forming them in that Christian discernment for which families today are thirsting, especially concerning the need to continue to nurture their marital relationship and the raising of children.

Marriage is a sacrament for mission. As baptized and married, spouses are called to live as *prophets, kings and priests* as spouses. In other words, we have received a *spousal ministry* that makes us co-responsible for the *kerygma*. A ministry of *family life*, which is a task of us families to help other families become ministries, domestic churches. But the mission of proclamation is not self-fulfilling. It is necessary to desire to *pass on the great gift received*, to desire to be witnesses of the beauty of the love celebrated, because in marriage Christ's love for his Church is reflected.

It takes the passion of a lover to fulfill the mission, the Pope says so in *Evangelii gaudium*: who, then, but a *married us* can be effective in bringing Christ to the world?

All families have a mission, but in most cases, they do not know it. To fulfill it they must become aware, and awareness is achieved by becoming *solid* families. New generations of spouses must be made aware that they are *living ministries* needed to build up the Church. Forming solid families, which are able to draw on the Grace received, is indispensable to help the Church form a robust lay priesthood, aware of its dignity and ecclesial co-responsibility.

Let us rise, then, let us go, with that joy and peace that are the fruit of faith. God does not burden us with burdens we are unable to carry. As he asks, he offers the help we need. As St. Augustine writes, when God asks more of you, he urges you to do all you can, to ask for what you cannot, and he helps you so that you can.

So, let us go, trusting Christ; He will be the one to accompany us on the journey. Let us go, acting as if everything depends on us, but knowing that everything will depend on Him.

Invite Jesus into the boats of your lives, into your pastoral projects, into your reflections with families. Let the flame of your hearts ignite those around you. Let there be in your hearts only one desire: to make the world permeable to Grace, to make first of all you and your marriage always permeable to Grace, but - as St. Ignatius of Loyola said - always in a *feeling of communion with the Church*, so that in your communities, looking in the same direction as the wider ecclesial community, you may act in a spirit of co-responsibility and service among families and in parishes.

More than ever today we need to breathe communion and see it in action. In view of the Second Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, one clear question has been posed to all of us: "How to be a synodal Church in mission?" How to concretely live communion, respecting unity and diversity, for the full participation of each one in mission?

We need Christian communities that, having at the center of their hearts the broken Bread of Christ, express communion in the gestures of welcome, participation and in the style of service: humble, capable of listening, of tenderness. Only domestic churches that live communion within themselves will be able to be subjects of effective evangelization.

Go, then, with a burning heart and good mission!