

The Mirror Column
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Bishop William Joensen

A Family of Families

I must admit that when I heard that Pope Francis had declared that not only is this a Year of St. Joseph, but also a Year of the *Amoris Laetitia* (Joy of Love) Family, I sighed a bit and thought to myself, “Can’t we focus on one thing and not stack celebrations on top of each other?” But as I reflected last month, to think of St. Joseph is to be naturally led to think of Holy Mary and her Son. As briskly as the month of May begins with the Feast of St. Joseph the Worker and then yields to a whole month of Marian devotion, I don’t think St. Joseph minds sharing the limelight not only with his spouse and family, but with families of all stripes and situations.

There will be plenty of opportunity to unpack the ‘Joy of Love’ Family throughout this spiritual year that extends until June 26, 2022, when the World Meeting of Families will take place in Rome. Here I get the ball rolling with a few thoughts about our cultural context and how the Church challenges us not to lose sight of some beautiful truths about how God draws us into the fold of his own family of persons.

A family is a natural society in the order of creation and as with all things God creates, is to be recognized and received as good in the midst of all the joys, pains and sorrows that stretch our hearts. “The family images God, who is a communion of persons.” The Risen Christ gathers and restores within families this image and likeness of the Holy Trinity, “the mystery from which all true love flows” (AL n. 71). A couple who is open to love and life is a “true, living icon—not an idol” who reveals that God in his deepest identity is not alone, but a family,” for he has within

himself fatherhood, sonship and the essence of the family, which is love. That love, in the divine family, is the Holy Spirit” (AL n. 11).

The uniqueness of the divine family and the love of the three persons enfolds all families in their own array of present and absent relationships. An ideal family is an abstraction, for we all know hopes that are frustrated and factors that go beyond our natural capacities to remain patient, to tender mercy and forgiveness, to be consistently good for each other. Yet the incursions of unexpected pregnancies, divorce, death, sibling rivalry, narcissism, and erosion of trust that confront us do not mean that we are left to our own devices to determine what a family is apart from our discernment of God’s intentions and invitation.

God desires our peace, happiness and salvation. If we make our own desires and feelings paramount without seeking to gracefully harmonize God’s will with our own, we fashion an artificial solitude for ourselves. We weaken the “glue” of charity and reconciled diversity among members that not only keeps individual families together, but is the foundation upon which greater society depends. Absent reverent love for God and one another, we mask our capacity to be icons, and instead inevitably make ourselves idols.

Noelle Mering is a Catholic author, wife, and mother who reflects on our contemporary “woke” culture that initially might rouse people to acknowledge social injustice and respond accordingly. But “wokeness” goes sour as it traffics in perpetual anger, victimhood, rejection of authority, and the elevation of group ideologies and identity politics at the expense of personal dignity. Agents of wokeness both advocate and celebrate “the dissolution of the family as the primary cell of human society, the rejection of sexual mores that served to protect the health and integrity of the dynamics between men and women, and the uncompromising support for abortion” that leaves women and men alike with wounds that might not even be acknowledged.

The woke culture rejects the sense of any intelligible insight into human nature—including our essential identity as body-soul unities—and instead regards these insights as the perpetuation of antiquated norms that should have long been discarded. Mering observes that for apostles of wokeness, “In order to say that I can be *anything*, I have to in fact mean *nothing*, for to be *something* always excludes being something else.” Further, “The effort to detach ourselves from the meaning of our bodies is exhibited in trans-activism, in the meaningless of sex, and also in the elimination of the significance of male and female difference.” Our autonomy trumps our biology.

In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis emphasizes that “biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated.” The Holy Father alerts us to an ideology of gender that “denies difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences. He further opposes the mindset that human life and parenthood are “separable realities, subject mainly to the wishes of individuals or couples.” The pope cautions us not to isolate our “I” from the organic composite that is our personal reality: “Let us not fall into the sin of trying to replace the Creator. . . . Creation is prior to us and must be received as a gift” (AL n. 56).

The family in which joyful love takes root and flourishes relies on both mothers and fathers. As St. Thomas Aquinas observes, “Mothers, who are those who love the most, seek to love more than to be loved” (AL n. 102). No elaboration of personal rights is complete without including a child’s right “to receive love from a mother and father; both are necessary for a child’s integral and harmonious development.” The complementary contributions of a mother and father allow for “a certain flexibility of roles and responsibilities,” taking into account the concrete circumstances each family experiences. “But the clear and well-defined presence of

both figures, female and male, creates the environment best suited to the growth of the child” (AL nn. 172, 175).

The Church holds up the family as a sanctuary where all members might mature in Christ. We want to be good for individual families and accompany and support them in the Diocese of Des Moines, so that as a local church we can truly be “a family of families” (AL n. 87).

While not a blanket categorization, there are some persons within the Black Lives Matter movement who in their “wokeness” have committed themselves to the dissolution of the nuclear family as a patriarchal relic and Western tool of oppression. How encouraged I was when I heard a dissenting voice at the protest rally on the steps of the Iowa Capitol last June in the wake of George Floyd’s death. State Rep. Ako Abdul-Samad, a Muslim man whose very bearing evokes a sense of God-given authority, stepped up to the microphone and gave a stirring challenge to young men in the crowd, calling them to respect women for who they are and not objectify them on the basis of their bodies. He enjoined them to not live like a bundle of self-centered desires, but to step up and fulfill their responsibilities as a real man should a pregnancy occur in or out-of-wedlock.

In the month when Father’s Day is observed, Rep. Abdul-Samad called biological fathers to become full-fledged, natural and spiritual fathers. He may not have used these words, but he was acknowledging that all social justice is founded on something greater than itself. And if liberty and justice are to be for all, then we need to heed the call to be true to our own humanity, so that we can hope to someday become one family, one people, one nation under God.