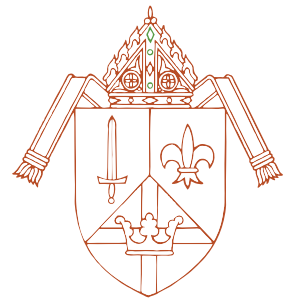


D I S C O V E R I N G

The Joy of Love



A Small Group Study Guide



CATHOLIC DIOCESE
OF LEXINGTON

D I S C O V E R I N G



A Small Group Study Guide

...no family drops down from heaven perfectly formed; families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love. This is a never-ending vocation born of the full communion of the Trinity, the profound unity between Christ and his Church, the loving community which is the Holy Family of Nazareth, and the pure fraternity existing among the saints of heaven. Our contemplation of the fulfilment which we have yet to attain also allows us to see in proper perspective the historical journey which we make as families, and in this way to stop demanding of our interpersonal relationships a perfection, a purity of intentions and a consistency which we will only encounter in the Kingdom to come. It also keeps us from judging harshly those who live in situations of frailty. All of us are called to keep striving towards something greater than ourselves and our families, and every family must feel this constant impulse. Let us make this journey as families, let us keep walking together. What we have been promised is greater than we can imagine. May we never lose heart because of our limitations, or ever stop seeking that fullness of love and communion which God holds out before us.

From *Amoris Laetitia*, Paragraph 325

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The Joy of Love: An Introduction

Pope Francis' papacy has been a famously active one. His policies and reforms have made headline news throughout the world. His state visits and interviews have become regular staples of local newsfeeds. Probably no aspect of his pontificate, however, has garnered as much attention as his public teachings.

The Pope made these a priority almost from the time of his election. Within a year he had issued *The Joy of the Gospel*, a call to reexamine today's economic ideologies in light of Christ's teachings. Less than two years later he put forward *Laudato Si*, an encyclical that did the same for humanity's relationship to the environment. Before publishing either of these, however, Pope Francis had commissioned a synod of bishops to investigate the state of today's families and the challenges they face.

The synod met for two years. During this time it consulted experts and heard testimony from couples the world over. The synod's findings and recommendations were sent to the Pope, and made public shortly afterwards. Those reports, filtered through Pope Francis' own theological reflections and pastoral experiences, soon found expression in the Pope's third major teaching document. This was *The Joy of Love*, an Apostolic Exhortation published by the Vatican in 2016.

The Joy of Love is well-named. Its pages remind us of the beauty of marriage, of all that it can and should be. Rather than a simple restatement of doctrine, *The Joy of Love* offers a new energy, and gives a re-presentation of the ancient promise given by God and expressed through His Church. It evokes the great icon, the image of two persons pulling each other toward heaven and creating life through their love. Yet it also gives a renewed perspective, offering a fresh look at a familiar theme. Along the way it recalls for us that the Gospel is ever-new, and always a surprise.

In a sense, *The Joy of Love* is also a rescue mission, an effort to liberate Church teaching from its many distortions. There are certainly no shortage of these, and they are not limited to those who seek to tear down Church doctrine, or else twist it for their own ends. Inside the Church are those who, while often well-intentioned, nevertheless offer misrepresentations of Church teaching. In love with the richness of our heritage, this group sometimes loses sight of the dynamism of our tradition. Their approach can harden doctrine into a set of legalistic obligations that bind married persons, instead of freeing them to experience the fullness of their calling.

The Joy of Love steers us between these dangers. It reminds us that while Tradition is certainly anchored to Scripture and Magisterial teaching, it is not tied by a short rope. Moored in immutable truth, it can still roll with the waves of changing circumstance. Church doctrine, we must recall, is alive, developing, vigorous, and beautiful.

The Pope's Exhortation provides the next phase of doctrinal growth. It is a new synthesis, the marriage of theological insight and pastoral experience. Grounded in the realities of our time, *The Joy of Love* grapples with the challenges of marriage preparation even while offering balm to those wounded by the shards of a broken relationship. It extends dialogue to those in "irregular" situations, many of whom have experienced doctrine as judgment. In its pages we find a call to hope for those on the margins, and a signpost for those seeking the fullness of their calling. For all that has been said about it here and elsewhere, therefore, *The Joy of Love* is simply summed up: the title is the message.

The Joy of Love: A Doctrine of Doing

The Joy of Love is more than a call to action. It is also an action plan. That much is self-evident for the Pope's offerings of practical wisdom and instructions on pastoral care. It is equally true, however, regarding his contributions to Church doctrine. Many of these can be found in his extended discussion of 1 Corinthians 13, a passage most of us have known for years. These familiar verses, teaching that "Love is patient, love is kind," have been a staple of Catholic weddings for time out of mind. Pope Francis, however, uses them to reflect upon two basic ideas. First, that sacramental marriage is meant to perfect a couple's love. Second, that this concept almost immediately runs into an obstacle: many of us are really sure what love is in the first place.

The Pope's theological contribution lies in addressing that challenge. He answers that love is an attitude translated into action, and demonstrates this principle by going through St. Paul's verses line by line. Often he breaks open individual words, using the original language and context to display their relevance to the modern world. In each case Pope Francis discusses two attitudes: one attuned to the true meaning of love, and the other to its opposite. He draws out the patterns of behavior that emerge from each, and exposes the effects of such behavior on our families and loved ones.

Patience, for example, is shown to be more than a synonym for tolerance. Instead, it is the recognition that others need not be perfect to be valued, an attitude manifested in the dynamic actions that help others recognize this in themselves. Jealousy, on the other hand, is described as sadness and anger at another's prosperity. This distorted mindset soon separates us from the family members we soon view as rivals, slowly replacing our relationships with a sullen, judgmental solitude. Pope Francis contrasts this attitude and its bitter fruits with the love that values others, and rejoices in their accomplishments. Such love naturally shows itself in the happy comments and actions that build and reinforce the bridges between loved ones. The behavior that results from this love strengthens marriage and family at every turn.

Commentaries like these draw new insights from St. Paul's familiar verses. They continually demonstrate a doctrine of doing, an expression of love as action. When the Pope condemns arrogance, for example, he reveals how it seeks to show off and dominate others. To this he opposes the courteous love that builds networks through humble service and gentle speech. Tearing down the negativity that takes joy in others' failings and the resentment that expresses itself in slander, on the other hand, the Pope counters with the hope and trust that come through in small actions and quiet moments. These, he demonstrates, are often the very things that help couples weather the storms of married life.

Practical wisdom impacts us all with its sage counsel and prudent warnings. Many of us have no need to go further, no time or inclination to grapple with the deeper levels of doctrine. For those who can, however, the Pope offers the thinking behind the wisdom. Such persons can provide a service to us all, growing into the wisdom figures that support our communities. In this regard, then, the Pope has gone beyond his responsibility to feed the sheep. He is training the shepherds as well.

The Joy of Love: A Pastor's Touch

Theological development may undergird *The Joy of Love*, but it takes up comparatively little space. Most of the Exhortation is devoted to a fusion of doctrine and application. Its approach is geared toward practicality; Pope Francis, after all, is more pastor than scholar. *The Joy of Love* rarely allows theory to separate from practice for precisely this reason. The Exhortation's pastoral elements, like its underlying theology, are in fact another aspect of the Pope's action plan.

This structure helps us understand why, for example, discussions on the nature of marriage quickly evolve into conversations of discernment and preparation. That pattern repeats throughout the document, finding expression on issues of marital strife, childrearing, and many more. The Pope is aiming to bring doctrine to life. For all his efforts, however, Pope Francis also recognizes the harsh realities standing in the way. That is why he dedicates the last part of *The Joy of Love* to those living in "irregular" situations.

The term "irregular" typically refers to those who are divorced and remarried without an annulment. In his final chapter the Pope makes the inclusion of such persons a priority. He instructs his pastors to aim for reconciliation, to find ways to include such persons in the life of the Church. Allowing leeway for local variations, the Pope nevertheless lays out a set of principles meant to govern this process.

The practice of inclusion, the Pope reminds us, is more than the determination of a starting point. Certainly it begins this way, as couples and their pastors discern the extent to

which participation is initially possible. Discernment, however, does not end there. Pope Francis intends it to be a lifelong journey of reflection directed toward an ever-growing reconciliation between couple and Church.

In his last chapter the Pope instructs pastors to accompany couples throughout this process. They are to be spiritual guides, helping couples discern the moments and decisions that have shaped their lives. Slowly consciences are formed, as the Gospel refashions perspectives on the past and directs actions in the present. All of this, however, is a matter of dialogue between the couple and their pastor. It is this dialogue that determines where participation begins, discovers the steps of discernment, and decides the pace of inclusion. As it progresses, those in “irregular” situations are gradually folded into the life of the Church.

The Joy of Love is certainly not lacking for big ideas. It contains a wealth of Church teaching undegirded by theological acumen. It represents a pastoral pivot, a new application of method to fit conditions on the ground. *The Joy of Love* offers preparation for those considering the sacrament of marriage and encouragement for those living it out. It holds out a healing hand to the wounded, pointing a way forward for all. Underlying all of these, *The Joy of Love* is also a product of magisterial authority and a papal call to action. The Pope, it seems, has written a great many things into his Exhortation. Let’s see what he has to say.

Introduction To The Booklet

Pope Francis’ teaching documents have all faced the same obstacles of communication. More than any other Pope in history, he is constantly confronted with a culture of sound bites and media spin. Ideologues and pundits give us countless interpretations of his words. Many of them contradict each other. The Pope’s message is vital, but how can we find it amidst so many distortions?

Ideally, we should read the Pope’s words for ourselves. That’s easier said than done, though. Today’s busy world runs us all ragged. Even if we had the time, we often don’t have the energy. Reading the Pope’s message in its entirety can seem like an overwhelming task.

This booklet is meant to help readers make a start. It isn’t intended to be comprehensive. It wasn’t possible to do justice to *The Joy of Love* in so few pages. It was possible, however, to pull out passages containing some of the Pope’s major themes. We hope these passages will serve as a doorway to Pope Francis’ message.

The booklet in your hands contains eight excerpts from *The Joy of Love*. Each is paired with discussion points, questions, and prayers. They are meant to reflect the pastoral themes of the Exhortation, culminating the Pope’s pastoral directives for the Church. The booklet can

be used in any number of formats. A longer study (e.g. eight weeks) might cover a passage a week. A shorter study (e.g. a four-week Lenten group) might cover two passages a week, or simply choose four of the eight.

These formats are only suggestions. Each group will have to decide what format works best for them. Regardless, we hope that each participant will take the time to read all the passages at some point, and perhaps read all of *The Joy of Love* when time permits.

I. The Call to Marriage

72. The sacrament of marriage is not a social convention, an empty ritual or merely the outward sign of a commitment. The sacrament is a gift given for the sanctification and salvation of the spouses, since “their mutual belonging is a real representation, through the sacramental sign, of the same relationship between Christ and the Church. The married couple are therefore a permanent reminder for the Church of what took place on the cross; they are for one another and for their children witnesses of the salvation in which they share through the sacrament”. Marriage is a vocation, inasmuch as it is a response to a specific call to experience conjugal love as an imperfect sign of the love between Christ and the Church. Consequently, the decision to marry and to have a family ought to be the fruit of a process of vocational discernment.



132. To opt for marriage in this way expresses a genuine and firm decision to join paths, come what may. Given its seriousness, this public commitment of love cannot be the fruit of a hasty decision, but neither can it be postponed indefinitely. Committing oneself exclusively and definitively to another person always involves a risk and a bold gamble. Unwillingness to make such a commitment...

fails to recognize the rights of another person and to present him or her to society as someone worthy of unconditional love...When love is expressed before others in the marriage contract, with all its public commitments, it clearly indicates and protects the “yes” which those persons speak freely and unreservedly to each other. This “yes” tells them that they can always trust one another, and that they will never be abandoned when difficulties arise or new attractions or selfish interests present themselves.

57. 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 stereotype 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”.

1. God calls us into relationship with Himself and one another. Such callings take different forms, known as vocations. Marriage is one of these.

a) Vocations are forms of lifelong service to God. We may be used to viewing the priesthood or consecrated life in this light. Yet marriage is a vocation too. How might looking at marriage this way change our view of it?

b) The Church presents marriage as a vocation meant to bring both spouses to God. Some, today, see marriage as one component of two individuals’ journey to self-fulfillment. How prevalent is this in our experience of married life today? How does it differ from a vocational understanding of marriage?

2. Sacramental marriage is an unreserved, lifelong commitment. It should not be undertaken lightly. Instead, a process of discernment should precede the commitment of marriage.

a) Pope Francis calls the marriage commitment “a risk and bold gamble.” He also stresses the importance of such commitments. Do you agree with his statements? Why or why not?

b) Discernment is more than a review of one’s feelings and desires. It requires thought and reflection to discover if one is called to marriage, and with whom. People sometimes resent such a process and the time it takes. Why might that be? What are the benefits and drawbacks to such a process?

c) Marriage preparation often concentrates on the wedding day. Discernment, however, should consider the practical reality of married life. Keeping this in mind, whom might younger couples consult in their discernment process? Why? What might be the role of such people after the wedding?

d) In addition to discernment, the couple should take time to discuss potential challenges in their married life. Sadly, many couples don’t take advantage of this opportunity. Why might this be? What potential issues might couples not think to discuss?

3. Marriage is not an assembly line product. People are unique, and so each marriage is stamped with its own character, bearing its own strengths and challenges. Sometimes we cannot understand why God called certain people together. Even so, family and community must stand ready to help couples as they strive for the ideal of Christian marriage.

If circumstances permit, consider a prayerful reading of Romans 12: 1-8. Should this not be possible, pray together for those discerning the call to marriage.

II. The Craftsmanship of Marriage

221. ...Each marriage is a kind of “salvation history”, which from fragile beginnings... grows over time into something precious and enduring. Might we say that the greatest mission of two people in love is to help one another become, respectively, more a man and more a woman? Fostering growth means helping a person to shape his or her own identity. Love is thus a kind of craftsmanship. When we read in the Bible about the creation of man and woman... We can almost hear the amazing dialogue that must have taken place when the man and the woman first encountered one another. In the life of married couples, even at difficult moments, one person can always surprise the other, and new doors can open for their relationship, as if they were meeting for the first time. At every new stage, they can keep “forming” one another. Love makes each wait for the other with the patience of a craftsman, a patience which comes from God.



137. Take time, quality time. This means being ready to listen patiently and attentively to everything the other person wants to say. It requires the self-discipline of not speaking until the time is right. Instead of offering an opinion or advice, we need to be sure that we have heard everything the other person has to say... Often the other spouse does not need a solution to his or her problems, but simply to be heard, to feel that someone has acknowledge their pain, their disappointment, their fear, their anger, their hopes and their dreams. How often we hear complaints like: “He does not listen to me.” “Even when you seem to, you are really doing something else.” “I talk to her and I feel like she can’t wait for me to finish.”

139. ...A certain astuteness is also needed... The ability to say what one is thinking without offending the other person is important. Words should be carefully chosen so as not to offend, especially when discussing difficult issues. Making a point should never involve venting anger and inflicting hurt. A patronizing tone only serves to hurt, ridicule, accuse and offend others. Many disagreements between couples are not about important things. Mostly

they are about trivial matters. What alters the mood, however, is the way things are said or the attitude with which they are said.

1. The Church presents the road to marriage as a journey of discernment and dialogue. After the wedding, however, a new journey begins. This is the lifelong path of mutual growth, the ongoing development of the spousal relationship at the heart of marriage.

a) Pope Francis speaks of marriage's "fragile beginnings." Why might he have chosen this phrase? Have you ever witnessed the "fragile beginning" of a marriage? How did it play out?

b) The road to a mature marriage is long, and sometimes difficult. Think of your own experience with married couples. Have you seen any patterns to the challenges they face? What were they? What pressures cause these challenges to recur?

c) Older couples can share their wisdom and experience with others. Do you know couples who could fill that role? Do you and others take advantage of their advice? Why or why not? If you are part of such a couple, do you feel comfortable sharing your advice? Why or why not?

2. Pope Francis calls marital love "a kind of craftsmanship." The idea of a craftsman at work brings to mind images of patience and skill. These images, the Pope reminds us, must be applied to marriage as well.

a) The Pope highlights two skills that are important to the craftsmanship of marriage. The first is listening. The second is careful speech. Do you know people who have these skills? What traits do they share?

b) Many people find these two skills difficult to acquire. Why might that be? Do you struggle with listening and careful speech? Why or why not?

c) The absence of these two skills can threaten a marriage. The Pope gives examples of how that can happen. Have you seen relationships threatened by the absence of these two skills? What happened? Did the lack of these skills make matters worse? How did it turn out?

3. The skills of listening and careful speech are vital to the Christian life. With them we can heal wounds and bring people together. Without them we run the risk of hurting people and creating divisions.

If circumstances permit, consider a prayerful reading of James 3: 1-12. Should this not be possible, pray together for those in the early stages of marriage.

III. Living Marriage Day By Day

129. The joy of this contemplative love needs to be cultivated. Since we were made for love, we know that there is no greater joy than that of sharing good... It is a joy and a great consolation to bring delight to others, to see them enjoying themselves. This joy, the fruit of fraternal love, is not that of the vain and self-centered, but of lovers who delight in the good of those whom they love, who give freely to them and thus bear good fruit.

220. This process occurs in various stages that call for generosity and sacrifice. The first powerful feelings of attraction give way to the realization that the other is now a part of my life. The pleasure of belonging to one another leads to seeing life as a common project, putting the other's happiness ahead of my own, and realizing with joy that this marriage enriches society. As love matures, it also learns to "negotiate". Far from anything selfish or calculating, such negotiation is an exercise of mutual love, an interplay of give and take, for the good of the family. At each new stage of married life, there is a need to sit down and re-negotiate agreements, so that there will be no winners and losers, but rather two winners.



113. Married couples joined by love speak well of each other; they try to show their spouse's good side, not their weakness and faults. In any event, they keep silent rather than speak ill of them. This is not merely a way of acting in front of others; it springs from an interior attitude. Far from ingenuously claiming not to see the problems and weaknesses of others, it sees those weaknesses and faults in a wider context... We have to realize that all of us are a complex mixture of light and shadows. The other person is much more than the sum of the little things that annoy me... The other person loves me as best they can, with all their limits, but the fact that love is imperfect does not mean that it is untrue or unreal.

133. The love of friendship unifies all aspects of marital life and helps family members to grow constantly. This love must be freely and generously expressed in words and acts. In the family, "three words need to be used. I want to repeat this! Three words: 'Please,' 'Thank you,'

‘Sorry’. Three essential words!’ “In our families when we are not overbearing and ask: ‘May I?’; in our families when we are not selfish and can say: ‘Thank you!’; and in our families when someone realizes that he or she did something wrong and is able to say ‘Sorry!’; our family experiences peace and joy”. Let us not be stingy about using these words, but keep repeating them, day after day.

1. Individuals change over time. So do marriages. From the honeymoon phase to the challenges of advanced age, couples pass through many stages in their married lives.

a) Love is a form of self-gift. As spouses change over time, however, that self-gift may look different. Think of couples you have known for a long time. How did the spouses change over the years? How did those changes affect their marriages?

b) Couples must work together to surmount the challenges of married life. Doing so requires give-and-take on both sides. As love evolves, it asks us to evolve as well. Think of the couples you know. How have they dealt with the challenges of married life? Which methods worked? Which didn’t? Why?

c) At times, love is a “negotiation” calling us to sacrifice individual goals for the needs of the relationship. As the realities of life change, however, spouses must sometimes revisit the solutions they found in the earlier stages of their marriage. Have you ever seen a couple “renegotiate” in this way? Why was it necessary? How did it turn out?

2. Spouses have a duty to protect each other’s reputations. Yet the Church invites us to go beyond this responsibility. The desire to broadcast the other’s best self, Pope Francis reminds us, is an authentic expression of marital love.

a) In a sense, spouses do public relations work for each other. Ideally, this means putting the other’s best face on display. Have you seen couples help each other in this way? How did it play out? How might one undertake this task in marriage’s more difficult moments?

b) Sometimes the difficulties of marriage spill over into the public sphere. In moments of anger, spouses are in an ideal position to hurt one another. Have you ever seen a spouse use their intimate knowledge of the other to tear them down? How did it play out? What was the result?

c) Children first learn about relationships from their parents. Consciously or not, parents model behavior that will leave a lasting impression on their children. What short and long-term impacts might this have? Have you seen this play out positively? Negatively? What happened?

d) Social media allows us to share the personal aspects of our lives very quickly. Frequent use of social media can blur the lines between our public and private lives, bringing new challenges to the social aspects of marriage. What dangers can social media pose to mar-

ried couples? How might social media over-expose a relationship? Should single and married persons use it differently? If so, how?

3. Pope Francis reminds us that word choice and tone are vital to the preservation of marriage. Simple words of gratitude can go far in a challenging time, and a warm tone can make difficult conversations possible. Words are like stones: they can be thrown in anger or used to build a strong foundation.

If circumstances permit, consider a prayerful reading of Ephesians 5: 21-33. Should this not be possible, pray together for the grace to build up the people in your life.

IV. Authentic Sexuality

150. ...God himself created sexuality, which is a marvellous gift to his creatures...Saint John Paul II rejected the claim that the Church's teaching is "a negation of the value of human sexuality", or that the Church simply tolerates sexuality "because it is necessary for procreation". Sexual desire is not some-thing to be looked down upon, and "and there can be no attempt whatsoever to call into question its necessity".



152. In no way, then, can we consider the erotic dimension of love simply as a permissible evil or a burden to be tolerated for the good of the family. Rather, it must be seen as gift from God that enriches the relationship of the spouses. As a passion sublimated by a love respectful of the dignity of the other, it becomes a "pure, unadulterated affirmation" revealing the mar-

vels of which the human heart is capable. In this way, even momentarily, we can feel that "life has turned out good and happy".

153. On the basis of this positive vision of sexuality, we can approach the entire subject with a healthy realism. It is, after all, a fact that sex often becomes depersonalized and unhealthy... In our own day, sexuality risks being poisoned by the mentality of "use and discard". The body of the other is often viewed as an object to be used as long as it offers satisfaction, and rejected once it is no longer appealing. Can we really ignore or overlook the continuing forms of domination, arrogance, abuse, sexual perversion and violence that are the product of a warped understanding of sexuality? Or the fact that the dignity of others and our human vocation to love thus end up being less important than an obscure need to "find oneself"?

157. All the same, the rejection of distortions of sexuality and eroticism should never lead us to a disparagement or neglect of sexuality and eros in themselves. The ideal of marriage cannot be seen purely as generous donation and self-sacrifice, where each spouse renounces all personal needs and seeks only the other's good without concern for personal satisfaction. We

need to remember that authentic love also needs to be able to receive the other, to accept one's own vulnerability and needs, and to welcome with sincere and joyful gratitude the physical expressions of love found in a caress, an embrace, a kiss and sexual union. Benedict XVI stated this very clearly: "Should man aspire to be pure spirit and to reject the flesh as pertaining to his animal nature alone, then spirit and body would both lose their dignity". For this reason, "man cannot live by oblation, descending love alone. He cannot always give, he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift".

1. Today's world offers many perspectives on human sexuality. In this passage Pope Francis highlights two of them: the Church's teaching, and the "warped understanding" most directly opposed to it.

a) Church teaching is often misunderstood or misrepresented. This can make it difficult to be sure of what the Church actually teaches. Does the first half of this passage support or challenge your understanding of Church teaching? How? Does it reflect what you've heard from others? Why or why not?

b) The Church teaches that sexuality is God's gift to a married couple. In turn, that gift evolves into the spouses' self-gifts to each other. What do you think this means? Have you ever met couples who see it this way? Does this view affect their marriages? How? What issues might arise when couples do not see their sexuality in this way?

c) Authentic sexual love upholds the dignity of the couple's mutual self-gift. Lust, on the other hand, transforms the other's body into an object for self-gratification. What is the practical difference? Is it possible to maintain desire while avoiding lust? How?

d) Pope Francis warns against the lustful mentality that adopts a "use and discard" view of others' bodies. Why are these warnings particularly timely in our day? What modern factors might be driving this lustful mentality?

2. There are many practical challenges to the Church's teachings on sexuality. To overcome them, spouses must admit their own needs while valuing the other's gift. Patient and open communication is essential to this process.

a) God's love for humanity is pure self-gift. Human relationships, on the other hand, require both giving and receiving. Yet communicating our needs can leave us very vulnerable. What might go wrong in such a communication? How might a couple guard against this?

b) At times relationships can seem one-sided. While spouses must sometimes carry each other, constant self-sacrifice can wear a marriage down. Have you ever seen this problem play out? What happened? How might a couple guard against this difficulty?

3. Today's lustful mentality bombards us from every angle, slowly wearing down our opposition. Sheer determination is not enough to resist this assault. We need a positive relationship with Christ, together with sacramental grace, in order to live out the Church's teachings.

If circumstances permit, consider a prayerful reading of Psalm 51: 1-12 or 1 Thessalonians 4:1-18. Should this not be possible, pray together for those weighed down by an unhealthy view of human sexuality.

V. Family Spirituality

314. We have always spoken of how God dwells in the hearts of those living in his grace. Today we can add that the Trinity is present in the temple of marital communion.

315. The Lord's presence dwells in real and concrete families, with all their daily troubles and struggles, joys and hopes. Living in a family makes it hard for us to feign or lie; we cannot hide behind a mask. If that authenticity is inspired by love, then the Lord reigns there, with his joy and his peace. The spirituality of family love is made up of thousands of small but real gestures. In that variety of gifts and encounters which deepen communion, God has his dwelling place. This mutual concern "brings together the human and the divine", for it is filled with the love of God. In the end, marital spirituality is a spirituality of the bond, in which divine love dwells.

317. If a family is centered on Christ, he will unify and illumine its entire life. Moments of pain and difficulty will be experienced in union with the Lord's cross, and his closeness will make it possible to surmount them. In the darkest hours of a family's life, union with Jesus in his abandonment can help avoid a breakup. Gradually, "with the grace of the Holy Spirit, [the spouses] grow in holiness through married life, also by sharing in the mystery of Christ's cross, which transforms difficulties and sufferings into an offering of love". Moreover, moments of joy, relaxation, celebration, and even sexuality can be experienced as a sharing in the full life of the resurrection. Married couples shape with different daily gestures a "God-enlightened space in which to experience the hidden presence of the risen Lord".

318. Family prayer is a special way of expressing and strengthening this paschal faith. A few minutes can be found each day to come together before the living God, to tell him our worries, to ask for the needs of our family, to pray for someone experiencing difficulty, to ask for help



in showing love, to give thanks for life and for its blessings, and to ask Our Lady to protect us beneath her maternal mantle... The various expressions of popular piety are a treasure of spirituality for many families. The family's communal journey of prayer culminates by sharing together in the Eucharist, especially in the context of the Sunday rest. Jesus knocks on the door of families, to share with them the Eucharistic supper.

323. We can be fully present to others only by giving fully of ourselves and forgetting all else. Our loved ones merit our complete attention. Jesus is our model in this, for whenever people approached to speak with him, he would meet their gaze, directly and lovingly.

1. The Trinity is a relationship of three persons in perfect communion. While the depths of its nature are difficult to grasp, Jesus used familial terms to help us understand. Titles like Father and Son reveal that each member of the Trinity is actively participating in the same love and vision as the others.

a) The human family was made in the image and likeness of this relationship. Its members are meant to be in communion with God and each other. Entering communion with God, therefore, reorients the family to its true identity and purpose. In what ways can a close, interdependent family mirror Trinitarian love? In practice, what might this look like in a family's best moments?

b) As human families, we often fall short of this purpose. Moreover, it can be difficult to see God's presence during life's challenging moments. How can families heal the wounds of a broken communion? What can they do to recapture communion with God and each other? How can we help our loved ones recognize God's presence in difficult times?

2. Christ left us the gift of Himself in the Eucharist. Nourished by His body and blood we are transformed. Shielded by His grace we are strengthened in spirit. The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life.

a) The Eucharist unites us to the risen Christ. It also connects us to His suffering. Communion with the crucified Christ allows families to tap into the redemptive power of His sacrifice. How can we give meaning to suffering in this way? What might Pope Francis mean when he says that the Cross can transform suffering into an offering of love?

b) Sometimes we are inclined to return fire at angry family members or be intolerant of difficult relatives. In these moments the Eucharist can strengthen us to respond positively, and to ease family conflict rather than make it worse. What might this look like in practice? How might Eucharistic communion help families get through dark times and avoid lasting divisions?

c) Sometimes suffering makes sense in hindsight. When misery seems pointless, however,

it can be hard to remember that Christ gave purpose to all human suffering. Yet it is true: united to Him, our pain becomes redemptive. United to Him, suffering leads to resurrection. Why can this teaching be hard? How might accepting it bring peace to the sufferer?

3. God is always present, but He is not always easy to find. The stresses, tasks, and sensory overload of everyday life can make it difficult for us to quiet ourselves and seek communion with God. This is why churches are designed to reorient our senses. Their sights, sounds, and smells are crafted to call our attention away from the mundane and direct it to the heavens.

Family spirituality faces similar obstacles, but it too has the capacity to orient its members toward the divine. Loving gestures, an attentive presence, and an active prayer life can be used to create “a God-enlightened space in which to experience the hidden presence of the risen Lord.” Empowered by the Eucharist, we can craft an environment that lifts our loved ones to God.

If circumstances permit, consider a prayerful reading of 1 Corinthians 2: 1-16. Should this not be possible, have a group discussion about the ideas expressed in #3 above.

VI. Moral Education of Children

267. Freedom is something magnificent, yet it can also be dissipated and lost. Moral education has to do with cultivating freedom through ideas, incentives, practical applications, stimuli, rewards, examples, models, symbols, reflections, encouragement, dialogue and a constant rethinking of our way of doing things; all these can help develop those stable interior principles that lead us spontaneously to do good. Virtue is a conviction that has become a steadfast inner

principle of operation. The virtuous life thus builds, strengthens and shapes freedom, lest we become slaves of dehumanizing and anti-social inclinations. For human dignity itself demands that each of us “act out of conscious and free choice, as moved and drawn in a personal way from within”.

273.... Situated freedom, real freedom, is limited and conditioned. It is not simply the ability to choose what is

good with complete spontaneity. A distinction is not always adequately drawn between “voluntary” and “free” acts. A person may clearly and willingly desire something evil, but do so as the result of an irresistible passion or a poor upbringing. In such cases, while the decision is voluntary, inasmuch as it does not run counter to the inclination of their desire, it is not free, since it is practically impossible for them not to choose that evil.

260. ...Parents need to consider what they want their children to be exposed to, and this necessarily means being concerned about who is providing their entertainment, who is entering their rooms through television and electronic devices, and with whom they are spending their free time. Only if we devote time to our children, speaking of important things with simplicity and concern, and finding healthy ways for them to spend their time, will we be able to shield them from harm.

261. ...What is most important is the ability lovingly to help them grow in freedom, maturity, overall discipline and real autonomy. Only in this way will children come to possess the wherewithal needed to fend for themselves and to act intelligently and prudently whenever



they meet with difficulties.

288. Education in the faith has to adapt to each child, since older resources and recipes do not always work. Children need symbols, actions and stories. Since adolescents usually have issues with authority and rules, it is best to encourage their own experience of faith and to provide them with attractive testimonies that win them over by their sheer beauty. Parents desirous of nurturing the faith of their children are sensitive to their patterns of growth, for they know that spiritual experience is not imposed but freely proposed. It is essential that children actually see that, for their parents, prayer is something truly important. Hence moments of family prayer and acts of devotion can be more powerful for evangelization than any catechism class or sermon.

1. Free will is real, but limited. It can be distorted by cultural conditioning, a lack of proper formation in youth, and a host of other influences. Yet such limitations are not insurmountable. A strong moral education can provide an internal compass that allows people to choose the good, and then to act on their choice.

a) Moral education develops virtue. Rather than instilling blind obedience, it teaches our internal compass to recognize what is good and right. Moral education shows us how to shape ourselves, so that we naturally choose to do what is right and just. What qualities of virtue do we find attractive in others? What qualities do we desire for ourselves? Do they always align?

b) Athletes require constant training to strengthen their bodies. Moral character works the same way. To develop it, we must consistently engage in the exercise of virtue. What might this look like in practice? Why might it work this way instead of the other way around?

c) Sometimes our desire to do good is weakened or twisted by circumstance and worldly appetite. We may misunderstand what is good if our moral compass is not properly calibrated. In other cases, even if we know what is good, we may not feel free to act on it. Is there a practical difference between the two? If so, what is it? Does it matter? Why or why not?

2. To be effective, parents must model the virtues they wish to instill in their children. Such self-discipline can be difficult. If we attend to our own practice of virtue and vice, however, we may achieve our children's moral education as a result.

a) Good moral formation requires gatekeeping. We are all affected by our environment, but children are especially impressionable. What media and social influences should parents carefully monitor? How can parents encourage children to do this for themselves?

b) Moral education is more than just shutting out bad influences. We must moderate our own behavior, model faith and virtue, and give children positive role models to follow. To

which aspects of their parents' behavior do children pay the most attention? Why?

c) No two children are the same. This means we must really know our children and how best to inspire them to virtue. Why might this be difficult? What obstacles might parents face when determining how best to teach their children?

d) Situations can be as different as children. When issues arise, we need the wisdom to find a proportionate response and the self-control to act in a balanced manner. What types of everyday pressures and stresses might impact parents' ability to react in this way? How might parents work together to mitigate those factors?

3. The methods of moral education change as children get older. Eventually children may require controlled opportunities to act virtuously on their own, to see for themselves and perhaps deal with limited consequences. Correctly adapted, this apprenticeship in virtue can mitigate the difficulties that occur when the freedom of young adulthood arrives before children are morally ready for it.

If circumstances permit, consider a prayerful reading of 2 Peter 1: 1-11. Should this not be possible, pray together for those charged with the moral education of children.

VII. Facing Pressures Together

33. ...Freedom of choice makes it possible to plan our lives and to make the most of ourselves. Yet if this freedom lacks noble goals or personal discipline, it degenerates into an inability to give oneself generously to others.

33. ...consideration needs to be given to the growing danger represented by an extreme individualism which weakens family bonds and ends up considering each member of the family as an isolated unit, leading in some cases to the idea that one's personality is shaped by his or her desires, which are considered absolute”.

39. I think, for example, of the speed with which people move from one affective relationship to another. They believe, along the lines of social networks, that love can be connected or disconnected at the whim of the consumer, and the relationship quickly “blocked”. I think too of the fears associated with permanent commitment, the obsession with free time, and those relationships that weigh costs and benefits for the sake of remedying loneliness, providing protection, or offering some service. We treat affective relationships the

way we treat material objects and the environment: everything is disposable; everyone uses and throws away, takes and breaks, exploits and squeezes to the last drop. Then, goodbye...

236. Then there are those personal crises that affect the life of couples, often involving finances, problems in the workplace, emotional, social and spiritual difficulties. Unexpected situations present themselves, disrupting family life and requiring a process of forgiveness and reconciliation. In resolving sincerely to forgive the other, each has to ask quietly and humbly if he or she has not somehow created the conditions that led to the other's mistakes...

234. Crises need to be faced together...At these times, it becomes all the more important to create opportunities for speaking heart to heart. Unless a couple learns to do this, they will find it



harder and harder as time passes. Communication is an art learned in moments of peace in order to be practised in moments of difficulty. Spouses need help in discovering their deepest thoughts and feelings and expressing them... This should spur us to try to approach marriage crises with greater sensitivity to their burden of hurt and anxiety.

1. Extreme individualism is the mindset that holds up self-fulfillment as the highest good. While responsible independence can be a mark of character, this dangerous perspective causes us to mistake selfish desire for true happiness.

a) Today's consumerist mindset encourages immediate self-gratification. The "drive-thru" mentality teaches us to expect what we want, when we want it. How could this view affect our relationships? What impact might it have in a family setting?

b) Marriage is sometimes seen as another path to self-fulfillment. This view creates an openness to the idea of "trading up." The permanence of commitment soon erodes when a possibility for greater self-fulfillment comes along. What might be the short and long-term effects of this mentality?

c) The pursuit of self-fulfillment changes the way we view other people. Over time, it leads us to place greater value on those who help fulfill our desires, and pass judgment on those who frustrate them. Why might this worldview cause us to act in a manipulative fashion? How might this affect our family relationships?

2. The truest form of commitment springs from careful discernment and an enduring promise to love. It deepens and dignifies a relationship, giving it strength to overcome the influences that tear couples and families into individual pieces.

a) Individualism closes off our openness to true commitment. So too does a love-starved rapacity. A desperate desire to be in a committed relationship leads to a blind commitment unlikely to stand the test or maintain its dignity.

b) Forgiveness and reconciliation, communication and mutual discovery: these fruits of a deep commitment develop into the skills needed to withstand crisis. Crafted in times of peace, these become the tools needed for the time of strife. What does this look like when modeled well? How might this work as a give and take?

3. Good communication and lifelong commitment go hand-in-hand. The former gives couples the ability to deepen their bond and adapt to new situations. The latter grants the confidence that encourages honesty and trust. Together, they bestow the permanence to endure.

If circumstances permit, consider a prayerful reading of Philippians 2: 1-18. Should this not be possible, pray together for the grace to confront individualism in your own lives.

VIII. Grappling With Irregular Situations

37. We have long thought that simply by stressing doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace, we were providing sufficient support to families, strengthening the marriage bond and giving meaning to marital life. We find it difficult to present marriage more as a dynamic path to personal development and fulfilment than as a lifelong burden. We also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations.

301. For an adequate understanding of the possibility and need of special discernment in certain “irregular” situations, one thing must always be taken into account, lest anyone think that the demands of the Gospel are in any way being compromised. The Church possesses a solid body of reflection concerning mitigating factors and situations. Hence it is can no longer simply be said that all those in any “irregular” situation are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying



grace. More is involved here than mere ignorance of the rule. A subject may know full well the rule, yet have great difficulty in understanding “its inherent values”, or be in a concrete situation which does not allow him or her to act differently and decide otherwise without further sin. As the Synod Fathers put it, “factors may exist which limit the ability to make a decision”.

308. ...from our awareness of the weight of mitigating circumstances – psychological, historical and even biological – it follows that “without detracting from the evangelical ideal, there is a need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively appear”, making room for “the Lord’s mercy, which spurs us on to do our best”. I understand those who prefer a more rigorous pastoral care which leaves no room for confusion. But I sincerely believe that Jesus wants a Church attentive to the goodness which the Holy Spirit sows in the midst of human weakness, a Mother who, while clearly express-

ing her objective teaching, “always does what good she can, even if in the process, her shoes get soiled by the mud of the street”. The Church’s pastors, in proposing to the faithful the full ideal of the Gospel and the Church’s teaching, must also help them to treat the weak with compassion, avoiding aggravation or unduly harsh or hasty judgements. The Gospel itself tells us not to judge or condemn...Jesus “expects us to stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune, and instead to enter into the reality of other people’s lives and to know the power of tenderness. Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated”.

1. Pope Francis takes a strongly pastoral approach regarding the reconciliation of “irregular” families to the Church. He steers clear of the view that expects such persons to immediately reshape their lives to fit the full body of Church teaching. Instead, Pope Francis prioritizes inclusion, urging that they be plugged into the Church quickly, and to the greatest extent possible.

a) Much of Jesus’ ministry was dedicated to those in “irregular” situations. He spoke to them with disarming directness. His unfailing kindness kindled in them a desire to be included. How can such conversations break down barriers? How can a desire to understand others change the way we engage with them?

b) Pope Francis’ emphasis on discernment reminds us that people were made in the image and likeness of God. Properly guided and formed, the human conscience is capable of overcoming its weaknesses and discerning right from wrong. What sort of obstacles might the conscience have to overcome? What sort of guidance and formation might be necessary to overcome them?

c) The term “special discernment” describes a specific process. Elsewhere the Pope notes that it requires humility and “a sincere search for God’s will.” Why might this be? Where might this process start? What makes it difficult? What makes it achievable?

2. Full conversion lies at the end of a faith journey. Human weaknesses and limitations cause us all to begin this journey in different places, and so take different roads. From there it develops into a process of accompaniment, in which pastors help people take the steps they can, at the pace they can.

a) Jesus’ followers needed room to stumble and time to grow. The stubbornness of the apostles Peter and Thomas, for example, required years of Jesus’ patient guidance to overcome. What made this necessary? How can certain sacraments help someone through this process?

b) Jesus occasionally gave people a stark choice. Most of his ministry, however, was devoted to teaching and conversation. He reached out to different people in different ways, and gave time

for his message to take root. How might individuals and congregations mirror this approach today?

c) Jesus did not work from an established location. He was constantly moving, striving to meet people where they were. What might this approach look like applied to those in “irregular” situations? What obstacles might prevent us from adopting this mindset? How might we begin our own gradual journey to overcome them?

3. Jesus made an extraordinary effort to reach the woman at the well. He broke social and religious barriers even to speak with her. He discussed her situation without judgment. Finding her unable to grasp his teachings, Jesus guided her forward in stages.

If circumstances permit, consider a prayerful reading of John 4: 1-42. Should this not be possible, pray together for the grace to accompany people on their journeys

Final Reflection

The Joy of Love is an action plan. In this booklet we have already glimpsed its structure and reflected upon its components. Yet are we sure how those pieces fit together? What is the big picture? The answer to these questions is found in the Exhortation's final chapter. At first glance the Pope's process to include the divorced and remarried seems aimed at a very specific group. In fact, it is meant for us all. Just below the surface, the ideas of inclusion and discernment suffuse the entirety of *The Joy of Love*.

Discernment is a constant state for those journeying toward Christ. Discerning the sacrament of marriage is part of this: those called to this vocation take a new step, and begin walking the path in tandem. First in preparation, then in practice, married couples come closer to each other and to God through this same process. Consciences are formed and communion

grown, and discernment takes a new step forward as the spouses take on the role of parents.

In a sense this journey of discernment produces a ripple effect. A pastor's guidance ensures that one never walks alone, but still the communion grows when two begin their walk together. These two create life from their love, or perhaps enfold another in their embrace through the outpouring of love we call



adoption. The new parents construct a safe environment for their children, one conducive to new journeys toward Christ. The ripples grow a little more, and now a family walks together, lifting each other up and helping one another on the way.

Such is the ideal. In spite of the many obstacles we face, Pope Francis' plan is to recapture it. In *The Joy of Love* he provides families with the doctrine and wisdom they need for their journeys. He points them toward Christ and the Eucharist, which strengthens the family by strengthening its members. Finally, the Pope offers healing to those whose paths have proven more difficult than most. This booklet was written as a small extension of his plan. It is intended to help individuals and families make just a little progress on journeys of their own.

The family, we are told, is the basic unit of society. There are many reasons why, as the family offers love and stability to its members, the larger community, and the Church as a whole. It is a force for evangelization, for the Christian family, we must recall, is attractive. It provides a model for the love and communion that so many desperately seek. Its welcoming environment draws people in, leading them to investigate this Christ who undergirds it all. The ripples now spread a little further, and a new journey of discernment is born.

These new travelers soon encounter the same obstacles and false turnings as their forebears. They too, however, are not with the resources to grapple with such difficulties. Such persons are strengthened by the family that first set their feet on the path. More than this, they too have the Church as their guide. There will be sacramental grace to pick them up and theological truth to point the way. There will be pastors who walk with them, bringing counsel, wisdom, and insight to light their path. They will not be alone.

Pope Francis' outreach to those in "irregular" situations can certainly be understood in this context. This outline, however, is the plan for us all. The Church offers her help and guidance to all God's children. Pope Francis reminds us of this, and also of our responsibilities to each other. We too are called to help one another on the journey, to pick up those who have fallen, and perhaps especially, to tend those who have been knocked down.

It is said that virtue begins at home. In this the married vocation is certainly local: its primary responsibility is to form a Christian communion with its own members. We must not forget, however, that more is implied in that old saying. Virtue may begin at home, but it doesn't end there. This is exactly the effect to which Francis is pointing. When we reach out to those we love, we soon find that our reach has grown. Every time this happens, our larger family – the Church – grows a little too. Over time that larger family extends its reach also, until it stretches further than we could have imagined. The family is the basic unit of society for many reasons. Primary among them, however, is this: the family is a vital part of God's plan to save the world.

As a final exercise: if circumstances permit, consider a prayerful reading of 2 Corinthians 5: 18-6 10. Should this not be possible, pray together for the grace to take your place in this great process of discernment and inclusion.

