

Homily XXVII Tiempo Ordinario

Dear Brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, Godparents, children, teenagers, aunts and uncles and cousins—FAMILY: nuclear family, extended family, blended family, separated family, single parent family, adopted family—we are, whoever we are, wherever we are, “We are Family” as the famous entertainer, Sister Sledge, sang her famous song last Saturday night before Pope Francis gave his beautiful address to the 1000’s of family members attending the World Conference of Families in Philadelphia. WE ARE FAMILY!

All of us, I think, are still basking in the glow and the joy of Pope Francis’ powerful visit to the United States and Cuba, to Congress and the United Nations, to homeless shelters and prisons, to schools and churches, and the World Conference of Families—kissing babies, hugging the handicapped, canonizing missionary saints, encouraging and challenging church, national and world leaders to live the “Golden Rule” ... Wow! What a whirlwind tour, something like Jesus in Mark’s fast moving Gospel, rapidly running all over Galilee and Judea proclaiming a gospel of life, love and joy, a gospel of justice, peace, mercy and reconciliation...

Do you remember, did you see last Saturday night when he was addressing the crowds on the meaning, the beauty, the privilege, the necessity and the struggles of family life, how he put on a big smile, began to laugh and said: “You know, many people ask me ‘how can you speak to us about family? You’re not even married!’” He grinned even more and then said: “But I was born into and raised in a family, the family of my immigrant parents. I AM a father! YOU are my family. We are all family—human family and God’s family.” And throwing his prepared text aside he spoke from his pastor’s heart of his deep knowledge, experience and concern for the joys and sorrows, the triumphs and failures, and the absolute necessity of the family. He appealed to the creation story of today’s first reading from Genesis, and to the design of God for man and woman as equal partners, as husband and wife in unbreakable unity and fidelity, loving and rearing their children within the solid and safe environment of the home, preparing these little ones for their own later mission in the world as adult children, now parents themselves—homemakers, workers, professionals, “world makers”—with the genes of their parents and grandparents, AND the grace of God in whose image each child is created and designed to flourish—making the world a fit home for all of God’s children of the human family.

I wonder if Pope Francis were still here today (it’s good that he’s not here with all this rain and hurricane Joaquin!) and these readings were before him, what would he say to the families before him? He knows very well, as do so many of us know from our personal and family experience that the divorce rate for American families, even American Catholic families, is about 50%! In light of Jesus’ very strong, even stern saying about divorce, remarriage and adultery—what do you think Pope Francis, the Vicar of Christ might say today?

I cannot and should not try to put words into his mouth, but from so many of his own words and actions in his 2 1/2 years as pope and his many years as a very pastoral bishop in Buenos Aires , I think that he might say some very simple, direct, faithful and wise things like:

“marriage and family are beautiful; marriage and family life are a great gift, a great challenge, and a great struggle. Hang in there! It’s worth it! Fidelity, love, joy, satisfaction, family success is not easy, but it is possible! God does love you and God is with you through it all! Be patient, forgive, put on love, as St. Paul says. Pray, pray always, pray for your spouse and children, go to mass and the sacraments of Jesus, raise your children in the Faith. Get off “the net” and cell phone, get out of the club or bar or market, come home from work and spend time with one another. Communicate, talk, share, challenge, speak the truth in love. Do not judge, do not let the sun go down on your anger. Get over cultural stereotypes of macho superiority and female inferiority, and get into biblical and humane relationships of partnership, equal dignity and mutual respect. No lies, deceit or cheating! Presence, fidelity “in good times and bad, in joys and in sorrows, in sickness and in health...” Remember the vows/the promises, the rings, las arras, el lazo, la fiesta, la luna de miel, los hijos, y los buenos anos juntos enamorados.

But if serious problems or infidelities threaten separation or divorce, do everything, everything possible to reconcile! Pray, be honest and humble, seek help! Seek every kind of spiritual, professional, psychological help. We are here to help and accompany you in this difficult journey. And if separation and divorce do occur, please, do not despair! You are still loved, not judged, and always welcome into the arms of God and his church. Come to hear God’s saving, healing word, share in his healing sacraments. Without shame, humbly seek, and you shall find the strength and comfort of God, church, family and friends. Do not let your children become the innocent victims of their parents’ hearts that have become hardened or estranged. Pray, and keep praying, seek guidance, go to confession, go to communion, and let God who is love continue to work in your heart! Take time, take a lot of time, take enough time to find peace of heart and mind. This peace, never perfect in this world, comes from God alone. Do not jump into the arms, and surely not into the bed, of the first lonely or lovely person who comes along, offering comfort and consolation! Dare to be alone, not lonely, but alone with your wounded, beautiful self, with children, family, friends and God—who wants your wellbeing, wholeness and happiness.

Separation and divorce are times of great testing of our faith in the saving grace of God—as our 2nd reading today from Hebreos testifies. “Is God with us or not?” asked the Hebrews in their 40 years of desert suffering. “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” asked Jesus, the faithful bridegroom of the human race as he laid down his life for his bride, for us on the cross. “Can a mother forget her child?” Isaiah asked. And God answered: “Even if a mother should forget her child, I will never abandon you my beloved.” This is the Good News, the truth, love,

joy, and hope of the Gospel proclaimed by Jesus, the saints, Pope Francis, and all good pastors. God and his family of Faith, the church, will never give up on or abandon you. God, through his church, wants to embrace you in his wide arms of mercy, and heal your heart and your marriage and your family. This is God's saving work of redemption, repentance and reconciliation.

Still, we must admit that many marriages, too many marriages, even marriages celebrated in the church—are not genuine, sacramental marriages. So many marriages are entered into without the proper intention or understanding, without the capacity or commitment, without real freedom, but because of force or fear, and with little or no real faith. Such marriages have a civil license and a legal bond, but are not the permanent, indissoluble bond of sacramental marriage. The Church has always allowed, after a pastoral process of examination, for a declaration of invalidity or nullity upon such marriages. Very recently Pope Francis announced a series of changes that would make this process of pastoral care and healing more accessible to divorced persons. Pope Francis and the whole Church uphold Christ's clear teaching that a genuine marriage bond that reveals Christ's own unbreakable marriage to the human race is itself sacramental and unbreakable. We do not teach that marriage is not permanent and that divorce is good, and should be quick and easy. But where a genuine, sacramental bond was never actually made, separation, divorce, and remarriage are possible. I am always ready to assist and accompany anyone in this healing process.

Pope Francis has also expressed his concern and sadness over the situation of divorced Catholics who have remarried without a declaration of invalidity or nullity. The present discipline of the Church prevents these persons from receiving Holy Communion, and many of these persons have actually left the Church or stopped practicing the faith all together. Pope Francis has asked theologians and bishops to closely examine this situation and to urgently seek compassionate and pastoral solutions. This will surely be an important topic in the upcoming second session of the Synod on the Family being held this month in Rome. Join me in praying for a faithful and fruitful outcome.

FAMILY, WE ARE FAMILY, never perfect, always on journey, always in need of help and healing. The baptism we share marks us all as beloved children in the family of God and of the Church. Let us always be grateful for this intimate relationship that God shares with us. And let us be faithful and fruitful and joyful in our love and service of God and one another within our family of faith, and the family of human kind, forever and ever..... Amen!