

The Joy of Love
Chapter Two: “The Experience and Challenge of Families”

Pope Francis begins the second chapter of his exhortation *The Joy of Love*” with this sentence: “The welfare of the family is decisive for the future of the world and of the Church.” Aware that the welfare of society and the church are intertwined with the welfare of the family, the Pope dedicates this chapter to highlighting the many challenges contemporary families face so that the church can better support them in their exalted vocation.

The Pope begins by discussing *The Current Reality of the Family*. Here he describes how family life is being lived today. First he notes that the family is receiving “less and less support from societal structures than in the past.” Related to this lack of support, is the tension that arises from “an overly individualistic culture caught up with possessions and pleasure.” Thus many families find themselves living in a culture that focuses more and more upon the individual and his or her freedom and gives less and less support to the family and its rights.

The Pope, however, is not discouraged by the present situation. He insists that “we can hardly stop advocating marriage to avoid countering contemporary sensibilities.” What is needed, he insists, “is a more responsible and generous effort to present the reasons and motivations for choosing marriage and the family.” Noting the need for a more positive and affirming attitude within the Church, the Pope encourages us “to present marriage more as a dynamic path to personal development than a lifelong burden.” In a striking statement, he notes that the Church is called to form consciences not to replace them! Accordingly, rather than being on the defensive, wasting our energy on denouncing a decadent world, we need to be proactive in showing the world the way to a true and authentic happiness grounded in the gospel.

Among the other things the Pope notes about the current reality of family life are (1) the pressures upon young people not to start a family because they are unsure about the future, (2) the overall decline in population that threatens to lead to economic impoverishment, (3) the consumerism that deters people from having children, (4) the lack of dignified and affordable housing, (6) the sexual exploitation of children, and (7) the severe challenges faced by the many migrant families of our day. In the face of this new reality, it is not surprising that many have chosen not to marry or have delayed marriage. Thus it is all the more urgent for the Church to find new ways to present the beauty and dignity of marriage and to insist upon the rights of the family and not just those of individuals.

In addition to the new situation in which families find themselves today, families face problems such as drug use, alcoholism, gambling, and other additions. In addition to these challenges, many families face problems of domestic violence. He notes that the “verbal, physical, and sexual violence that women endure in some marriages contradicts the very nature of the conjugal union.” While noting that certain forms of feminism may be inadequate, he writes: “we must nonetheless see in the woman’s movement the workings of the Spirit for a clearer recognition of the dignity and rights of women.” Finally, the Pope warns of the current

tendency in some places that “denies the differences and reciprocity in nature of man and woman and envisages a society without sexual differences.”

While this chapter focuses on the difficulties and challenges facing the family today, its purpose is not to present a pessimistic picture of the contemporary situation but to rouse the church to present a gospel vision of marriage and the family the will capture and the imagination of young people today.

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