

## *The Joy of Life*

### *Chapter One: "In the Light of the Word"*

Pope Francis begins his exhortation on Marriage and the Family with a reflection on what the Word of God teaches us about this important subject. Thus the opening words of this chapter are: "The Bible is full of families, births, love stories, and family crises." Beginning with the story of the first man and woman in the Book of Genesis, and ending with the image of the wedding feast of the Bride (the church) and the Lamb (Christ) in the Book of Revelation, the Scriptures focus our attention on the relationship between man and woman, and the joy and trials of family life.

The Pope employs Psalm 128 ("Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine within your house . . . your children like olive shoots around you") to guide his reflection. He notes that the couple that loves and begets life is a "living icon" that can reveal God the Creator and Savior. He then goes on to say that the fruitful love of man and woman, which comes to expression in their children, is a symbol of God's own inner love between the Father and the Son that begets the Spirit. Accordingly, the mystery of married love helps us to us to understand the mystery of God!

After speaking of the love between spouses, the Pope reflects on the fruit of their love—their children who are like the shoots of an olive tree. He notes that if parents are the foundation of the home, then their children are the "living stones" that build up the edifice of their home. This home becomes a "domestic church," a setting for the Eucharist where Christ is present at table. The Pope notes that the Bible regularly presents the family as the place where children are brought up in the faith. The family is "the place where parents become their children's first teachers in the faith."

The Pope then reminds us that children are not the *property* of a family but have their own lives to lead. Even the twelve year old Jesus tells his parents that he has a greater mission to accomplish than his early family. This is why parents must find that delicate balance between nurturing their children and allowing them to grow into their God given vocation.

Pope Francis is aware that the idyllic picture of family life in Psalm 128 is not the whole of the story of family life. The scriptures are also filled with stories of family failures and betrays, as well as infidelity. Jesus himself is aware of the tensions of family life, and he often portrays them in his parables such as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Thus the Word of God is not "a series of abstract ideas but rather a source of comfort and companionship for every family that experiences difficulties and suffering. The Pope then points to some of the difficulties that contemporary families face when they are deprived of honest work or find themselves as migrants in search of a home. This extended quotation from the conclusion of chapter one summarizes much of what the Pope writes:

With a gaze of faith and love, grace and fidelity, we have contemplated the relationship between human families and the divine Trinity. The word of God tells us that the family is entrusted to a man, a woman and their children, so that they may become a communion

of persons in the image of the union of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Begetting and raising children, for its part, mirrors God's creative work. The family is called to join in daily prayer, to read the word of God and to share in Eucharistic communion, and thus to grow in love and become ever more fully a temple in which the Spirit dwells.

Next week I will consider what the Pope writes in chapters two, "The Experience and Challenges of Families." *Father Matera*