

## **The Family, Path to Holiness and First Line of Evangelization**

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### **1. Introduction**

I have been asked to speak from the perspective of a spiritual family, the Sodalit Family, which among other realities includes *Sodalitium Christianae Vitae* and the Christian Life Movement. The latter was born in Peru in 1985 and was approved by the Apostolic See in 1994. Among its members are thousands of marriages, spread out in many countries on five continents, that have opted to live their Christian lives with seriousness and maturity.

The promotion of the family constitutes one of the principal pastoral orientations and concerns of the whole Sodalit Family. There is so much to say about marriage and the family, but for now we will resign ourselves to painting a few broad strokes.

### **2. Crisis of the Family**

For some time now the family has been suffering a crisis of grave negative incidence. A systematic siege seeks to dissociate conjugal and familial love from the life of the spouses and the family. When we hear expressions such as “reconstructed family”, “single-parent family”, “dysfunctional family”, and “civil unions” we can only think that we are facing a culture that accepts these situations as “normal” or even “ideal.” This implacable campaign incorporated to the process of globalization also affects the identity of a family based in the marriage of a man and a woman. I think that the serious consequences of this dark phenomenon constitute a very

grave assault against human rights, which in reality can only be founded in nature created by God and not in mere human conventions, fashions, legal dictatorships or ideologized caprices. The existence of an anti-Catholic fundamentalism that feeds these processes seeking to generate a world inspired by the “culture of death” is no secret to anyone. All this makes the value of the family in itself as well as its mission as the first line in the real proposal for a society of life - a community which is more just, more reconciled and more in accordance to the divine Plan - increasingly evident.

### **3. Program of the Marital Path**

The Sodalit Family holds a clear position on the very high value of conjugal and family life and on its decisive importance in the construction of a better world. It also offers an education for cooperation with marriages and for cooperation among marriages in their path to holiness as members of the Church. This path is not only expressed in reflection and theoretical positions but also in what could be called a practical program for those called to live the vocation to marriage. It is expressed, succinctly, in five points, like the fingers of a hand, which, moreover, symbolizes action.

#### ***3.1 First Point: Personal Holiness***

The first of the five points that we consider must be accepted by a person blessed with a call to marital life is personal holiness. More than a few people forget the order of things. They forget that, as taught since time immemorial, charity begins by attending to God’s Plan for one’s own self. If this step is not taken into account it is difficult, not to say humanly impossible, to take the others. Having a clear conscience of the contents and objectives involved, and with faith in the mind, it is fundamental to turn to one’s self-awareness and answer to the responsibility one holds for himself.

No one and nothing is a substitute for personal work. The horrible failure of so many millions of marriages is due in large part to the fact that they do not begin from the idea that married life is about a man and a woman who have to proceed towards encounter, to harmonize with each other in love and in daily life, building a “we” dimension out of their individual realities, realities which cannot be renounced. Husband and wife do not dissolve but go towards the encounter of one another as persons. Thus the first logical and fundamental step is to live the Christian dynamism in one’s own self. If you don’t work to integrate the Lord Jesus in your own life, if you don’t receive Him into your heart and interiorize the values and teachings manifested in His person, if you don’t open wide the doors of your heart to Him, you will be living an existential lie.

I am convinced that if God in Jesus institutes the sacrament of marriage it isn’t in order to paint a varnish over some human situation, a social cell, however basic it may be considered, but in order to open up a beautiful, exciting, and vigorous channel for the person’s realization, a stream in which each of the members of this adventure of conjugal love can realize themselves and be happy in the light of the divine Plan.

The encounter of love, this integration to which the spouses are invited to, must be a horizon which takes them to an ever-intensifying personal exigency, an ever-increasing personal commitment to Jesus, to course an existential project facing eternity.

The first step then is the awareness that each one is called to holiness **as a person**. First as a person. It is necessary that truth and realism have primacy here. Some men will be widowed, some women will be widowed, and more than a few will marry again. This reality of life must speak to us very clearly of the fact that personal responsibilities must not and cannot be avoided. Each person is **before all else** responsible for himself before God.

### ***3.2 Second Point: The Spouses***

In second place is the beautiful and exciting horizon of integration as a couple. It is a joint effort, evidently founded in the search for and answer to the Lord Jesus of each one of the spouses.

The effort to live as spouses presents itself as a wonderful and fruitful horizon that invites one to a personal encounter, to a process in which the beautiful mystery of the conjugal “we” is built in the Lord Jesus. The love of the husband for the wife and of the wife for the husband must be a love which is nourished by the love of Jesus, that goes out to meet the other in the dynamic of Jesus, in such a way that each one discovers that interior light of the Lord that shines in the depths of every person. Thus, under this luminosity, they encounter their own identity and really discover that of their spouse, since the Lord Jesus reveals the identity of the human being.

Marital love is one of the most beautiful human adventures but its success, considering the loving grace that God pours out, demands an ascetic personal discipline, a renunciation of personal egoism in favor of the other, a constant and renewed building in the vital ideal of conjugal love. It demands a process of trimming, of cutting, and of smoothing rough edges, those thorns that everyone carries within them, eliminating the inconsistencies that we all have inside us, building themselves as couples in a beautiful existential process. To not do so daily, to not do so with the enthusiasm and freshness proper to beginnings, to not do so with a vision of the newness that accompanies the dawn of each day, is to begin to dig the grave of one’s own personal and conjugal life project. Perseverance and fidelity in marriage despite the blizzards and the problems is a manifestation of having taken seriously the path of sacramental marriage as a road to the fullness of existence and to holiness.

### ***3.3 Third Point: The Children***

Next comes the third step, the step of the formative love of children, the process of building the family which has been received as a gift and as a task, in respect for the dignity of each of its members. When there are children, the couple has to understand that they are the expression of their love, and that God has given them the responsibility to love and educate them as free human persons, invited to the full encounter in the communion of God. To fail to understand that children are first of all of God is to start off on the wrong foot. They are persons entrusted to the education, love, tenderness, and care of the parents.

A possessive eagerness, objectification, of the children is as serious a problem as neglect. Both attitudes are a crime against these creatures! What a multitude of crimes are committed against defenseless children because of the inconsistencies of irresponsible parents! Many do not understand that together with the objective of personal love between both spouses stands the objective of abnegated love of both towards their children; of the encouraging, liberating, and reconciling education of their children; and the effective renunciation of all that which in each spouse's personal life and in their marriage, as spouses, impedes the firm and healthy development of these creatures entrusted to them both. To understand this is fundamental, since children who have come into the world form an irrevocable part of the family project, an irrevocable part of the family. All this also forms a part of understanding marriage as a path to holiness.

The faith illumines this whole process of family growth and maturation. Under this light it is necessary to examine one's own attitudes and the family realities that with the help of the compass of faith, of self-examination before what we profess to believe, will show us if we are along the right path, if we are walking towards wells that culminate in an oasis, or if we have deviated from the

route and are headed towards the suffocation of the desert or towards wells where the little remaining water has mixed with the murkiness of the sand forming a watery mud which only an enormous interior thirst is able to drink as a substitute for the limpid spring waters, wells and oasis that are the participation in the love of Christ.

### ***3.4. Fourth Point: Work***

Christian marriage is a consecration to fidelity. It is out of this frame that the personalizing action that forges the human sphere develops. Each member of a marriage should enter this fundamental dimension of human existence committed to never allowing professional aptitudes or achievements, the necessary work for the sustenance of a home, to become obstacles to the fulfillment of the first three of these five steps. In today's culture this is a tough challenge. The pressure of the ideology of "productivity," of professional competition, of consumerism, of even unemployment or underemployment, are factors that contribute to distortions which affect not only the lives of the spouses but the healthy growth and development of the children. The postponement of family life so common today, not attending to it opportunely and effectively, has a more and more negative influence on marriage and the family. That is why, among other concerns, a correct theological vision personal realization and of work is so necessary. In any case, in living the vocation to marriage as a path to holiness one has to give due priority to conjugal and family life. As with the other points there remains so much more to say

### ***3.5 Fifth Point: Apostolate***

It is habit to talk about Church as exterior to oneself. It's a very bad habit. All the baptized are members of the Church, and in her we have rights and duties, but beyond that we are called to love her and feel with her, to love and participate in the mission of the

Church. From conjugal and family love, from a life transformed in prayer, into a constant liturgy which seeks always to give glory to God, from a home which wants to be a Cenacle of Love, goals of the “domestic church” as Vatican II calls it, Christian life must radiate and must do so intensely. Married Christians should turn to apostolate towards others, not as a routine, but with the same enthusiasm that they should have in knowing and loving each other.

It's clear that there is an internal apostolate, with one's spouse, with one's children, everyone as a family, and there is an external one which is the personal radiation of Jesus from the heart of the family, as a testimony that Christian life is possible, that it is a path for personal transformation and for the transformation of the world, a fulfilling and vivifying path. From the heart of the family the Christian life should unfold in a proclamation of the Lord Jesus and in sharing his love with the most needy, as well as in the evangelization of culture and the transformation of the world.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In light of the awareness of all this I would like to propose a demystification of the magnitude of the enterprise of personal holiness, of conjugal and family holiness. The initiative of the vocation to marriage is from God who gives the grace. One must collaborate with it and take the means following a process which helps endure challenges and nourish itself from love, enthusiasm, and affection. Even though the saints on the altars who were married in this life are very few, I am certain that those participating in the Communion of Love are myriad. Countless millions!

The path to marital holiness is not a quick race, but one of perseverance. It's not a question of taking it all at once, but step by step, perseveringly, letting oneself be helped by the Spirit, and imploring the intercession of the ever Virgin Mary and the Holy Guardian, Saint Joseph.

Families are the first line of the Church. Their task is enormous and exciting. These are the “domestic churches” whose mere mention, due to their greatness and their mission, is already overwhelming. That’s why it is good that families, in order to be what they should be, always look to the Family of Nazareth, pray to those who form it, let themselves be impacted by its peace, beauty, and harmony, and, before this great school of faith, discover the extremely beautiful mission of Christian homes that, ardent in love, faith and hope are called to witness to what it is to live in the light and warmth of the tenderness of God to a world which finds itself submerged in the darkness of the culture of death and shivering with cold because it’s slipping away from the shelter of the Church of the Lord, *Ecclesia sua*.