



# PASTORAL LETTER ON MARRIAGE & FAMILY LIFE

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Embrace with Joy Marriage and Family Life

*My Dear Brothers and Sisters, at this time of Easter and following our Archdiocesan Assembly which took place on the 20-21st March 2015, I am pleased to share with you this Pastoral Letter on the Joy of the Gospel in Marriage and Family Life. I encourage you to read, reflect and discuss this Pastoral Letter in your parishes, schools and families.*

## Where is Jesus today in our family life?

“The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus”, writes His Holiness, Pope Francis (Evangelii Gaudium, 2013, n.1).

We apply that now to our Archdiocesan Assembly here in Canberra 2015 and we state with confident faith: the joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus in marriage and family life.

To encounter Jesus in marriage and family life means that we allow Jesus to EMBRACE with joy, love, kindness and mercy all who marry and live in family life. With faith we want Jesus to draw us more fully into the Grace of the love of the Trinity where divine love is born and generated. That is our deepest prayer. The fruit of this profound prayer is joy.

We all participate in marriage and family life in some way – directly or indirectly.

In my first months in Canberra I began each day feeling something was missing. I eventually discovered what it was. For the first time for many years I could not hear the joyful shouts of children going to school. My place of residence previously was close to the local Catholic Primary School. As I finished my morning meditation and had breakfast before setting out for the

day, I could hear children coming to school. Looking out from my presbytery window I could see dedicated parents, so many wonderful grandparents, guardians, people in cars and on bicycles coming to school. There was much joy and happiness. Children seemed genuinely joyful to go to school and parents seemed genuinely joyful and relieved to see them go! It became part of my life. I did not realise it until it was not there.

It made me reflect on my family life living at home with my parents, my brother and four sisters. Again we take it all for granted until we leave home. But, on reflection, my own family was like a nest for me. It was a home base for all activity – and there was plenty of comings and goings! It was a place of stability and rest in a busy world. It was my primal experience of a community made of love and life and forgiveness. It was like society but in miniature. It was like the Church in a smaller domestic form. It was where we grew up not only physically but in maturity. It is where we slowly took in the values and principles of a good and truthful life lived in love.

This does not mean that my family had reached any height of perfection - far from it. I recall many arguments and sad days within the family, even among my parents. Thanks be to God, however, there were also many times of reconciliation and forgiveness and the willingness to listen to each other again more deeply.

I can recall many attempts for us to pray together at home. Our local parish and schools were like extensions of home. Our participation in parish life was something natural and nourishing to the family's "soul". As a youth, I started to understand leadership by taking on responsibility at parish and school. But I would also return to the home "womb" as prime community. The joy and love found there always revitalised tired spirits. They still do even today.

## QUESTIONS

Think back to your life as a young child.

- Recall a joyful moment.
- How did you deal with challenging situations?

## Marriage – does it have a future?

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My vocation to the priesthood, in hindsight, seems a natural progression from the family life I received. Taking on small responsibilities within the home led me to take on greater responsibilities away from my family. In some ways, reviewing my family life with you from a generation ago seems so different to the way marriage and family life is conducted today.

No doubt there have been challenges to marriage and family life in every age, but the challenges today seem to be particularly complex and worrying. We all feel this. I hope they are exaggerating, but some social commentators surmise that these present-day challenges are even threatening the very existence of marriage and family life as we know it.

Why aren't people highly sensitised to this transformation taking place?

Occasionally, when interviewed by the media on the topic of environmental ecology, I have introduced the topic of human ecology. This is something the recent Popes providentially have introduced. We know that there are universal patterns and objective parameters around which the Earth and its ecological systems revolve and which humanity must respect. There are also reasoned universal principles and objective human values that all must likewise respect if

we hope for a common life of happiness, joy and hope.

Regrettably, I normally find that the interviewer quickly moves onto another topic! Yet, marriage and family life are surely the chief battlegrounds for this indifference to universal human truths. Incremental inattentiveness to the changes to the global warming issues of Earth are causes for profound anxiety. Likewise, why are slow but sure paradigmatic changes to the way society nurtures and promotes relationships, especially in marriage and family, not causes for equal societal angst at the highest levels?

I am reminded of the familiar anecdote of the boiling frog. It says that a frog placed in boiling water will immediately jump out. However, if it is placed in water that very slowly boils it will remain in the water and be boiled to death.







## Some challenges to marriage and family life today

### 1. Moral and philosophical thinking

Even we are not aware of it, the specific decisions we make in family life today are based on certain moral and philosophical presuppositions. For many decades there has been an exaggerated stress on the self in decision-making. What is best for me? How will my self-fulfilment best be attained? Although we need to respect the self, we must also respect the common good of society. There are social responsibilities to keep in mind with personal decision-making. There is the common good that must be protected too. It is not good enough to think, “Oh well, I feel OK about this and it is not illegal, therefore it must be good.” Be careful! Following this line of thinking may make you very unhappy and not give you the freedom you deeply desire.

I can think of a story to illustrate this.

People travelling on a boat suddenly sense that the boat is slowly sinking. They surmise that there must be some leak. They search the boat. Incredibly, they find a man drilling a hole in the base of the boat.

*One passenger shouts out: “Stop, you fool! What are you doing? Stop right now?”  
But the man replies: “What I am doing is none of your business. Whatever I am doing I am doing it in my own spot which I paid for. So mind your own business!”  
Everyone with one voice shouted back: “What you are doing is affecting all of us. The boat will sink and we will perish!”*

### 2. Family communication - relationships

The change in attitudes to relationships today is extraordinary. We all know of this. Examine families today and, along with many wonderful and positive expressions of love and joy, we will notice challenges regarding separation, divorce, co-habitation, same sex attraction, single parenting, roles of women and men, responses to children with disabilities, struggles with marital

The societal reasons why the water in which marriage and family life is slowly heating up are varied and complex. Pope Francis states that “the family is experiencing a profound cultural crisis, as are all communities and social bonds.”(Evangelii Gaudium, 66)

In a simple and brief manner, I wish to nominate some of these cultural challenges in the following section.

In his visit to the Philippines (January 2015), Pope Francis spoke to families and warned of “ideological colonisation” in today’s world. In other words, he called for vigilance from all sorts of tempting ideas that are imposed on people today. They come from outside the present arrangements and aim to change stable mentalities and structures.

#### QUESTIONS

- Do we ever speak about the positive aspects of our marriage to those around us – our fellow married couples or single young people?
- Are we more likely to refer jokingly to the problems of marriage but seldom refer to the joys?

commitment, caring for the elderly and sick, working parents, domestic violence, and so on.

We need a balanced and careful discussion on these attitudinal changes and cultural challenges to communications in the family. There are both helps and hindrances here.

Pope Francis offers a good example regarding much needed balance when he recently discussed modern media in the family today. In his Message for World Communication Day: Communicating the Family (2015), he notes some of the media hindrances “if they become a way to avoid listening to others, to evade physical contact, to fill up every moment of silence and rest...” - But media can help “when they enable people to share their stories, to stay in contact with distant friends, to thank others or to seek their forgiveness and to open the door to new encounters”.

We cannot deny, however, that society today does stress a culture of the ephemeral and the “body beautiful”. Even the issue of family size has changed so rapidly in Australia. When I was a boy, coming from a family of six children did not seem to me to be anything extraordinary. Today, it is most unusual.

I recall a migrant mother telling me recently her shock when she answered a question from a stranger and told her that her baby was her fourth child. “Fourth!” said the surprised stranger, “this one must have been an accident!” “I have no accidents, only children!” said the migrant mother as she walked off.

Even the evidence today of couples deliberately and freely choosing to have no children is not considered remarkable. I remember some years ago a grandmother telling me in frustration of her only child deliberately opting not for children in his relationship but only dogs! “I wanted grandchildren,” she sighed, “but all I have are grand-dogs!”

Let me make some initial theological reflections on these matters from a Catholic point of view.

In marriage there has always been an intrinsic link between love sharing (the unitive



dimension) and life giving (the procreative dimension). Christian marriage reflects to the world Trinitarian love. God loves us amazingly in a way that unites us together in marriage, family and society. At the very same time, it sends us out into the world to “be fruitful...fill...multiply...and govern” (Genesis 1:28) the earth.

This complementary vision is challenged by the extremes in opinions regarding sexuality today.

On the one hand, reducing sexual pleasure to individual pleasure is a real threat to true love. Sexuality can so easily become hedonistic and narcissistic. On the other hand, a rigorist attitude of former times whereby sexuality is justified solely from the point of view of procreation is likewise unworthy of a balanced marital sexuality that involves the persons’ total emotional and affective involvement.



Reclaiming a balanced and all-embracing attitude regarding sexuality that inspires a truly human sexual ethic for our times remains a real challenge.

### QUESTIONS

- Did you and your spouse-to-be discuss having children before you were married? Was it a subject put into the too-hard basket?
- Name two joys and two challenges your children have brought to your relationship?
- What is your attitude to couples with many children or no children?

### 3. Medical issues

All of us can thank God for the advances in medical sciences. On a daily basis, so many are helped tremendously in this area. Yet medical sciences, like all the sciences, must be animated by solid ethical principles.

Much could be said on this topic, but I will limit myself to one observation.

It is still true to say that the most vulnerable stages for Australians are at the start and end of life's spectrum.

Modern medical science today through safe abortions can make this very sad option a real possibility for those with unwanted pregnancies. Also, political debate is still ensuring that euthanasia, especially for the sick and elderly, is kept on the public agenda. Both these options are poison for the health of marital and family life. Counselling, not rushed medical options, is needed for those who find themselves in lonely places in their lives.

### 4. The transmission of christian faith

As a bishop, I know that this is an area that people, especially good Catholic people, are really concerned about. Very often parents, grandparents and great grandparents will bring to my attention the difficulty and frustration of passing on the Catholic faith to the next generation. Blaming goes on: they blame Church leaders, schools, parishes, their children, and even themselves.



No doubt, in each of these areas we can all improve. It is one reason the topic of evangelisation is so important and stressed so much. Simply, the cultural environment in Australia and in so much of the Western world is not supporting the passing of Christian values and faith from one generation to the next. We need to present the saving encounter of Jesus Christ, Lord and Saviour, and the joy of the Gospel in new ways to attract the distracted gaze of the modern world. This is perhaps the deepest task and faith responsibility of us all. Marriage and family life is the “womb” for this to happen afresh as we call on the Holy Spirit to enlighten and lead us.

### QUESTIONS

- Do you ever talk to your children about Jesus?
- Do your children's friends know that you are Catholics?
- In what non-threatening ways do you seek to present Jesus to them?
- Is this the role of parents or should it be tackled elsewhere?

### The beauty of marriage and family – humanity's greatest treasure

What would Australians answer today if we asked them to define marriage? Despite considerable hesitancy, I believe most in Australia would probably end up saying that it is the permanent love bond between a man and woman that is open to the possibility of children.

In other words, it is an enduring male/female friendship that is both love sharing and life giving.

Where did this understanding come from? When I speak to people, many seem to think that it comes from Christianity, and especially Catholicism. There is no doubt that Christianity has given marriage and family life a definite understanding. Shortly, I will consider what shape this has taken. In fact, this traditional definition of marriage and, therefore, family well and truly pre-dates Christianity.

In a recent address at a Vatican conference on marriage and family called HUMANUM COLLOQUIUM ON COMPLEMENTARITY (18TH November 2014), Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, explained the long history of traditional marriage as we know it. He reflected over “the most beautiful idea in the history of civilisation: the idea of the love that brings new life into the world”. He surmised that “seldom has any institution woven together so many different drives and desires, roles and responsibilities. It made sense of the world and gave it a human face, the face of love.”

Lord Sacks then cautioned from returning to the narrow approaches to marriage found in some parts of history. However, he said that...  
...our compassion for those who choose to live differently should not inhibit us from being advocates for the single most humanising institution in history. The family, man-woman, and child, is not one lifestyle choice among many. It is the best means we have yet discovered for nurturing future generations and enabling children to grow in a matrix of stability and love..... It is where we first take the risk of giving and receiving love. It is where one generation passes on its values to the next, ensuring the continuity of a civilisation. For any society, the family is the crucible of its future, and for the sake of our children’s future, we must be its defenders.

I remind you - this vision of marriage and family is not given by a Christian but a Jewish scholar. It is a vision entirely in harmony with the Christian panorama. But they are reflections

going back centuries before Christianity. We are in agreement that this traditional definition and understanding of marriage and family life constitutes one of humanity’s greatest beauties. It is a treasure to be guarded and showcased at all times. Despite its many everyday failures and difficulties, it is a precious vision for humanity’s shared future.

Of course, Catholicism shines the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ onto the beauty of marriage and family life as expressed above.

Therefore, our Tradition sees the love of the Trinity present in the Sacrament of Matrimony. Not merely a contract, but a covenant of love and life is sacramentally present in the married couple. They witness to the faithfulness of our Trinitarian God in the Covenant (CCC 1647) with his people. This covenant is permanent and therefore the marital bond is indissoluble one (cf. Matthew 19/6). The profound teaching on marital love in Humanae Vitae(9) of Pope Paul VI(1968) is too often overlooked. However, this teaching explains the human, total, faithful, exclusive and creative of life aspects of the mystery of God’s covenant shared and witnessed in the Sacrament of Matrimony. This includes the couple’s openness to new life as an expression of their willingness to be at the service of life. (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1652,1653,1654)

In defining the family, Church teaching uses the ancient expression “the domestic Church”(Lumen Gentium 11, Familiaris consortio 21). The family is an expression of the communion Christ shares with the Church, the Body of Christ. This community of life and love (Gaudium et Spes, 48) signifies the communion of the Trinity. “The Gospel” of the family has an evangelising task in society. Indeed, society comes through the family. It is the original cell of our shared social life. (CCC 2204-2213)

This beautiful vision is expressed in the complex and confusing context of the crisis in marriage and family life today. Keeping the two “worlds” together is no easy task! We all know and experience this.

Clearly, marriage and family life has become a new field of evangelisation for wounded humanity.

- There are the attempts to dismantle the legal definition of marriage that protects the millennia old understanding expressed above.
- Couples need thorough preparation as they prepare for marriage.
- Newly-weds need encouragement and mentoring.
- Counselling couples in relationship crisis is a priority.
- The divorced and re-married outside the Church who seek understanding.
- Wounded families need healing and practical help.
- Same-sex attracted people need respect and sensitivity.
- The alarming drop in the birth rate in the Western world needs careful attention.
- And so on...

The image of the Church used by Pope Francis in these new “battlegrounds” is helpful to place before us as we consider the shape of relationships and intimacy in the times ahead. In the modern world, Pope Francis describes the Church “as a field hospital after battle”. He says, “it is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of the blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then you can talk about everything else.” (Pope Francis, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 19th Sept 2013).

So, let us keep in mind the healing compassion and mercy Jesus showed to the Samaritan woman (John 4/5-42), and the adulterous woman (John 8/1-11). May our response imitate the loving father in the Prodigal Son parable (Luke 15-11-32) as he responded to his two very different sons. He embraced them with mercy and invited them to start afresh. Yes! Let us all start afresh with Christ, as St John Paul II insisted at the start of this new millennium!

## QUESTIONS

- How do we help our children today to see marriage as an enduring and life-giving bond between a man and a woman?

- Do we know the views of our children on these matters?
- Do we encourage mentoring and support for newly-marrieds or do we feel it is not our business to suggest it?

## Encountering Jesus in marriage and family life today

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The Catholic Church is now in the midst of a sustained reflection on these matters internationally. The two Bishops Synods Pope Francis has convened (2014, 2015) and the discussions around the world like our own in the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn will assist us to listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, “the Lord and giver of Life”.

It is important for us to appropriate for our own purposes the direction Pope Francis gave at the start of last year’s Bishops Synod. He indicated that a synod is a path or journey together led by the Holy Spirit. It is not a parliament dependent on a democratic vote. He calls for a three pronged approach. First, we must truly listen to the context and challenges of the family today. Secondly, we are to look to Jesus. How did Jesus respond to the situations he encountered? Let us respond likewise with his love and tenderness, patience and mercy in proclaiming the Kingdom of God in our day. Thirdly, let us confront the serious pastoral issues of today with conversion, grace and mercy.

## The Holy Family – the dwelling place of all families

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Dear friends, may I leave this reflection by offering us all the image of the Holy Family – the dwelling place where all families find a home.

Just before last Christmas I joined a delegation of Australian Bishops on a brief visitation of solidarity to the oppressed Christian communities and families in the Middle East. They are victims of a brutal repression of people by Islamic fanatics. We see this in the media



constantly. Their future is bleak, yet their faith remains strong.

One of the Bishops told me that the main question the refugees ask him is, “Where is God in all this?”. He answered by saying that God had never left them in their struggles. He was present with them in their refugee tents that had now become their homes. I noticed how his wise words had helped them. All around the town they had constructed humble little Christmas cribs. But the special feature of these cribs was that they placed the Holy Family not in a manger but in the tents of the refugees. I was profoundly touched by the devotion of these fragile people as they stood with their families in prayerful adoring silence in front of these cribs. In the Holy Family they placed their own families. May we do the same with our families in Australia.

Yet, our issues are not like theirs. They are battling issues of sheer survival – life/death, hunger, clothing, education, shelter, housing. Australians can too easily forget that these are issues of a large percentage of the world population. Tragically, these are issues too in some of our own cities and rural areas, especially among our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Generally, however, our issues are of a different nature. Ours are more to do with meaning – how do we find happiness, security, commitment, hope and friendship in marriage and family?

Let us, too, place our issues near the Holy Family. May Mary show us the contemplative heart that “treasures and ponders” (Luke 2/52) what life offers us. May St Joseph, “a just man” (Matthew 1/19), teach us what justice and mercy means as life’s complexities present themselves. May Jesus, who became small so that we all might be made great in the eyes of God, lead us to the Father of every family.



*Let us pray:  
Heavenly Father,  
Your Son, Jesus, Our Lord and Saviour, was  
born in the midst of our complex world as a  
humble and defenceless little child.  
May we too become humble and totally  
dependent on you as your Holy Spirit leads us  
now on this journey of faith.  
We have so many issues to place before you  
from our marriages and families.  
Bless us all with your healing mercy.  
May your Holy Spirit lead us, O Lord, gently on  
the path of true love and community.  
We make this prayer through Christ, Our Lord,  
AMEN.*

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading '+ Christopher Prowse'.

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