

In the Image of Love: Marriage, the Family and the New Evangelization

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Icon of the Holy Family. The hand of the Father sends the Holy Spirit upon
the family with the Son of God in its midst. The icon, located in the offices
of the Pontifical Council for the Family, Rome, Italy, was completed by
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*Carl A. Anderson &
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“There was a marriage at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited....” (John 2:1-2)

The Wedding at Cana. Holy Family Chapel, Knights of Columbus Supreme Council, New Haven, Connecticut.

In the Image of Love: Marriage and the Family

Michelle K. Borras

Often, when people hear the phrase “the family and the new evangelization,” they understand this to refer to the need for the Gospel to be better proclaimed to families so that they might live in accord with the Church’s teaching. This is certainly one aspect of a renewed proclamation of the “good news of divine love” in our age.¹ It is also one of the reasons why Pope Francis called for two synods of the world’s bishops in 2014 and 2015 to address precisely this theme. Nonetheless, proclaiming the Gospel to families by no means exhausts the meaning of the phrase “the family and the new evangelization.”

Almost immediately in his pontificate, Pope Francis identified a “social and spiritual crisis” so severe that, as we read in the preparatory document for the synod, “never before has proclaiming the Gospel on the Family ... been more urgent and necessary.”² We might ask: Why is it so urgent? Is it because the Church’s apparently outmoded teaching seems senseless to many? Because our modern Western societies seem to be on a collision course with centuries-old Christian values and traditions? Or is there something at

stake far more essential to every human being than the alleged desire of a few clerics, to whom scarcely anyone pays attention anyhow, to impose their taboos on others?

What if that phrase, “the family and the new evangelization,” actually refers to something beautiful – something indispensable for the inhabitants of a world that, for all its technological progress, seems to be becoming increasingly inhuman? What if “proclaiming the Gospel on the Family” means something far greater than: The Church needs to “do something” so that families “follow the rules”? Would it not be far more meaningful to say that just as the family needs the Church, the Church – and the world – needs the family?

St. John Paul II, who issued the stirring call for a new *evangelization*, insisted that “*the future of humanity passes through the family.*”³ Pope Benedict XVI likewise affirmed repeatedly that “the new evangelization depends largely on the Domestic Church.”⁴ These two pastors knew that just as the family needs God’s Word in its midst in order to be true to itself, the Church needs married love that allows itself to be indwelt by God’s love. The Church needs the family if she is to bear witness to this love in a world where community and enduring fidelity seem to be ever-scarcer commodities.

The theme “the family and the new evangelization” does not only mean that the family needs to be better evangelized. It means also and above all that *the family is at the heart of the new evangelization*. For despite all their imperfections, it is in marriages and families that true humanity enters the world: People learn to find themselves by giving themselves, and grow in relationships of love to one another and to God.

In marriages and families lived with integrity, human beings, whether they are believers or not and whether they realize it or not, first glimpse the beauty of the God they unconsciously seek. This God, Christians believe, is himself a communion of Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Or as St. John writes with a simplicity that contains boundless depths, “God is love” (1 John 4:8).

At the beginning of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II wrote, “Man cannot live without love.... His life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him ... if he does not experience it and ... participate intimately in it.”⁵ While our society’s increasing suicide rates are proving this statement true in the negative, even those who do not despair have restless hearts. Like many people today, we may “hold a pessimistic interpretation of the capacity of human nature to accomplish a lifelong commitment,”⁶ yet we still look for fidelity and are hurt by its absence. We look for beauty, for “human beings cannot exist without beauty.”⁷ We seek joy, acceptance, love.

Every now and again, something makes us pause in our restless search. Someone who perhaps never experienced real tenderness, glimpses a young father firmly yet lovingly correcting his four-year-old daughter. An Asian woman whose government has forbidden her to have more than one child bursts into tears at the sight of a lively group of siblings arguing, playing together, helping one another – moved as much by the fact that this kind of beauty exists in the world as by what she has lost.

We notice that marriage of our coworker or friend, which cannot help but attract attention. It has its faults, to be sure, yet the spouses “live [their] love for each other and for everyone, sharing joys and sufferings, learning to seek and to grant forgiveness,”⁸ in an enduring commitment that transcends the two of them. It is fruitful even beyond the children who reflect something of their parent’s unity, for it sheds a kind of light all around them.

Sometimes even our own, terribly imperfect marriages and families allow us to experience a moment of truth, of real acceptance or unexpected help that reminds us of words that seem somehow bigger than us: “*I take you...*” – with your strengths and weaknesses, your past, present and future, your bodily capacity to generate life and your spirit – “*until death....*”

We may not know it, but when we have an experience like this, a ray of God’s light falls over us. We may never have read a word John Paul II wrote, but something stirs in us: “Man cannot live without love.” However much we may wound one another at times, my spouse, child, parent, brother or sister, I cannot live without deeply human, tender and unbreakable love.

Those who have a familiarity with Scripture will realize that in those moments, we find ourselves once again at the origin of the proclamation of the Gospel.

Two thousand years ago, at Cana in Galilee, the Son of God incarnate chose a marriage feast as the setting for the

first public sign of his saving mission. “There was a marriage at Cana in Galilee,” we read in John’s Gospel, “and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited ... with his disciples” (John 2:1).

The newlyweds at Cana were poor. Though most of the guests had not yet noticed, it seemed as if the one thing they could give to others had already run out for them. “They have no wine,” Mary said quietly (John 2:3). They are like us, whose love at times seems to run dry; who bear the wounds of a spouse’s or parent’s infidelity or abandonment; or who try to cover over the staleness of our everyday family relations with increasing amounts of work and entertainment. They – like us – seem to have exhausted their joy.

That newly married couple did not know that among their guests stood the Bridegroom of Israel, of the Church and of mankind. “He who has the Bride is the Bridegroom,” John the Baptist would later say of Jesus, testifying to the presence of the long-awaited Messiah (John 3:29). Jesus himself said nothing at that wedding, except for a brusque answer to his mother and a word to the waiters. But with this word, the marriage of a Galilean couple too poor to afford enough wine for their feast was caught up into a manifestation of God’s glory.

“Authentic married love is caught up into divine love,” the Second Vatican Council tells us.⁹ If we have trouble understanding what those words might mean for us, whether we are struck by the strength of a marriage or our loves seem broken and poor, we need only to ponder that wedding at Cana. There, the unremarkable marriage of two

children of Israel contained the unbreakable Covenant – Jesus, the One who wed God and man – in its midst.

That humble wedding, with its fragile pledge of human fidelity and its promise of fruitfulness, was the place Jesus chose for the hidden beginning and the abiding foundation of the public proclamation of God’s kingdom: “Jesus said to [the waiters], ‘Fill the jars with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim.... ‘Now draw some out, and take it to the steward of the feast.’” The steward tasted it and turned to the bridegroom in astonishment: “You have kept the good wine until now!” (John 2:7-10).

Water became good, rich wine for the joy of a wedding feast, just as our fallible human loves are transformed when they open themselves to the divine guest present within them. “This, the first of [Jesus’] signs” (John 2:11), stands at the beginning of what Pope Francis has called the “joy of the Gospel,” which “fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus.”¹⁰ There at Cana, as now, human love was caught up into divine love, and “he manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him” (John 2:11).

The world’s cultures have always intuited that married love has something to do with God. The two loves, human and divine, have been inextricably linked from the moment the first man and woman turned to one another with a glimmer of recognition: “You...” – or, in the exclamation the book of Genesis places on Adam’s lips, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!” (Genesis 2:23). Behind

the human “you,” man and woman glimpsed, however inarticulately, the divine “You,” who “chose us ... before the foundation of the world ... in love” (Ephesians 1:4-5) and who gave us such a gift.

When the human person was created male and female, in the image and likeness of God (cf. Genesis 1:27), the goodness of creation became manifest to someone – or rather, to two persons – other than God. In fact, something of the mystery of the Creator himself became manifest in them and in their “innate vocation” to love. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains: “God who created man out of love also calls him to love – the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. For man is created in the image and likeness of God who is himself love. Since God created him man and woman, their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves man. It is good, very good in the Creator’s eyes.”¹¹

This “intimate community of ... life and love,”¹² made up of man and woman, revealed the power at the origin of the universe. “In the beginning,” it already reflected the Love that we call “God.” Of course, in the act of creation narrated in the first two chapters of Genesis, God had not yet fully revealed himself. All we have is that mysterious divine “We,” which seems to suggest something of the richness of God’s life: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). And we have the result of that deliberation: a creature who bears even in his body the signs that he is called to a free, exclusive, fruitful and faithful gift of himself to another. We have the human person, made in the image of Love.

John Paul II said that with the creation of the human person as male and female, a “primordial sacrament” entered the world.¹³ In this context, he meant “sacrament” in a sense broader than but related to what we mean when we speak of the Church’s seven sacraments. Man and woman, who are called to make a total and enduring gift of themselves to one another, are a kind of original sign that “efficaciously transmits in the visible world ... the mystery of divine life.”¹⁴

With these words, John Paul II described a truth so fundamental to God’s intention in creating the universe and so central to human existence that sin and death could not destroy it. From the moment God first blessed man and woman, commanding them to “be fruitful and multiply” and to care for creation (Genesis 1:28), “the love between the spouses is nothing less than the visible presence of God’s love in the world.”¹⁵

God wanted to be present in his creation. Indeed, he wanted to share his own life with his creature. Thus he placed at the culmination of creation, not something primarily functional or useful, but a *person* – a being capable of receiving a gift and becoming a gift for another. John Paul II wrote: “God is love (cf. 1 John 4:8) and in himself he lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in his own image ... God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion.”¹⁶

In the book of Genesis, we see that Eve’s very being calls Adam, and vice versa, to a gift of self that is total, faithful and

fruitful. This gift involves body and soul, affections and will, past, present and future: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). Something absolutely essential not just to the human person, but to all of creation becomes visible in this “unbreakable union of their two lives,”¹⁷ which is joined by God himself (cf. Matthew 19:6).

Sin – that is, human beings’ infidelity and refusal to love – dulled our perception of God’s original plan, but it could never erase the mark God left on the work of his hands. In the “vocation to marriage ... written in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator,”¹⁸ we begin to understand that creation, like every man and woman in it, is oriented toward a covenant.

This glimpse of God’s original intention for marriage and the family could strike us as an unrealistic idealization. How can it still be relevant when human history, like each of our personal histories, contains a sorry litany of discord and infidelity? As a result of their ruptured relationship with God, the first husband and wife already began accusing one another (cf. Genesis 3:12). With their deliberate disobedience, lust entered the world; they had to hide themselves not just from God, whose love is pure and ungrasping, but from one another. Their children began killing one another out of envy.

All of this, which Genesis also describes, seems to continue through history right into our own lives. We are often afraid of our closest relationships, for while we desire

a love that is unbreakable, “strong as death” (Song of Songs 8:6), we know too well the pain of infidelity and the flight of infatuation. We may bear in our hearts and even in our bodies the deep wounds of rejection, violence and domination. We may experience the emptiness of infertility and we must face the finality of death. We hide from our own disordered loves, our feeling of inadequacy and the selfishness that closes us to new life.

Yet Scripture shows us something deeper, stronger and more enduring than this history of sin. For while the story of God’s chosen people in the Old Testament is full of human betrayal and failed love, it also tells of a far greater fidelity. However much human beings may try to forget, God remembers what he intended. He is faithful to the work of his hands. Pope Benedict explained:

The truth about marriage and the family, deeply rooted in the truth about the human being, has been actuated in the history of salvation, at whose heart lie the words: ‘God loves his people.’ The Biblical revelation, in fact, is first and foremost the expression of a history of love, the history of God’s Covenant with humankind. Consequently, God could take ... the union of a man and a woman in the covenant of marriage as a symbol of salvation history.¹⁹

Speaking to married couples, John Paul II once said that the covenant God made with the people of Israel in the Old Testament is “not a simple political contract: ... in it, the Lord commits his Word and his Life, [the covenant] calls forth love and tenderness. The covenant is expressed through the sign

of marriage.”²⁰ God loves Israel like a bridegroom loves his bride, and is as grieved by her idolatry as a husband would be by his wife’s repeated faithlessness. Throughout a history in which the people accepted polygamy and Moses permitted divorce because of their “hardness of heart” (Matthew 19:8), God remembered that for which he had created mankind.

At last, after a centuries-long preparation, came “the fullness of time”: “God sent his Son, born of a woman’ (Galatians 4:4)... ‘The Word was made flesh’” (cf. John 1:14). Here at last was “an unbreakable Covenant, for nothing could any longer separate man from God, united forever in Jesus Christ.”²¹ The Son of God incarnate “seals the Covenant in the blood of his cross and ‘sends his Spirit’ (cf. John 19:30) on the Church ... the beloved and fruitful Bride who begets new children until the end of time.”²² All the men and women throughout history who sought an enduring love can at last lift up their heads: This is the Covenant to which all human love pointed from the beginning of history. From this “great mystery” of the union of Christ and the Church, every Christian marriage draws its love and its life (cf. Ephesians 5:32).

Discord and betrayal no longer have the last word, once “God radicalizes his love to the point that he himself becomes, in his Son, flesh of our flesh.”²³ In this way, Pope Benedict explained, “God’s union with humankind acquired its supreme, irreversible form.”²⁴ In Jesus Christ, God loved us “to the end” of death and beyond it (cf. John 13:1). He gave us himself forever, in a gift that Jesus expressed very simply on the night before he died: “He took bread, and when he had

given thanks broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body which is given for you.... This ... is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:19-20).

There is something final about this love. In it, we already glimpse the end of history, which the Book of Revelation describes as the joyous “wedding feast of the Lamb” (19:9). Men and women through the centuries would be called to leave everything, including the possibility of earthly marriage, in order to become a living reminder of that wedding feast. By following “the Lamb wherever he goes” (Revelation 14:4), they point to the divine Love that dwells in every marriage.²⁵

The end, however, also sheds light on “the beginning.” That is, it reveals what we men and women were made for, and why we cannot live without love. Pope Benedict explained that in the “new and eternal Covenant,” men and women rediscover something buried deep in their nature, which had been obscured through mankind’s long history of sin. God’s love for the world and for every human being in Jesus Christ shows them the “blueprint of human love ... that reciprocal ‘yes’ which cannot be revoked” and which is not afraid to be fruitful.²⁶

Even if they – that is, most of us – try to forget it or fail to correspond to it, they recognize such a “yes,” for such a “blueprint” was written into the roots of their being. They were made for it and they belong to it. For this reason, this irrevocable “yes” “does not alienate men and women but sets them free from the different forms of alienation ... in order to restore them to the truth of creation.”²⁷

God's love does more than restore human love to its original truth. At Cana, human love was not simply "blessed" and left unchanged. When Jesus contradicted the Jewish practice of divorce and remarriage – "from the beginning it was not so," he said (Matthew 19:8) – he was not simply backpedaling to the relationship of the first man and woman before the Fall. Rather, when the Word became flesh, suffered, died and rose again, human love was not only restored, but also transfigured. Now redeemed, human love would manifest God's glory, like water that had suddenly become wine. It was, in the language of Vatican Council II, "taken up into divine love."²⁸

In Jesus Christ's total gift of himself for the Church and for the world, God certainly blessed human love. He did so by making it bigger, broader and deeper than it could be on its own: He made it an expression of *his* love. He allowed the communion of a baptized man and woman to share in the exclusive, indissoluble and fruitful Covenant he himself makes with mankind. His zealous love for his one Bride, the Church, upholds a husband's and wife's love even in its moments of weakness. His fidelity, "strong as death" (Song of Songs 8:6) undergirds their stumbling attempts to be faithful. And if they do not close themselves off from God's presence in their midst and from his gift of new life, his Holy Spirit makes them share in the fruitfulness of the redemption.

This is what Benedict XVI meant when he told married couples that "by means of a special gift of the Holy Spirit,

Christ gives you a share in his spousal love, making you a sign of his faithful and all-embracing love for the Church.”²⁹ It is also what John Paul II meant when he said that God’s Covenant in Jesus Christ does not just “inspire” Christian marriages. If they are open to this gift, it fills and transforms them: “Appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will,’ through the Lord’s gift, human love can be completely irradiated by the Source of love and truly manifest the new and eternal Covenant that shines through them.”³⁰

The *Catechism* describes this same truth using more traditional language of the Church: “Christian marriage ... becomes ... the sacrament of the Covenant of Christ and the Church. Since it signifies and communicates grace, marriage between baptized persons is a true sacrament of the New Covenant.”³¹

The fact that God’s love has “taken up” human love in this way, or that the marriage of baptized persons has been “raised ... to the dignity of a sacrament,”³² does not mean that the love of Christian spouses is suddenly perfect, or that their marriage is not also a lifelong work in progress, in which they slowly learn – and often fail – to correspond to the great gift that has been given them. As John Paul II reminded us, “Love, like every other human reality, needs to be saved.”³³ Likewise, it does not mean that the love between the spouses will be free of suffering, or from the need continually to relearn the value of forgiveness. The “supreme Sacrament of the Covenant,”³⁴ namely the Eucharist, remains an enduring sign that Christ saved us by dying:

“The Covenant is sealed in the blood of the Lamb.”³⁵

What the sacramentality of marriage does mean is that in Christian spouses’ everyday attempts to live with and for one another “in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health”; in their acceptance of the gift of children and the difficulties that come with raising them; in moments of closeness and in the painful labor of forgiving and asking forgiveness, they are like the couple at Cana – they have a divine guest in their midst. Vatican II taught:

The Savior of men and the Spouse of the Church comes into the lives of married Christians through the sacrament of matrimony. He abides with them ... so that just as he loved the Church and handed himself over on her behalf, the spouses may love each other with perpetual fidelity through mutual self-bestowal.³⁶

“*He abides with them.*” Spouses whose hearts are open to God amid the busyness, anxieties, joy and grief of family life soon come to experience that this divine presence means everything. The Bridegroom in their midst, who brings with him the presence of his Father and the gift of his Spirit, is not some kind of extra “insurance” for Christian marriage, which can more or less get along without God. Rather, he is its coherence and meaning, the light illumining the spouses’ love, the presence that makes their bond fully and deeply human.

Sometimes we are afraid of the single-heartedness involved in “forsaking all others” to give ourselves to this

particular husband or wife and these children. Then, Christ's "total ... unique and exclusive love"³⁷ shows us anew the dignity of these individual human persons. They are worth an undivided commitment, for they were worth his love, his life and his death. In other words, in the light of Christ's love for the Church his Bride, we understand that Christian marriage is an *exclusive* union.

Sometimes the communion between spouses risks breaking down. The love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is still between them, offering them the grace of reconciliation with God and with one another. In the dazzling light of the communion of three Persons in the one God, Christian spouses remember – or perhaps learn for the first time – that "God created us male and female, equal in dignity, but also with respective and complementary characteristics, so that the two might be a gift for each other, might value each other and ... bring into being a community of love and life."³⁸ Christian marriage is a *communion of love*, in which the love between man and woman is much more than an emotional bond: It is a faithful and fruitful sharing of life.

On dark days, they may no longer know why they said "I do" to a person they no longer understand. In these moments, the Redeemer's unfailing "yes" to creation and to their love, safeguards their truest desire from their impulse to run away. In him, they see that true freedom is discovered not by escaping commitment, but in a "definitive gift" of oneself.³⁹ From Christ's unbreakable love, continually present to the Church in the sacrament of the Eucharist, they "learn ... an unfailing fidelity" to the gift of their word

and their life.⁴⁰ There are tragic instances of abuse in which spouses need physically to separate, but divorce is incompatible with Christ's faithful love. "What ... God has joined," Jesus said, "let no man put asunder" (Matthew 19:6): Christian marriage is *indissoluble*. Indeed, indissolubility is God's supreme act of mercy on the spouses' love, for it allows their deepest desires to be realized.

Spouses may be afraid to open themselves to the gift of new life. This is understandable, for the conjugal act, in which man and woman express their total self-gift to one another through their bodies, is a "moment of special responsibility"⁴¹ – it is the moment in which they can become a father or a mother. Yet the Spirit of God who dwells in them shows them that if they distort this act through contraceptive drugs or devices, they falsify their love. It would be like saying to one another: "I give you all of myself, except for that profound mystery in me, my capacity to become a father or a mother. In other words, I don't give you all of myself." He helps them to abstain when necessary for responsible parenthood, and to give themselves to each other courageously and totally.

In fact, he does more. The Spirit of God, who can be described as "Love personified,"⁴² shows them that it is the very logic of love to be fruitful, for love – communion, shared life – is a source of beauty, exuberance and generosity: It always overflows. Speaking at the World Meeting of Families in 2012, Pope Benedict described the many dimensions of this fruitfulness in married life:

Dear married couples ... your love is fruitful first and foremost for yourselves, because you desire and accomplish one another's good, you experience the joy of giving and receiving. It is also fruitful in your generous and responsible procreation of children, in your attentive care for them.... And lastly, it is fruitful for society, because family life is the first and irreplaceable school of social virtues, such as respect for persons ... trust, responsibility, solidarity, cooperation.⁴³

Marriage and the family are meant to be a place where people experience this “joy of giving and receiving,” the expansive joy of communion. Even if a couple suffers the pain of being unable to conceive, they are caught up into the logic of this generosity. If their love is open to God, they are a place where he dwells. For them, too, Christian marriage is always *fruitful*.

This kind of exclusive, faithful and fruitful communion between spouses gives a foundation and meaning to life. For despite all its shortcomings, the love between spouses, parents and children shares in the unbreakable Covenant that God made with human beings. Through his gift, it really communicates the Love without which man cannot live.

Yes, spouses often feel the burdensome monotony of the daily tasks they perform for each other, parents are often exhausted in caring for children, siblings often find one another difficult to bear. Here and there, tragedy strikes. There is no Christian family that does not encounter the cross. And yet that cross is the source of all the light in the world: Christ's suffering was our redemption. His death

leads to Easter. Our imperfect human relationships are the place that God has chosen for the redemption to “take,” and for his own, perfect love to begin to leak into the world.

At this point, everything we have said about God’s plan for man and woman, as well as about the redemption of human love, can still seem somewhat abstract. Marriage is a sacrament, well and good, we might think. But isn’t the Church’s teaching on this subject at best unrealistic? If we have experienced the profound lack of love that people too often encounter in the world, we might understandably be tempted to think this, or to dismiss what we have heard. That is, until we no longer simply hear of it or read about it, but *see* it. Then, everything that had seemed vague or unreal suddenly takes on the sharp contours of human lives. What had seemed impossible becomes the irrefutable testimony of flesh and blood.

Terms like “the sacramentality of marriage” or “the mission of the family” may not mean much to most people. But those same people pay remarkable attention when, for instance, a British married couple with small children must suddenly draw on all the resources of their faith and the power of the sacraments: A life-changing injury leaves the young wife and mother unable to walk. They live an unquestioned fidelity to one another and to raising their children, forgiving the stranger who caused the injury.

Gradually, their extended family, friends and other families gather around them, drawn by the peace and deep

humanity of this couple. They want to help this family to be a family. But they also need this family, for it has become what a family truly is: a place of healing for the people around it, a “community ... of life and love.”⁴⁴ An older woman, noticing these people’s inexplicable joy, articulated what many others secretly say in their hearts. “I want what you have,” she said to the young wife and mother, quickly adding, “and don’t tell me it’s your faith.” “But it is,” said the younger woman simply.

This family does not think of carrying out any extraordinary mission. Its members merely seek to be a family and to love one another in truth. Yet in doing so, they are what Pope Benedict described when he once told families that when they live “with the strength that comes from the grace of the sacrament,” they reflect “the beauty of the Trinity” – the beauty without which human beings cannot live. Their vocation “is not easy to live, especially today” the pope added. But when they live it, they proclaim the Gospel “not only by word, but ... by ‘radiation,’ in the strength of living love.”⁴⁵

Other married couples and families may live in less striking circumstances, but they do the same. “Your family is different from most of the patients’ families we get in here,” said a nurse to a woman bringing her elderly mother to visit her dying father at a California hospital. “You take care of each other.” Or rather: *You love....*

In these marriages and families, husbands, wives, children and parents try to live out the gift that has been given them. They allow Christ’s unbreakable Covenant, present in the Eucharist, to inform their love; and the power

of forgiveness to transform them through the sacrament of penance. In them, their friends, neighbors and caregivers witness the strength of fidelity and the joy of communion when, maybe, they had despaired of ever finding these things.

The people near such a family might be like “the world grown old” that John Paul II described, which “no longer believes in life, in love, in fidelity, in forgiveness.” They might be like us, who need to see “authentic love, fidelity even to the cross, the joy of life and the power of forgiveness.” Then, unexpectedly, the familiar concreteness of human relationships opens to heaven: “Through the fidelity of the spouses, they” – and we – “can glimpse the fidelity of the living God.”⁴⁶

At the World Meeting of Families in 2012, Pope Benedict summarized all of this. He told families that in the humble attempt to “live your love for each other and for all with the help of God’s grace, you become a ... domestic church” at the heart of the Church, sharing in her mission. “You become a living Gospel” for a world that is dying for love.⁴⁷

What is the “Gospel of the Family” that Pope Francis identified as so “urgent and necessary” for our age?⁴⁸ Different aspects of it have been discussed throughout these pages. It is the restoration of human love to its original intention, in which God created man and woman to image his love. It is the unbreakable Covenant God made with humanity in

Jesus Christ, and spouses' sharing in this Covenant through an exclusive, irrevocably faithful and fruitful communion. But the "Gospel of the Family" is also something more: It is the gospel that the family has *become*, when it embraces its mission "to guard, reveal and communicate love."⁴⁹

Spouses who are open to the God who called us to love and families who welcome the divine presence in their midst, don't just help one another. Others can see that they are different even in the way that they deal with disagreements and grief. They radiate the peace of forgiveness, the strength of fidelity and the beauty of communion all around them. In our world, which is full of division and sorrow, they proclaim with their whole lives that even if life can be hard at times, it is good to exist. They image the God who is Love.

The Second Vatican Council explained that in becoming flesh and revealing the Father's love, the Son of God brings to light much that is true about creation but that had been obscured by sin. This is true especially of the human person: "It is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear.... In the ... revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, [Christ] fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling."⁵⁰

The divine Word through whom the world was made (cf. John 1:10) was born like us, grew up in a human family, suffered, died and rose again to lead us back to the Father. Ever since he did this, the light that illumines the existence of every man and woman – and the mission of every family – is the light of God himself.

John Paul II once said that the God Jesus revealed to us

“is not a solitude.” He is the Father to whom Jesus prayed constantly, and with whom he shared a union deeper and more intimate than anything we can imagine: “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30). He is the Spirit that the dying Jesus breathed forth into his Father’s hands and that poured forth from the risen Christ over all creation when the Father raised his only-begotten Son from the dead. *This* God is not solitude. He is life itself, dynamic beauty, maximum communion – Trinity. As John Paul II, the Pope of the Family, explained, “our God in his deepest mystery ... has in himself fatherhood, sonship, and the essence of the family, which is love.”⁵¹

This is the Love that dwells in the love between a man and a woman, transforming it through the sacrament and taking it into his service. This is the Source of the communion that all of us seek. Finally, this is the God whom the family, a “saved and saving community,”⁵² proclaims to the world.



“The family has the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love.”

(St. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 17)

Icon of the Holy Family. ©Pontificium Consilium pro Familia.

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The Family in the New Evangelization⁵³

Carl A. Anderson

A Proclamation of God's Beauty

When, in a 1983 address to the Latin American Bishops, St. John Paul II called for an evangelization “new in its ardor, methods, and expression,”⁵⁴ he identified with remarkable insight the crisis of our age. At the same time, he pointed us to that which alone can respond to it: a radical proclamation of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, who reveals to us the true face of God and of man.

Our age is experiencing to an unprecedented degree what the prophet Amos called “not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:1), and is suffering the consequences in what the writer C. S. Lewis calls “the abolition of man.” Such a situation begs much more of the Church and of Christians than cordial dialogue coupled with humanitarian works, or a fleshless and therefore unconvincing instruction in the doctrinal contents of the faith. The men and women of today are *in extremis*. They are made for the Absolute, for *worship*, and for the absolute

commitment that is part and parcel of love. They hunger for beauty, communion, and joy. And when the Absolute himself is lacking to a people and an age – if they know nothing of his boundless fidelity – they are mortally wounded. Deprived of the source of beauty and communion, human beings respond with unspeakable violence.

For this reason, the new evangelization involves much more than efforts to revitalize pastoral programs or to transmit the faith more effectively to younger generations. It is also more than a “state of mind,” although these efforts and attitudes are laudable and necessary. The new evangelization is, in the words of the *Lineamenta* for the 2012 Synod on the New Evangelization, the Church becoming “what she is by her nature.”⁵⁵ It is a proclamation of the name of the living God, not simply in her words, but in her worship and in the radiance of the lives of her members – which alone make words true and credible. It is the proclamation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who, as John Paul II said, “is not a solitude ... since he has in himself fatherhood, sonship, and ... love.”⁵⁶

If the new evangelization can be such an incarnate proclamation of the beauty of God, who is communion, it will also be a proclamation of the true name of man.

On the basis of these introductory remarks, we can consider the question: Just what is the place of the family in the new evangelization? In a homily at Puebla de los Angeles in 1979, John Paul II remarked that “in the future, evangelization will depend largely on the domestic church.”⁵⁷ In the light of our present discussion, it may be helpful to ask why.

Certainly, as the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the same synod points out, the family is “the model-place for witnessing to faith because of its prophetic capacity for living the core values of the Christian experience.”⁵⁸ Moreover, the family bears “responsibility in the formation and transmission of the Christian faith from the very beginnings of human life.”⁵⁹ These statements touch on irreplaceable ways in which the family founded on the sacrament of marriage participates in the Church’s task of evangelization.

The Family at the Heart of the Church’s Mission

There is, however, an even more fundamental reason why the family is at the heart of the new evangelization, or of the “authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord”⁶⁰ to which Pope Benedict XVI called us in the Year of Faith. Our faith teaches us that God is a unity in communion, a Trinity, that he is Love. This Love made an irrevocable gift of himself to us. God opened his life to us in his Son Jesus Christ, who is God’s Covenant with his creation. And because man is made in the image of God, he “is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless” if he does not encounter this Love.⁶¹

The world we live in, in which millions of people have yet to encounter this love in any meaningful way, needs the family to be an icon of the God who is communion. It needs to see the God revealed by Jesus Christ saving man in all his relationships. This world which is starved for meaning needs to see all the elements of human life – which Pope Benedict

identifies as “the joy of love ... the drama of suffering and pain, the power of forgiveness in the face of an offence received and the victory of life over the emptiness of death” – visibly finding “fulfillment in the mystery of [Christ’s] ... becoming man.”⁶² In other words, the world needs to see families that are true communities of life, love, and forgiveness. Such families are truly *human* communities, which can thus point their unbelieving brothers and sisters to the beauty of the God who is a communion of love.

For this reason, as St. John Paul II taught us, the family is *essentially missionary*. Its mission, which flows from its being, is far greater than any external activities of evangelization, social or political reform to which Christian families commit themselves. Every such activity will bear fruit only when it flows from the far more foundational mission that places the family founded on sacramental marriage at the heart of the very mission of the Church. In the words of John Paul II, “the family has *the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love.*” This love is a reflection of the Trinitarian communion and shares in “God’s love for humanity and the love of Christ the Lord for the Church his bride.”⁶³

In the Church’s mission of evangelization, love alone is “effective” – the love of the crucified and risen Lord, which Christian spouses first receive as a divine gift and a task, and which is their genuine participation in the life of God. No amount of worldly influence or power, no technological instruments, and no pastoral planning can take its place. This love, which the family has the task of living and communicating, is the driving force of evangelization. It is

what allows the proclamation of the Gospel to “permeate and transform the whole temporal order, assuming and renewing cultures.”⁶⁴ This love alone, when it is authentically lived in families whose members convert anew to it every day, can be the basis of a genuinely human culture which St. John Paul II called a “civilization of love.”⁶⁵

With all this in mind, it is my hope that pastors, bishops and religious become ever more conscious of the pressing need to help the Christian family in its mission “to become what it is”:⁶⁶ an icon of God’s own communion. This is the only way for the family to be a place of healing and of *humanity* for the men and women of our time. Christian families may in fact need to be encouraged to become active in parishes and ecclesial groups, or helped in the crucial task of transmitting the faith to younger generations. But above all, families need help simply in coming to an awareness of what they are: a saved and *saving* community,⁶⁷ a sacramental reality at the heart of the Church’s mission of evangelization.

Such assistance is needed not only for the sake of the family itself. Our world, in which ever increasing numbers of our brothers and sisters are deprived of God and thus of a genuine experience of communion and joy, need this. Those who do not believe or whose faith wavers need the family to be a living witness to the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the source of all the beauty in the world.

Now, as in the first centuries of Christianity, it remains the case that the greatest proof of the truth of Christianity is not our words, programs or argumentation. All of that has its place and serves. But that which most helps our brothers

and sisters understand what it means to be human, to be made for the Absolute, to be made for faith, hope and love, is this exclamation on the lips of the unbelievers in the first centuries of Christianity: “See how they love one another!”⁶⁸

Receiving and bearing witness to this love, without which faith remains incomprehensible and its transmission impossible, is the primary contribution the family can make to the new evangelization. When Pope John Paul II cried out, “Family, become what you are!”⁶⁹ he summoned every family founded on baptism to its essential and irreplaceable mission. The family is called to reveal to the world the face of God, and thus to become a place where our unbelieving brothers and sisters – and we ourselves – can catch sight of the true face of man.

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