

1. THE JOY OF LOVE experienced by families is also the joy of the Church. As the Synod Fathers noted, for all the many signs of crisis in the institution of marriage, “the desire to marry and form a family remains vibrant, especially among young people, and this is an inspiration to the Church”.¹ As a response to that desire, “the Christian proclamation on the family is good news indeed”.²

2. The Synod process allowed for an examination of the situation of families in today’s world, and thus for a broader vision and a renewed awareness of the importance of marriage and the family. The complexity of the issues that arose revealed the need for continued open discussion of a number of doctrinal, moral, spiritual and pastoral questions. The thinking of pastors and theologians, if faithful to the Church, honest, realistic and creative, will help us to achieve greater clarity. The debates carried on in the media, in certain publications and even among the Church’s ministers range from an immoderate desire for total change without sufficient reflection or grounding, to an attitude that would solve everything by applying general rules or deriving undue conclusions from particular theological considerations.

3. Since “time is greater than space”, I would make it clear that not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Unity

¹ THIRD EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Relatio Synodi* (18 October 2014), 2.

² FOURTEENTH ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Relatio Finalis* (24 October 2015), 3.

of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. *Jn* 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does. Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs. For “cultures are in fact quite diverse and every general principle... needs to be inculturated, if it is to be respected and applied”.³

4. I must also say that the Synod process proved both impressive and illuminating. I am grateful for the many contributions that helped me to appreciate more fully the problems faced by families throughout the world. The various interventions of the Synod Fathers, to which I paid close heed, made up, as it were, a multifaceted gem reflecting many legitimate concerns and honest questions. For this reason, I thought it appropriate to prepare a post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation to gather the contributions of the two recent Synods on the family, while adding other considerations as an aid to reflection, dialogue and pastoral practice, and as a help

³ *Concluding Address of the Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops* (24 October 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 26-27 October 2015, p. 13; cf. PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION, *Fede e cultura alla luce della Bibbia. Atti della sessione plenaria 1979 della Pontificia Commissione Biblica*, Turin, 1981; SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 44; JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (7 December 1990), 52: AAS 83 (1991), 300; Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 69, 117: AAS 105 (2013), 1049, 1068-69.

and encouragement to families in their daily commitments and challenges.

5. This Exhortation is especially timely in this Jubilee Year of Mercy. First, because it represents an invitation to Christian families to value the gifts of marriage and the family and to persevere in a love strengthened by the virtues of generosity, commitment, fidelity and patience. Second, because it seeks to encourage everyone to be a sign of mercy and closeness wherever family life remains imperfect or lacks peace and joy.

6. I will begin with an opening chapter inspired by the Scriptures, to set a proper tone. I will then examine the actual situation of families, in order to keep firmly grounded in reality. I will go on to recall some essential aspects of the Church's teaching on marriage and the family, thus paving the way for two central chapters dedicated to love. I will then highlight some pastoral approaches that can guide us in building sound and fruitful homes in accordance with God's plan, with a full chapter devoted to the raising of children. Finally, I will offer an invitation to mercy and the pastoral discernment of those situations that fall short of what the Lord demands of us, and conclude with a brief discussion of family spirituality.

7. Given the rich fruits of the two-year Synod process, this Exhortation will treat, in different ways, a wide variety of questions. This explains its inevitable length. Consequently, I do not recommend a rushed reading of the text. The greatest benefit, for families themselves and for those engaged in the family apostolate, will come if each part is read patiently and

carefully, or if attention is paid to the parts dealing with their specific needs. It is likely, for example, that married couples will be more concerned with Chapters Four and Five, and pastoral ministers with Chapter Six, while everyone should feel challenged by Chapter Eight. It is my hope that, in reading this text, all will feel called to love and cherish family life, for “families are not a problem; they are first and foremost an opportunity”.⁴

⁴ *Address at the Meeting of Families in Santiago de Cuba* (22 September 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 24 September 2015, p. 7.