

Rejoice in the Lord

**By Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.
Archbishop of Newark**

Pastoral Needs Facing Families Today



In a letter dated February 2, 2014, Pope Francis asked all the families in the world to pray for the Synod of Bishops which was subsequently held in Rome from October 5–19, 2014. The theme of this Extraordinary Synod was “pastoral challenges to the family in the context of evangelization.” This Extraordinary Synod was followed a year later by the Ordinary Assembly, which also had the family as its theme. In addition, as you may recall, Pope Francis also participated in the World Meeting of Families which was held in Philadelphia in September 2015. So, the Holy Father’s

request that the entire Church pray for, and reflect on, the importance of families was addressed in significant ways during the initial years of his pontificate.

In his letter, Pope Francis said: “Indeed, in our day the Church is called to proclaim the Gospel by confronting the new and urgent pastoral needs facing the family.” None of us imagined at the time that these “new and urgent pastoral needs” would include the devastating threat to family life posed by the worldwide crisis we call COVID-19. Six years ago, we had no idea that we would be facing the economic, social, and spiritual problems caused by this deadly virus and by the necessary shutdown of all but the most essential functions of daily life.

The Holy Father’s call for prayers six years ago involved a specific reference to the importance of our “praying intensely to the Holy Spirit” so that our eyes and ears and hearts would be open to the Spirit’s guidance as we seek to respond to the needs of today’s families. In light of the current pandemic, the Wisdom that can only come from Divine Providence is more important than ever.

We believe that the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, is the source of life and love, courage and hope, wisdom and fidelity to God’s loving plan for us. It is the Holy Spirit who unites men and women in marriage. It is the Spirit who guides families and helps them stay together during hard times.

Most of us have witnessed the presence and power of the Holy Spirit as families have come together to protect, comfort, and heal their members during these past months of “Stay home. Stay safe.” We’ve also seen the heroic efforts of healthcare professionals, first-responders, pastoral leaders, and even ordinary citizens who have placed themselves in harm’s way in order to care for those who are in need.

In his letter to families, Pope Francis said that by the power of the Holy Spirit, “Jesus is the one who brings together and unites generations! He is the inexhaustible font of that love which overcomes every occasion of self-absorption, solitude, and sadness. In your journey as a family, you share so many beautiful moments: meals, rest, housework, leisure, prayer, trips and pilgrimages, and times of mutual support. Nevertheless, if there is no love, then there is no joy, and authentic love comes to us from Jesus. He offers us his word, which illuminates our path; he gives us the Bread of life which sustains us on our journey.”

How true these words are today as we struggle to stay close to one another while maintaining all the necessary precautions of “social distancing” and safe, sanitary environments at home and everywhere we gather as families. On top of everything, we need the love—and joy—that comes to us from Jesus in Word, sacrament, and service to those who are most in need of God’s love.

It is the grace of the Holy Spirit that makes Jesus present to us, and who fills our hearts with the profound love and joy that alone can sustain us as families journeying together on the rough roads we often have to travel during our daily lives. The pope urges us to turn to the Holy Spirit for guidance, strength, and hope—especially in these challenging times.

With Pope Francis, I urge all families to pray that the Holy Spirit will guide us in our pastoral planning (“Forward in Faith Together”) and in our outreach to families throughout northern New Jersey and beyond. In the words of the Holy Father to families, “May the protection of the Blessed Mother and Saint Joseph always accompany all of you and help you to walk united in love and in caring for one another.”

Sincerely yours in Christ the Redeemer,



Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.
Archbishop of Newark

The Church's Teaching on the Family

Even in the early Christian community the family appeared as the “domestic church” (cf. CCC, 1655). In the so-called “family canons” of the Apostolic letters of the New Testament, the great family of the ancient world is identified as the place of a profound solidarity between husbands and wives, between parents and children, and between the wealthy and the poor (cf. *Eph* 5:21-6:9; *Col* 3:18-4:1; *1 Tim* 2:8-15; *Titus* 2:1-10; *1 Pt* 2:13-3:7; cf. also the *Letter to Philemon*). In particular, the Letter to the Ephesians recognized the nuptial love between man and woman as “the great mystery”, making present in the world the love of Christ and the Church (cf. *Eph* 5:31-32).

Over the centuries, especially in modern times to the present, the Church has not failed to continually teach and develop her doctrine on the family and marriage as rooted in the teaching of Him who founded her. One of its highest expressions has been proposed by the Second Vatican Council in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, which, in treating certain pressing problems, dedicated an entire chapter to the promotion of the dignity of marriage and the family, as seen in the description of their value for the constitution of society: “the family, in which the various generations come together and help one another grow wiser and harmonize personal rights with the other requirements of social life, is the very foundation of society” (GS, 52).

Particularly striking is its appeal for a Christ-centered spirituality in the spouses' life of faith: "Let the spouses themselves, made to the image of the living God and enjoying the authentic dignity of persons, be joined to one another in equal affection, harmony of mind and the work of mutual sanctification. Thus, following Christ who is the principle of life, by the sacrifices and joys of their vocation and through their faithful love, married people can become witnesses of the mystery of love which the Lord revealed to the world by his dying and his rising up to life again" (GS, 52).

After the Second Vatican Council, the successors of St. Peter enriched this teaching on marriage and the family, especially Pope Paul VI with the Encyclical *Humanae vitae*, which offers specific principles and guidelines. Subsequently, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, Pope John Paul II insisted on proposing the divine plan in the basic truths of married love and the family: "The only 'place' in which this self-giving in its whole truth is made possible is marriage, the covenant of conjugal love freely and consciously chosen, whereby man and woman accept the intimate community of life and love willed by God himself (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 48) which only in this light manifests its true meaning. The institution of marriage is not an undue interference by society or authority, nor the extrinsic imposition of a form. Rather it is an interior requirement of the covenant of conjugal love, which is publicly affirmed as unique and exclusive, in order to live in complete fidelity to the plan of God, the Creator. A person's freedom, far from being restricted by this fidelity, is secured against every form of subjectivism or relativism and is made a sharer in creative Wisdom" (FC, 11).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church gathers together the fundamental aspects of this teaching: "The marriage covenant, by which a man and a woman form with each other an intimate communion of life and love, has been founded and endowed with its own special laws by the Creator. By its very nature, it is ordered to the good of the couple, as well as to the generation and education of children. Christ the Lord raised marriage between the baptized to the dignity of a sacrament [cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 48; *Code of Canon Law*, 1055, 1] (CCC 1660)."

The doctrine presented in the *Catechism* touches on both theological principles and moral behaviors, developed under two separate headings: *The Sacrament of Matrimony* (nos. 1601-1658) and *The Sixth Commandment* (nos. 2331-2391). An attentive reading of these sections of the *Catechism* provides an updated understanding of the doctrine of faith, which supports the Church's work in the face of modern-day challenges. The Church's pastoral ministry finds inspiration in the truth of marriage viewed as part of the plan of God, who created man and woman and, in the fullness of time, revealed in Jesus the completeness of spousal love elevated to the level of a sacrament. Christian marriage founded on consensus is also endowed with its own effects such as the goods and duties of the spouses. At the same time, marriage is not immune from the effects of sin (cf. Gen 3:1-24), which can cause deep wounds and even abuses to the dignity of the sacrament.

The 2013 encyclical of Pope Francis, *Lumen fidei*, speaks of the family in the context of a reflection on how faith reveals "just how firm the bonds between people can be when God is present in their midst" (LF, 50). "The first setting in which faith enlightens the human city is the family. I think first and foremost of the stable union of man and woman in marriage. This union is born of their love, as a sign and presence of God's own love, and of the acknowledgment and acceptance of the goodness of sexual differentiation, whereby spouses can become one flesh (cf. Gen 2:24) and are enabled to give birth to a new life, a manifestation of the Creator's goodness, wisdom and loving plan. Grounded in this love, a man and a woman can promise each other mutual love in a gesture that engages their entire lives and mirrors many features of faith. Promising love forever is possible when we perceive a plan bigger than our own ideas and undertakings, a plan which sustains us and enables us to surrender our future entirely to the one we love" (LF, 52). "Faith is no refuge for the fainthearted, but something which enhances our lives. It makes us

aware of a magnificent calling, the vocation of love. It assures us that this love is trustworthy and worth embracing, for it is based on God's faithfulness which is stronger than our every weakness" (LF, 53).

From "Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization: Preparatory Document," Vatican City, 2013

A Message from Pope Francis: Words of Challenge and Hope

Dear families,

I am writing this letter to you on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple. The evangelist Luke tells us that the Blessed Mother and Saint Joseph, in keeping with the Law of Moses, took the Baby Jesus to the temple to offer him to the Lord, and that an elderly man and woman, Simeon and Anna,



moved by the Holy Spirit, went to meet them and acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah (cf. Lk 2:22-38). Simeon took him in his arms and thanked God that he had finally "seen" salvation. Anna, despite her advanced age, found new vigor and began to speak to everyone about the Baby.

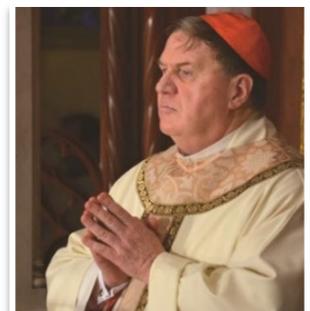
It is a beautiful image: two young parents and two elderly people, brought together by Jesus. He is the one who brings together and unites generations! He is the inexhaustible font of that love which overcomes every occasion of self-absorption, solitude, and sadness. In your journey as a family, you share so many beautiful moments: meals, rest, housework, leisure, prayer, trips and pilgrimages, and times of mutual support...

Nevertheless, if there is no love then there is no joy, and authentic love comes to us from Jesus. He offers us his word, which illuminates our path; he gives us the Bread of life which sustains us on our journey.

*From the Vatican, 2 February 2014
Feast of the Presentation of the Lord*

My Prayer for you

Father, through the intercession of the Holy Family of Nazareth, we come to you seeking your loving care for all families today. Protect them in times of danger, comfort them in their afflictions. Bless them with good health and grant all their spiritual and temporal needs. Above all, may our families experience the peace, hope, and lasting joy that comes to us from Jesus, your Son, through the power of the Holy Spirit. †



Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.

