

LIVING FRATERNITY

Theme: « The experiences and challenges of the family »

In this month of January 2017, during our fraternal meetings, we are proposing some excerpts of the Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family by our Pope Francis. These excerpts will help us in our reflection on the actual situation in our families.

Recall: At the monthly meeting, members should have at their disposal a Bible, at least one copy of the General Constitutions, a copy of the Catechism of the Catholic Church and at least one copy of Living with Christ. Also, members should have in hand their own copy of the Rule.

Good preparation – Good meeting

JANUARY 2017 MONTHLY MEETING

Opening Prayer and Song: (According to the Ritual or chosen by the Fraternity)

Biblical Reflection in answer to Article 4 of our Rule:

As Article 4 of our Rule proposes *Secular Franciscans should devote themselves especially to careful reading of the gospel, going from gospel to life and life to the gospel*, thus we propose a sharing of the gospel, be it the today's or next Sunday's.

Afterwards, share your thoughts, using one or two of the following questions:

1. What does this gospel teach us?
2. To whom does it speak?
3. How does it reach us personally?
4. Is it a message of hope? Is there another kind of message? Why and how is it?

Reading: (choose a person who reads calmly)

Introduction (*Article 1 of the Exhortation*)

The Joy of Love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church. As the Synod Fathers noted, for all the many signs of crisis in the institution of marriage, “the desire to marry and form a family remains vibrant, especially among young people, and this is an inspiration to the Church”. As a response to that desire, “the Christian proclamation on the family is good news indeed”.

The welfare of the family (*Article 31 of the Exhortation*)

The welfare of the family is decisive for the future of the world and that of the Church. Countless studies have been made of marriage and the family, their current problems and challenges. We do well to focus on concrete realities, since “the call and the demands of the Spirit resound in the

events of history”, and through these “the Church can also be guided to a more profound understanding of the inexhaustible mystery of marriage and the family”.

I will not attempt here to present all that might be said about the family today. Nonetheless, because the Synod Fathers examined the situation of families worldwide, I consider it fitting to take up some of their pastoral insights, along with concerns derived from my own experience.

The current reality of the family (*Article 32 of the Exhortation*)

Faithful to Christ’s teaching we look to the reality of the family today in all its complexity, with both its lights and shadows... Anthropological and cultural changes in our times influence all aspects of life and call for an analytic and diversified approach”.⁹ Several decades ago, the Spanish bishops noted that families have come to enjoy greater freedom “through an equitable distribution of duties, responsibilities and tasks”; indeed, “a greater emphasis on personal communication between the spouses helps to make family life more humane”, while “neither today’s society nor that to which we are progressing allow an uncritical survival of older forms and models”.¹⁰ It is also evident that “the principal tendencies in anthropological-cultural changes” are leading “individuals, in personal and family life, to receive less and less support from social structures than in the past”.

Reflection:

Which expressions or phrases speak particularly to you in this paragraph? Why? How? Take the necessary time to share your thoughts.

The responsibility of Christians (*Article 35 of the Exhortation*)

As Christians, we can hardly stop advocating marriage simply to avoid countering contemporary sensibilities, or out of a desire to be fashionable or a sense of helplessness in the face of human and moral failings. We would be depriving the world of values that we can and must offer. It is true that there is no sense in simply decrying present-day evils, as if this could change things. Nor it is helpful to try to impose rules by sheer authority. What we need is a more responsible and generous effort to present the reasons and motivations for choosing marriage and the family, and in this way to help men and women better to respond to the grace that God offers them.

Reflection:

Following the reading, what do think about this article? Take time to fully consider it before sharing on its content.

Highlight family relationships (*Article 38 of the Exhortation*)

We must be grateful that most people do value family relationships that are permanent and marked by mutual respect. They appreciate the Church’s efforts to offer guidance and counselling in areas related to growth in love, overcoming conflict and raising children. Many are touched by the power of grace experienced in sacramental Reconciliation and in the Eucharist, grace that helps them face the challenges of marriage and the family.

In some countries, especially in various parts of Africa, secularism has not weakened certain traditional values, and marriages forge a strong bond between two wider families, with clearly defined structures for dealing with problems and conflicts. Nowadays we are grateful too for the witness of marriages that have not only proved lasting, but also fruitful and loving. All these factors can inspire a positive and welcoming pastoral approach capable of helping couples to grow in appreciation of the demands of the Gospel.

Yet we have often been on the defensive, wasting pastoral energy on denouncing a decadent world without being proactive in proposing ways of finding true happiness. Many people feel that the Church's message on marriage and the family does not clearly reflect the preaching and attitudes of Jesus, who set forth a demanding ideal yet never failed to show compassion and closeness to the frailty of individuals like the Samaritan woman or the woman caught in adultery.

Reflection:

After the reading, share your thoughts on the content of the text.

- What would be the dynamic capacity to be demonstrated? How can we highlight it?
- What do you retain from Pope Francis' invitation?
- Is it « too late » to contribute to restoring to the Christian marriage its place in today's world?
- What connection can we find between this exhortation and Article 17 of our Rule that is found hereafter?

Deepening of points taken from the Rule and the General Constitutions

Rule 17

In their family they should cultivate the Franciscan spirit of peace, fidelity, and respect for life, striving to make of it a sign of a world already renewed in Christ.

By living the grace of matrimony, husbands and wives in particular should bear witness in the world to the love of Christ for his Church. They should joyfully accompany their children on their human and spiritual journey by providing a simple and open Christian education and being attentive to the vocation of each child.

General Constitutions

Article 24.1

Secular Franciscans should consider their own family to be the first place in which to live their Christian commitment and Franciscan vocation. They should make space within it for prayer, for the Word of God, and for Christian catechesis. They should concern themselves with respect for all life in every situation from conception until death.

Married couples find in the Rule of the SFO an effective aid in their own journey of Christian life, aware that, in the sacrament of matrimony, their love shares in the love that Christ has for his Church. The way spouses love each other and affirm the value of fidelity is a profound witness for their own family, the Church, and the world.

Life –Objective:

At the beginning of the New Year 2017, let us take time to share the benefits of our families and fraternities

Events and Information from the Church and the Order

Remind the members of regional and local activities.

End of the meeting: (a prayer or song chosen by the fraternity)

At home

In order to continue our reflection, read the following paragraph which concludes this chapter of the Exhortation (*Article 57 of the Exhortation*)

I thank God that many families, which are far from considering themselves perfect, live in love, fulfil their calling and keep moving forward, even if they fall many times along the way. The Synod's reflections show us that there is no stereo-type of the ideal family, but rather a challenging mosaic made up of many different realities, with all their joys, hopes and problems. The situations that concern us are challenges. We should not be trapped into wasting our energy in doleful laments, but rather seek new forms of missionary creativity. In every situation that presents itself, "the Church is conscious of the need to offer a word of truth and hope... The great values of marriage and the Christian family correspond to a yearning that is part and parcel of human existence". If we see any number of problems, these should be, as the Bishops of Colombia have said, a summons to "revive our hope and to make it the source of prophetic visions, transformative actions and creative forms of charity".

We take the occasion of the sending of Living Fraternity for January, to wish to all the members of our fraternities a

Happy, Pleasant and Holy Year 2017.

Let us pray so that between our fraternities scattered from one ocean to another, the bonds will be strengthened even more.

Let us also pray that Christians, men and women will join us, seeing us live our joyous and dynamic faith in the Gospel message, will wish to join us to deepen together the call to evangelical perfection to become perfect « as our heavenly Father is perfect ».