

The Joy of Love

The Fourth Pastoral Letter

By His Excellency

Bishop Gregory John Mansour,

Eparchy of Saint Maron of Brooklyn



November 2016

The Joy of Love



The Father's Love

Commemorating this Jubilee Year of Mercy, and in the light of Pope Francis' beautiful exhortation on marriage and family entitled "The Joy of Love," I would like to reflect with you on the extravagant love of God. This love is most especially revealed in the person and the parables of Jesus Christ, whose passion and death are his clearest witness to this love and a mirror of the love his father has for each of us.

Among his many miracles, Jesus healed the leper, opened the eyes of the blind, and forgave the sins of the woman who wept at his feet. In these acts of mercy, he asked little in return, except: "Go and sin no more." This love is beautifully illuminated in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, one of three stories recorded in Luke's Gospel, Chapter 15, all three of which were presented to the Scribes and Pharisees, who complained that Jesus spoke and ate with tax collectors and sinners.

The first is that of a shepherd who leaves

ninety-nine sheep in the desert, to go in search of the one lost. It was intended by Jesus to reveal the extravagant love of God for the sinner. No shepherd in his right mind would risk losing ninety-nine sheep to look for the one lost. But God does, and he not only rejoices, but calls his friends to rejoice and to show them how, and to what extent, he was willing to risk the entire flock, just to find one.



The second story is similar, about a woman who had ten coins. Even though she lost one, she swept her entire house just to find it. When she did, she invited her friends to come and celebrate with her.

The third parable is called the “Story of the Prodigal Son,” but it is more the story of a father and his boundless love for two sons who just did not understand. The “Prodigal” returns home, only because he is hungry and out of money. He did not grasp his father’s great love for him.

Likewise, the older son does not rejoice that his

brother is back alive. He too does not understand his father's love. He calls his brother "your son" and he wonders how his father could love his prodigal brother. The father pleads with him and tells him: "You are with me always, and all that I have is yours", but this does not convince him. Although he is obedient to the will of his father, he does so less out of love, than out of servitude.

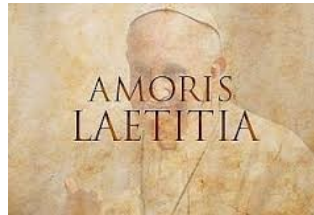


Jesus presents these three parables to describe God as a loving and merciful Father, able to embrace the sinner (the Prodigal) as well as those who think they are more righteous (the Scribes and Pharisees). Like the Scribes and Pharisees, the son who worked with his Father was doing everything to please, but not out of love.

Although the Prodigal demanded his share of the estate, while his father was still living, a clear insult, the father still gives, and, hopes for his return. Jesus is trying to teach us that God endures the bad behavior of people, the Prodigal and the Self-Righteous alike. He pleads with the

Self-Righteous to come to the feast, and at the same time he hopes the Prodigal will make a full repentance.

In the parable Jesus never lets us know if the Self-Righteous son ever came to the banquet, nor does he tell us if the Prodigal ever completely repented so as to love the father for more than just what he could get out of him. Nonetheless, we do know that Jesus described God as having an extravagant love for sinner and righteous alike, even when neither truly deserves that love.



Our Human Love

This brings us to the wonderful work of Pope Francis on marriage and family. Jesus healed, taught, and forgave sins as a witness to God's great love, and it is this love that impelled Pope Francis to write "The Joy of Love" (*Amoris Laetitia*).

After two Synods, in which he listened to bishops, experts, and married couples from throughout the world, Pope Francis, in the person of Saint Peter, wrote this exhortation calling us to a greater fidelity to our Lord's teaching on marriage and family. At the same time he urged us to be true

witnesses to the unconditional and merciful love the Father has for each of us, whether or not we have been faithful to all that the Gospel demands of us.

The Holy Father begins by reflecting on the attributes of love found in Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 13:4-7), read often at marriage ceremonies, and which provides an eloquent invitation to couples to find joy in their daily lives together.



“The Joy of Love” is meant for those who have, with God's grace, lived an upright and chaste life, honoring marriage and family, and it is a profound invitation to safeguard and nurture this holy, beautiful and joyful love. It is also written to those who have not been so fortunate! In fact, it is written as Jesus himself would have wanted, with one eye on those who are doing well, to encourage them to deepen their love for their spouse and family (and to accompany, without self-righteousness, all those in need), and the

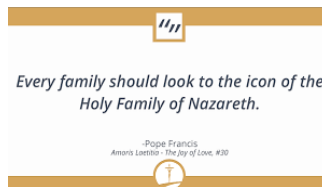
other eye on those who struggle and have not yet fully realized the joy of love in marriage and family. It is thus an invitation to all of us to find greater joy in human love.

Pope Francis urges us to:

- Assist our engaged couples to enhance their transition from single to married life through a strong, effective and relevant marriage preparation program.
- Encourage those couples and families who are living in God's grace to share their experience with newly married couples.
- Support and nurture newly married couples and families in establishing spirituality in their home lives while assisting them in developing strong and responsible parenting skills.
- Be mindful of the role of the Church in preparing young families to receive the Mysteries through strong and effective Religious Education programs.
- Support families through life crises, including illness, loss of a child, spouse, parent or sibling, financial loss, addictions, mental health challenges, or domestic violence.
- Discern the best course of assistance and counseling to assist individuals and families to resolve serious issues.



- Foster an environment of forgiveness and mercy where spouses and families can feel the loving embrace, warmth and support of their Church, to rekindle their love for God and each other, and fully participate in the Mysteries.



The Pope also addresses those who have been “wounded” or disappointed by “imperfect love,” so that they may regain their strength, turn to God and the Church, and be welcomed back with love and mercy. We are all sadly familiar with those around us, and in some case, we ourselves, who have suffered harm, abuse, or other hurtful actions, at the hands of those whom we trusted.

Although the Holy Father does not change or compromise the teaching of the Church with regards to the sacred nature of marriage, he does ask us to assist others in any way we can. He urges us to reach out to those who are in irregular unions, for example, those who may be living together without marriage, or are divorced and civilly re-married and who seek the Church’s help. Pope Francis clearly reminds us that “they remain

part of the ecclesial community” (*The Joy of Love*, n 243).

Again Pope Francis gives us some practical advice:

- Help those who are in need of healing after divorce to come to Church; and if possible seek an annulment.
- Invite them to attend and receive a blessing at communion time until their marital situation can be regularized.
- Encourage all who feel estranged from God to return to Church without being judged.
- Accompany others as Pope Francis urges: “What we are speaking of is a process of accompaniment and discernment, which guides the faithful to an awareness of their situation before God” (*The Joy of Love* n 300).

There are other ways that we in our parishes can assist:

- Make marriages better, stronger and happier by fostering retreats for couples that help deepen our love for marriage and family.
- Work with youth and young adults to help them mature in charity and grace, as well as chastity in preparation for marriage.
- Appreciate single people who are often generous with their time and love. The parish needs them. They serve as catechists, helpers with youth and

young adults, and in a variety of other ways. We ought to appreciate the way they live their single life, with love and generosity; their way of life and their experience of friendship, especially overcoming loneliness, as well as their personal devotion to God and others, are gifts to the Church.



- Accompany those in our parishes who feel same-sex attraction, and welcome them with love. What is said above for the single person can also be said for those who sincerely want to embrace their faith and be engaged in the life of Church. They have gifts to offer. We can encourage them to live the Gospel's invitation, to which all people are called, that is, to the joy of loving and chaste relationships that enrich their lives and give them much holiness, spirituality and peace.
- Appreciate the life and gifts of consecrated men and women, who pour their lives into the life of the Church, and who witness to the evangelical virtues of chastity, poverty and obedience. The Church needs their witness and finds joy in their service.
- Never forget our elders. Their wise and patient guidance are a blessing and they have so much to offer all of us.

Life-Giving Repentance

What then does our Holy Father ask of us? He asks most that we work on ourselves, not to be the half-repentant son, who loves the father only for what he will do for him, nor the self-righteous son who does not appreciate that the Father can love both saint and sinner alike, and even rejoice at the repentance of sinner. The Pope asks us to willingly and eagerly embrace a “life-giving repentance” (Acts 11:18), that we may know the Father’s mercy and love.



We are still reeling from the myth of irresponsible sexual freedom, which has left a wasteland of wounded hearts and much confusion. Abortion, pornography, human trafficking, various addictions, broken families, infidelity, depression, and the inability to commit ourselves to another person are just some of the illnesses we face today. This reminds us of the prophetic warning of Pope Paul VI in 1968, when he wrote of his real concern about the rising promotion of artificial contraception and its much deeper consequences. It may sound “old fashioned” today, but it is clearer than ever. He wrote:

“Responsible men can become more deeply convinced of the truth of the doctrine laid down by the Church on this issue if they reflect on the consequences of methods and plans for artificial birth control. Let them first consider how easily this course of action could open wide the way for marital infidelity and a general lowering of moral standards. Not much experience is needed to be fully aware of human weakness and to understand that human beings—and especially the young, who are so exposed to temptation—need incentives to keep the moral law, and it is an evil thing to make it easy for them to break that law. Another effect that gives cause for alarm is that a man who grows accustomed to the use of contraceptive methods may forget the reverence due to a woman, and, disregarding her physical and emotional equilibrium, reduce her to being a mere instrument for the satisfaction of his own desires, no longer considering her as his partner whom he should surround with care and affection.” (*Humanae Vitae*. n. 17)



Our world is troubled. But there is hope. The challenge before us is to forgive, safeguard and restore the joy of love in marriage and family. What helps us do this? We can begin in the

confessional, to participate in the Mystery of Penance, examine our conscience, acknowledge our shortcomings, accept the spiritual guidance of a confessor, and resolve to do better through the grace of forgiveness and absolution. This is truly life-giving repentance. Let us remember that Christ is as present to us in the Mystery of Penance as he is in the Eucharist, and is ever ready to restore us to the state of grace, if we are ready to repent, and accept his forgiveness and love.

Brothers and sisters, our Lord's passion and death bear witness to the extent he would go for us. In his parable of the "Prodigal Son" we know that God waits for the Prodigal as a loving Father, and continually urges him to come home to his banquet, even though he may be only partially-repentant. Likewise, he awaits the Self-Righteous Son who condemns others for their sins and faults and yet is not attentive to his own. Sometimes, we are the Prodigal, and sometimes the Self-Righteous. In this case we must ask for forgiveness and accept the extravagant love that makes us more open to God's mercy and love for ourselves and others.



“The Joy of Love” calls us to embody this merciful love in our family, our marriage, our friendships, our parish, and in every aspect of our lives. With God’s grace we can recognize, foster and enhance the joy of this love and know that God loves us, and even runs to us in order to forgive us. The Father urges us to come home, whether half-repentant or self-righteous.

Marriage and family are precious gifts, and as the Pope says, they are the ordinary means for us to reach God. They are also realities close to the heart of God, and are of the divine origin, as he also reminds us.

Nonetheless, there is no perfect marriage, no perfect spouse, no perfect family and no perfect person. We are thus called by Pope Francis, and by Jesus himself, to a life-giving repentance, so that we may take our assigned place in the “Field Hospital,” as Pope Francis describes the Church.

Let us then redouble our efforts to strengthen marriage, and to honor the joy of human love. Let us reach out to those who are either self-righteous or partially repentant and invite them all to come home. Let us each repent, as best as we can, from our own personal failures, as well as our failure to love others as extravagantly as God

has first loved us! This is the Jubilee Year, the appointed time, the time for mercy.

Mary, Mother of Mercy, pray for us.

+ Gregory



