

*Amoris Laetitia ch. 3*

*Prov 8: I was at His side, a master craftsman ...*

*Ps 8: the heavens, the work of your hands ...*

*Rom 5: hope is not deceptive: the love of God has been poured into our hearts.*

*Jn 16: Spirit takes from what is mine ... Everything the Father has is mine ...*

We continue our reading of the recent, and beautiful, document from Pope Francis on Marriage and Family Life, *Amoris Laetitia*, ‘The Joy of Love.’ And this week we are going to draw from his chapter 3, which he has entitled, ‘Looking to Jesus: The Vocation of the Family.’ In this chapter he sets out to summarize some of the Church’s vast body of teaching on Love, Marriage and the Family.

Pope Francis begins by stating that Marriage is a gift from God, a part of His loving plan for the world, and is a beautiful and good thing. We see this, anyway, by looking at Jesus Himself: the Son of God in His plan of salvation for us chose to be born into, and live long years in, and honour, a human family in Nazareth, with Mary & Joseph. Jesus went on to share special times also with families such as St Peter’s household; the home of Martha, Mary & Lazarus; and with great compassion he brought blessing, healing and mercy to many other families.

The family is, in fact, an image of the Most Holy Trinity. God is a communion of persons — Father, Son, and Spirit, existing in perfect loving union — and the family is meant to image that loving in human terms. “Through the Church,” says Pope Francis, “Marriage and the family receive the grace of the Holy Spirit from Christ, in order to bear witness to the Gospel of God’s love.” (A.L. 71) A married couple, and their children, if they live up to what they are called to, express in the world one of the deepest expressions of God’s love at work. The Pope goes on to say: “The sacrament of marriage is not a social convention, an empty ritual or merely the outward sign of a commitment. The sacrament is a gift given for the sanctification and salvation of the spouses. ... Marriage is a vocation, inasmuch as it is a response to a specific call to experience conjugal love as an imperfect sign of the love between Christ and the Church.” (A.L. 72). The Pope reminds us, then, of the incredibly high calling of married couples in eyes of God, and the sight of the Church. “Christian marriage is a sign of how much Christ loved his Church in the covenant sealed on the cross, yet it also makes that love present in the communion of the spouses. ... Even though the analogy between the human couple of husband and wife, and that of Christ and his Church,

is imperfect it inspires us to beg the Lord to bestow on every married couple an outpouring of his divine love.” (A.L. 73)

Whilst the Church sees all *bona fide* marriage between a man and a woman as good, yet marriage between the baptized builds on their baptism relationship with Christ, and offers very special graces and gifts. Baptized, married couples, therefore, should see the dignity they have in God’s sight, and the great responsibility to minister to each other the grace of the Sacrament to each other in an ongoing way. The Sacrament of Marriage isn’t just something that happens on the Wedding Day, but which is ongoing: “the common life of husband and wife, the entire network of relations that they build with their children and the world around them, will be steeped in and strengthened by the grace of the sacrament.” (A.L. 74)

The physical love-making of husband and wife has a beauty and importance in the Catholic understanding of marriage, and serves to express physically that total gift of self, one to the other, as the Pope states: “Sexual union, lovingly experienced and sanctified by the sacrament, is in turn a path of growth in the life of grace for the couple. ... The meaning and value of their physical union is expressed in the words of consent, in which they accepted and offered themselves each to

the other, in order to share their lives completely. Those words give meaning to the sexual relationship and free it from ambiguity.” (A.L. 74) Hence the richness of Catholic teaching that surrounds our sexual faculties, which have their right expression only between a man and woman in marriage.

Naturally, this leads the Pope on to speak of procreation and the gift of children, which are to be conceived only in the physical love-making of the couple, and not by artificial means such as IVF. He teaches that: “The child who is born “does not come from outside as something added on to the mutual love of the spouses, but springs from the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and fulfilment. ... A child deserves to be born of that love, and not by any other means, for “he or she is not something owed to one, but is a gift.” (A.L. 80–81) When viewed in this way, any child conceived is safe from the threat of being unwanted and in danger. The Pope, as we would expect, reminds us of the grave sin of abortion when he goes on to say: “if the family is the sanctuary of life, the place where life is conceived and cared for, it is a horrendous contradiction when it becomes a place where life is rejected and destroyed. So great is the value of a human life, and so inalienable the right to life of an innocent child growing in the mother’s womb, that

no alleged right to one's own body can justify a decision to terminate that life, which is an end in itself and which can never be considered the 'property' of another human being." (A.L. 83)

Pope Francis also repeats strongly that married couples should not frustrate their God-given gift of fertility by artificial contraception, since this only serves to introduce a barrier into the total loving of a couple, though using methods that rely on the woman's natural cycle are perfectly permissible, since this ensures loving communication between the man and woman and respects God's wisdom in His sexual gift to us.

Finally, it's worth quoting the Holy Father as he reaches out to those Catholics who are, for whatever reason, in sexual relationships that are not (yet) Marriages in the eyes of God. He has a special word of appeal to the Church — and to her priests — in their regard: "Seeing things with the eyes of Christ inspires the Church's pastoral care for the faithful who are living together, or are only married civilly, or are divorced and remarried. ... When a couple in an irregular union attains a noteworthy stability through a public bond — and is characterized by deep affection, responsibility towards the children and the ability to overcome trials — this can be seen as

an opportunity, where possible, to lead them to celebrate the sacrament of Matrimony." (A.L. 78)