

*The Joy of Love*  
*Chapter Six: “Some Pastoral Perspectives”*

Chapter six of “The Joy of Love” takes up the pastoral question of how the church should proclaim “the gospel of the family” today. That is, it seeks to find a way to proclaim the good news of marital and family love in a way that will resonate with contemporary believers. The document begins by noting that “Christian families, by the grace of the sacrament of matrimony, are the principal agents of the family apostolate, above all through their joy-filled witness as domestic church.” With this statement the document affirms that those who are best equipped to proclaim the good news of family life are those who live it—families that have been strengthened by the grace of the sacrament. For, it is the grace of the sacrament of matrimony that empowers them not only to live family life but to witness to marriage and family love in the world.

Having called upon families to proclaim the gospel of the family, the Pope turns his attention to the pastoral care of the family. How can the church strengthen marriage and the family throughout the many different phases of family life? Pope Francis begins with the pastoral care of those preparing for marriage. He notes that “we need to help young people discover the dignity and beauty of marriage.” But this is not only the work of the parish priest or deacon; it is the work of the entire parish. The whole parish community must take responsibility for preparing young people for marriage. The Pope writes: “Marriage preparation should be a kind of initiation to the sacrament of matrimony, providing couples with the help they need to receive the sacrament worthily and to make a solid beginning of life as a family.”

Couples who are preparing for marriage should be encouraged to discuss what they expect from marriage, “what they understand by love and commitment, what each wants from the other, and what kind of life they would like to build together.” Noting how unpredictable “desire” is, the Pope insists: “The decision to marry should never be encouraged unless the couple has discerned the deeper reasons that will ensure a genuine and stable marriage.”

In addition to preparing couples for marriage, it is important to prepare them for the liturgical celebration of the sacrament. Preparing for marriage can be a stressful time, especially when preparations focus on invitations, cloths, the reception, etc. Here the Pope challenges all who are preparing for marriage: “Have the courage to be different. Don’t let yourselves get swallowed up by a society of consumption and empty appearances. . . . You are capable of opting for a more modest and simple celebration in which love takes precedence over everything else.” And so the Pope writes: “the couple should be encouraged to make the liturgical celebration a profound personal experience.”

Here, I would like to introduce a personal observation. Today, more than ever, the venue for the wedding reception seems to drive everything with the result that couples are more concerned about where the reception will be rather than where the marriage will occur. The

pressure to have a lavish reception is enormous, as is the expense for such receptions. But when the venue for a lavish reception becomes the driving force, something important is lost. Something is missing.

In the rest of this rich chapter, the Pope addresses the need to accompany married couples in the first critical years of married life. He then addresses how the pastoral activity should accompany and help those whose marriages are facing a severe crisis that threatens to destroy the marriage bond.

What the Pope writes in this chapter presents every parish, not just its official ministers, with a challenge. How can we accompany those who enter the sacrament of marriage throughout their entire married life? How can married couples strengthen and support each other to live out their marriage vows? *Father Matera*