

## The Family - 15. Education

Today, dear brothers and sisters, I would like to welcome you because I saw among you many families, Good morning to all the families! Let us continue to reflect on the family. Today we will pause to reflect on an essential characteristic of the family, the natural vocation to *educate children* so they may grow up to be responsible for themselves and for others. What we heard from the Apostle Paul, at the start, is very beautiful: "Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged" (Col 3:20-21). This is a wise rule: children should be raised to listen to their parents and obey their parents, who, in turn, should not order them around in a negative way, so as not to discourage the children. Children, indeed, must grow without becoming discouraged, step by step. If you parents say to your children: "Let's climb this ladder" and you take them by the hand and, step by step, help them climb, things will go well. But if you say: "Go up!" — "But I can't" — "Go!", this is called provoking your children, asking them to do things they don't have the ability to do. That is why the relationship between parents and children must be one of wisdom, of a great balance. Children, obey your parents, this pleases God. And you parents, don't provoke your children by asking of them things they can't do. And this needs to be done so that children can grow up to be responsible for themselves and for others.

It would seem like an obvious statement, there are difficulties still in our times. It is hard to educate when parents only see their children in the evening, when they come home tired from work. Well, those who are fortunate enough to work! It is even more difficult for parents who are separated, who are weighed down by their condition: the poor dears, they have had real hardships, they have separated and frequently the child is taken hostage and the father speaks ill of the mother, and the mother speaks ill of the father, and so much harm is done. But I say to separated parents: never, never, never take your child hostage! You separated because of many difficulties and reasons, life has given you this trial, but the children should not be the ones to carry the weight of this separation, they should not be used as hostages against the other spouse, they should grow up hearing their mother speak well of their father, even though they are not together, and the father speak well of their mother. For separated parents this is very important and very difficult, but they can do it. Above all, the question is: how should we educate? What tradition do we have today to pass on to our children?

Intellectual "critics" of every kind have silenced parents in countless ways, in order to protect the younger generations from the damage — real or presumed — of family education. The family stands accused, among other things, of being authoritarian, of favoritism, of conformism, of the emotional repression that generates conflict. In fact, a rift has opened up between the family and society, between the family and school, the educational pact today has been broken; and thus, the educational alliance between society and the family is in crisis because mutual trust has been undermined. There are many symptoms. For example, at school relationships between parents and teachers have been compromised. At times there is tension and mutual distrust; and naturally, the consequences fall on the children. On the other hand, the number of so-called "experts" has multiplied, and they have assumed the role of parents in even the most intimate aspects of education. With regard to emotional life, personality and development, rights and duties, these "experts" know everything: objectives, motivations, techniques. And parents must simply listen, learn and adapt. Deprived of their role, they often become overly apprehensive and possessive of their children, to the point of never correcting them: "You cannot correct the child". They tend to entrust them more and more to the "experts", even in the most delicate and personal aspects of their lives, putting themselves alone in a corner; and thus parents today run the risk of excluding themselves from the lives of their children. And this is very grave! Today there are cases like this. I am not saying that it always happens, but there are cases. The teacher will admonish the child at school and send a note to the parents. I remember a personal anecdote. Once, when I was in the fourth grade, I said a bad word to the teacher and the teacher, being a good woman, called my mom. She came the next day, they spoke together, and then I was called. And my mother explained to me in front of the teacher that what I had done was bad, that I shouldn't have done it; but my mother did it with such sweetness and she asked me to apologize to the teacher in front of her. I did it and then I was glad that I did: the story had a happy ending. But that was only the first chapter! When I got home, the second chapter began... Imagine today if a teacher were to do something of the kind, the next day the parents, or one of the two, would seek to admonish her, because the "experts" say that children should not be reproached like this. Things have changed! That is why parents should not exclude themselves from their children's education. It is clear that this approach is not good: it is not harmony, it is not dialogue, and rather than fostering cooperation between the family and other educational agencies, schools, gymnasiums... it counteracts it.

How did we get to this point? There is no doubt that parents or, better yet, certain past educational models had their limitations, there is no doubt. But it is also true that there are mistakes that only parents are allowed to make, because they can compensate for them in a way that is impossible for anyone else. On the other hand, as we well know, life has become stingy with the time for talking, reflecting and facing oneself. Many parents are "sequestered" by work — mom and dad have to work — and by worries, uncomfortable with the new needs of their children and with the complexity of modern life — which is the way it is and we must accept it as it is — and they find themselves as if paralyzed by the fear of making a mistake. The problem, however, is not just talking. Superficial "dialogue" does not lead to a true meeting of mind and heart. Let us ask instead: do we seek to understand "where" our children really are in their journey? Where is their soul, do we really know? And above all: do we want to know? Are we convinced that they, in reality, aren't waiting for something else? Christian communities are called to offer support to the educational mission of families, and they do this first of all with the light of the Word of God. The Apostle Paul recalls the reciprocity of duties between parents and children: "Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged" (Col 3:20-21). At the foundation of everything is love, that which God gives us, which "is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but ... bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor 13:5-7). Even the best families need support, and it takes a lot of patience to support one another! But such is life. Life is not lived in a laboratory, but in reality. Jesus himself experienced a family upbringing. Also in this case, the grace of the love of Christ leads to the fulfillment of what is inscribed in human nature. How many astounding examples we have of Christian parents filled with human wisdom! They show that a good family upbringing is the backbone of humanity. Its radiance in society is the source that allows us to fill in the gaps, wounds and voids in parenthood that affect less fortunate children. This radiance can work real miracles. And in the Church these miracles happen every day!

I hope that the Lord bestows on Christian families the faith, freedom and courage necessary for their mission. If family education rediscovers the pride of its leadership, many things will change for the better, for uncertain parents and for disappointed children. It is time for fathers and mothers to return from their exile — for they have exiled themselves from their children's upbringing — and to fully resume their educational role. We hope that the Lord gives this grace to parents: to not exile themselves from the education of their children. And this can only be done with love, tenderness and patience.

## The Family - 16. Engagement

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good Morning!* Continuing these catecheses on the family, today I would like to speak about *engagement*. Engagement — one hears it in the word — has to do with trust, confidence, reliability. Confidence in the vocation that God gives, since marriage is first and foremost the discovery of a call from God. Certainly it is a beautiful thing that young people today can choose to marry on the basis of mutual love. But the very freedom of the bond requires a conscious harmony in the decision, not just a simple understanding of the attraction or feeling, for a moment, for a short time ... It calls for a journey.

Engagement, in other words, is the time when the two are called to perform a real labor of love, an involved and shared work that delves deep. Here they discover one another little by little, i.e. the man "learns" about woman by learning about *this* woman, his fiancée; and the woman "learns" about man by learning about *this* man, her fiancé. Let us not underestimate the importance of this learning: it is a beautiful endeavour, and love itself requires it, for it is not simply a matter of carefree happiness or enchanted emotion. The biblical account speaks of all creation as a beautiful work of God's love. The Book of Genesis says that: "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Gen 1:31). Only when it is finished does God "rest". We understand from this image that God's love, which brought forth the world, was not an impromptu decision. No! It was a beautiful work. The love of God created the concrete conditions for an irrevocable covenant, one that is strong and lasting.

The covenant of love between man and woman — a covenant for life — *cannot be improvised*. It isn't made up one day to the next. There is no marriage express: one needs to work on love, one needs to walk. The covenant of love between man and woman is something learned and refined. I venture to say it is a covenant carefully crafted. To make two lives one is almost a miracle of freedom and the heart entrusted to faith. Perhaps we should emphasize this point more, because our "emotional coordinates" have gone a bit askew. Those who claim to want everything right away, then back out of everything — right away — at the first difficulty (or at the first opportunity). There is no hope for the trust and fidelity entailed in the gift of self, if prevailing tendency is to consume love like some kind of "supplement" for mental and physical well-being. This is not love! Engagement focuses on the will to care for something together that must never be bought or sold, betrayed or abandoned, however tempting the offer may be.

God, too, when he speaks of the covenant with his people, does so several times in terms of betrothal. In the Book of Jeremiah, in speaking to the people who had distanced themselves from him, he reminds the people of when they were the "betrothed" of God, and he says: "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride" (cf. 2:2). God took this path of betrothal. He then also made a promise: we heard it at the beginning of the audience, in the Book of Hosea: "I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord" (2:19-20).

The road the Lord takes with his people on this betrothal journey is a long one. At the end, God espouses his people in Jesus Christ. In Jesus he marries the Church. The People of God is Jesus' Bride. But what a long road! And you Italians, in your literature you have a masterpiece on betrothal, *The Betrothed*. Young people need to know about it and read it. It is a masterpiece that tells the story of an engaged couple who have endured great suffering, they travel a road filled with many struggles, until at last they arrive at marriage. Don't leave aside this masterpiece on betrothal, which Italian literature has given especially to you. Go on, read it and you will see the beauty, the suffering, but also the faithfulness of the betrothed.

The Church, in her wisdom, guards the *distinction between being engaged and being spouses* — it's not the same — especially in view of the delicateness and depth of this test. Let us be careful not to disregard lightheartedly the wisdom of this teaching, which also comes from the experience of happy married life. The powerful symbols of the body hold the keys to the soul: We cannot treat the bonds of the flesh lightly, without opening some lasting wound in the spirit (cf. 1 Cor 6:15-20).

Of course, today's culture and society have become rather indifferent to the delicateness and seriousness of this step. On the other hand, it cannot be said that they are generous to young people who are determined to make a home and welcome children. Indeed, often they put up a thousand obstacles, both psychological and practical. Engagement is a path of life that has to ripen like fruit; it is a way of maturing in love, until the moment it becomes marriage. *Pre-marriage* courses are a special expression of preparation. And we see so many couples, who perhaps come to the course somewhat reluctantly: "But these priests make us take a course! But why? We already know..." and they go reluctantly. But afterwards they are happy and grateful, because they have found there the opportunity — sometimes the only one — to reflect on their experience in non-trivial terms. Yes, many couples are together a long time, perhaps also in intimacy, sometimes living together, but *they don't really know each other*. It seems curious, but experience shows that it's true. Therefore engagement needs to be re-evaluated as a time of getting to know one another and sharing a plan. The path of preparation for marriage should be implemented from this perspective, also with the benefit of the simple but intense witness of Christian spouses. And also by focusing on the essentials: the Bible, by consciously rediscovering it together; prayer, in its liturgical dimension, but also in "domestic prayer" to live out in the home, the Sacraments, the Sacramental life, Confession, ... where the Lord comes to abide in the engaged couple and prepare them truly to receive one another "with the grace of Christ"; and fraternity with the poor and those in need, who lead us to live soberly and to share. Engaged couples who commit themselves to this path both grow, and all of this leads to preparing for a beautiful celebration of Marriage in a different way, not in a worldly way, but in a Christian way! Let us consider these words of God we have heard, when he speaks to his people as bridegroom to his future bride: "I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord" (Hos 2:19-20). May every engaged couple think of this and say to one another: "I will take you as my bride, I will take you as my bridegroom". Wait for that moment. It is a moment, it is a path that goes slowly ahead, but it is a path of maturation. The steps of the journey should not be rushed. This is how we mature, step by step. The time of betrothal can truly become a time of initiation, into what? Into surprise. Into the surprise of the spiritual gifts with which the Lord, through the Church, enriches the horizon of the new family that stands ready to live in his blessing.

I invite you now to pray to the Holy Family of Nazareth: Jesus, Joseph and Mary. Pray that the family may make this journey of preparation; and pray for couples who are betrothed. Let us pray to Our Lady all together, a Hail Mary for all engaged couples, that they may understand the beauty of this journey towards Marriage. [*Hail Mary...*]

And to engaged couples who are here in the square: "Enjoy the journey of engagement!".