

Something Great That Is Love (XII): The Vocation to Marriage

“The beauty of the vocation to form a Christian family brings with it a call to holiness that is not second-class, but first-class.”

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When Saint Josemaria first began to speak about a vocation to marriage, almost a century ago now, uniting these two concepts used to disconcert

people, if not cause them to laugh; it was like speaking about a wingless bird or a square wheel. “You laugh because I tell you that you have a ‘vocation to marriage’? Well, you have just that: a vocation.”[1] In the mentality of that era, and even at times today, “to have a vocation” meant to leave behind what is normal in life in order to be able to serve God and the Church. And for the majority of people, what is normal is to have a family, children, a home, a job, purchases, bills, washing machines, leftovers in the fridge...

This list, as varied and unforeseeable as life itself, not only fits in the “square wheel” of the vocation to marriage, but finds there its best expression. The view of “marriage as a real call from God”[2] stems directly from the conviction that God blesses the normality of family life and wants to “dwell” there. *Thou*

dweltest in the holy place, the praise of Israel, says the Psalm that Jesus prayed on the Cross (Ps 22:4). God, the Holy One, wants to live in the midst of the most normal lives of families. Lives called to become, through the affection expressed there, a praise to Him: to become a “heaven,” despite all the unavoidable defects of this provisional site that is our earthly life.

May you have a good journey

That young man laughed when he heard the words “a vocation to marriage,” but he also became thoughtful. And he was given some specific advice: “Commend yourself to Saint Raphael that he may keep you pure, as he did Tobias, until the end of the way.”[3] Saint Josemaria makes reference here to the only story in the Bible about this Archangel, for whom he had a special affection; so much so that

very early on he entrusted to Saint Raphael his apostolate with young people.^[4] “The book of Tobit is enchanting,” he once said.^[5] Although the entire book is the narration of a journey, it allows us to enter deeply into the lives of two homes, and to witness the birth of a third one. And even the journey itself shares in this atmosphere of a home, with a small detail that artists have not failed to notice down through the centuries. This book is the only place in Scripture where we see a household dog, who accompanies Tobias and Saint Raphael along their entire journey (cf. *Tob* 6:1; 11:4).

When Tobias is about to leave, his father blesses him with these words: *God who dwells in heaven will prosper your way, and may his angel attend you* (*Tob* 5:16). Saint Josemaria paraphrased these words when giving his blessing to those about to undertake a journey: “may the Lord

be on your path, and may his Angel go with you.”^[6] And the true journey, the most decisive one, is the path of life, when husband and wife mutually give themselves to one another in marriage, responding to a dream of God that goes back to the origin of the world.^[7] How important it is, then, to help young people discover, and to rediscover after journeying for many years, “the beauty of the vocation to form a Christian family”^[8]: the call to a holiness that is not second-class, but first-class.

When life truly begins

A person’s vocation is born from a simple discovery that brings with it many consequences: the conviction that the meaning, the truth of our life is not found in living for ourselves, for our own concerns, but for the others. We discover that we have received so much love in our life and

that we are called to do the same: to give love. Only thus will one truly find oneself. To give love, not only in our free moments, to tranquilize our conscience, but to make love the central goal of our life, the center of gravity for all our other concerns.

Before and after his marriage with Sarah, the young man Tobias receives some advice in this regard, with appeals to what is most noble in him. His father Tobit, who sends him on a journey to obtain money for their future (cf. *Tob* 4:2), first wants to pass on to him his most important inheritance, what he has valued most in his own life. *My son, when I die, bury me, and do not neglect your mother. Honor her all the days of your life; do what is pleasing to her, and do not grieve her ... Remember the Lord our God all your days, my son, and refuse to sin or to transgress his commandments ... Do not turn your face away from any poor man,*

and the face of God will not be turned away from you. If you have many possessions, make your gift from them in proportion; if few, do not be afraid to give according to the little you have ... Bless the Lord God on every occasion; ask him that your ways may be made straight and that all your paths and plans may prosper (Tob 4:3-19). Several weeks later Tobias, recently married, is about to begin the return journey to his parents' home, and his new mother-in-law, Edna, makes a parting request: *The Lord of heaven bring you back safely, dear brother, and grant me to see your children by my daughter Sarah, that I may rejoice before the Lord. See, I am entrusting my daughter to you; do nothing to grieve her (Tob 10:12).*

God calls husband and wife to protect one another, to care for one another, to pour out their life for one another: from here stems the secret of their personal fulfilment, which

therefore can never be merely *self*-fulfilment. The deepest meaning of life is to give life. That is what we see in Jesus' life: *I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly* (Jn 10:10). That is also how Saint Joseph and our Lady lived, with the most humble, tender and refined love this world has ever seen, caring for one another, and caring above all for Life made flesh. And that is how God wants his disciples to live, so that wherever we are we radiate his joy, his eagerness for life. This is the nucleus of the meaning of our Christian mission.

“The lack of love and smiling has turned our cities into deserts. So much entertainment, so many things for wasting time, for making laughter, but love is lacking. The smile of a family can overcome this desertification of our cities. This is the victory of family love. No economic and political engineering

can substitute this contribution of families. The Babel project builds lifeless skyscrapers. The Spirit of God instead makes the desert fruitful (cf. *Is 32:15*)."[9]

The deepest meaning of life is to give life. This discovery, which can be made even as an adolescent, but which sometimes is only attained late in life, marks the true passage from childhood to human maturity. We could say that only then does one truly begin to be a person: that only then does life truly begin. For "having great dreams is the sign of life; loving, this is what life means. Loving to the point of being able to give oneself for the beloved. Being able to forget about oneself, this is to be oneself; being able to die for something, this is to live. A person who only thinks about himself is no one, is empty; only a person who can forget about himself, who can give

himself, who can love in a word, is alive.”[10]

The scope of a “yes”

In this light, we see how far removed the vocation to marriage is from “an impulse to self-satisfaction or a mere means to selfish fulfilment of one’s own personality.”[11] Certainly, our personality is only truly developed when we are able to give ourselves to another person. The life of marriage is also the source of many satisfactions and joys; but no one fails to see that it also brings with it problems, demands, deceptions. Yet how easy it is to seek to escape from this less attractive face of love.

We can think here of how some marriage celebrations are planned with great care, sparing no expense, doing everything possible to ensure that it will be an unforgettable experience and worthy of the family’s social position. But then

comes the reality of daily life, the disenchantment that can arise after some months or years, when faced with the imperfections of family life: when problems arise, when one sees more clearly the spouse's defects, and it becomes difficult to talk with one another, to listen to one another, to heal wounds that are opened, to pour out affection. Then one can begin to lose sight of the fact that marriage is "a real call from God," which asks the spouses to truly give themselves, as a father, a mother, a husband, a wife....with a vocation. And this would truly be unfortunate: a family that God wanted to be happy, even amid difficulties and hardships, and that ends up off the path, content to merely "put up with" one another.

The day a man and a woman are married, they answer "yes" to the question about whether they love one another. But the true answer is

only given by their own life: forged in the slow fire of the “forever” of their mutual “yes.” “One always answers the most important questions with one’s whole life. It doesn’t matter what one says, the words one uses. In the end, the answer comes from the deeds of one’s life. Who are you? What do you truly want? The answer comes only from one’s entire life.”[12] And this “yes” of one’s entire life, made a reality once and again each day, becomes ever deeper and more authentic. The unavoidable naiveté that marks the beginning of married life is transformed into a light-filled innocence, without any cynicism: into a “yes, dear” that now knows, but also loves.

The immense depth of this “yes,” irrevocable if love is to be true, is also the reason the Church continues to go against the current in her teachings about the engagement time

and the openness of the spouses to life. Although this stance leads to accusations of being unenlightened and harsh, she insists patiently because she knows that God is calling her to safeguard the truth of human love, especially in its “native place.”[13] In doing so, the Church is not defending an abstract truth, a rule from a manual as it were.

Rather she is protecting the truth of specific lives, of families; she is protecting human relationships from the true deadly sickness: from the venom that subtly works its way in, clothed at first as romance and triumph, until it is suddenly unmasked, perhaps only after a number of years, as what it really is: the selfishness that can trap each spouse in him or herself.

It's true that there is an apparent magnanimity and joy of living in a person who decides: “I'm going to enjoy all that my body can give me,

and share it with whomever wants to join me.” In this approach to life we can hear a clear echo from the first chapters of Genesis: youth is such a savory fruit... why not taste it to the full? Why does God want to deprive me of this sweetness? (cf. *Gen 3:2,6*). Young people today who are seeking to lead a Christian life feel this same attraction, but they see that it is only a mirage, and they want to grasp the truth more deeply. By their effort to keep their love pure, or to regain their innocence if perhaps they have lost it, they are preparing themselves to love without “possessing” the other person, without “consuming” them. In one way or another they ask themselves: with whom am I going to share this eagerness for life that I sense inside? Is this really the right person? Are we going to truly love one another, or only desire one another? They know that with their body they are also going to give their heart, their person, their freedom.

They know that all this only truly fits within a “yes forever,” and they know that they and every person are worthy of a “yes without terms and conditions.” If this decision is missing, they are not ready to make this gift, nor are the others to receive it; it is a gift that would leave them empty inside, although they might discover this only with the passage of time.

The same “logic” underlies the vocation of those who are celibate, and who also want to love God with their body, because they give it to Him day after day. Yes, matrimony and celibacy mutually illumine and need one another, because both of them give expression to a gratuitousness that can only be understood in God’s light, from the self-image God has placed in us, by which we see ourselves as a gift, we see others as a gift, and we realize we are called to give life: to our parents,

children, grandchildren... to everyone.

When Jesus reveals this deep meaning of love, his disciples are perplexed, so much so that He has to tell them: *Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given (Mt 19:11)*. Young people and parents who are trying to lead a Christian life, although they may at times encounter a lack of understanding in others, should realize that deep down many people admire them, although sometimes they can't express exactly why. They admire them because with their sincere love they are giving clear expression to the joy and freedom of God's love, the desire for which each man and woman harbors deep in their heart, "with sighs too deep for words" (*Rom 8:26*).

A heart that doesn't want to suffer

The name Raphael means “God heals.” It means God watches over and cares for each person. The Archangel’s intervention in the lives of Tobit, Anna, Tobias and Sarah is a visible expression of a reality we may often lose sight of: God’s protective care for families, the importance He gives to their success and happiness (cf. *Tob* 12:11-15). God wants to be close to us, although we at times refuse to let Him, because we don’t truly want Him to be close. In the story of the prodigal son, who went off to a *far country* (*Lk* 15:13), we can see not only specific people, but also entire societies and cultures: a world that distances itself from God and thus becomes a hostile place where many families suffer, and sometimes suffer shipwreck. Despite everything, like the father in the parable, God never tires of waiting, and always finds a way to be present in these sometimes tragic realities,

seeking out each person, even when many wounds have to be healed.

The book of Tobit also shows us how God's closeness to and concern for families does not mean being spared from every difficulty, whether internal or external. Tobit, for example, is a righteous man, even heroic, and yet God allows him to become blind (cf. *Tob* 2:10). His wife as a result has to try to find income for the family, and one day, along with her salary she is given a kid. Tobit, perhaps in a bad mood because of his blindness, thinks his wife has stolen the kid and unintentionally causes a commotion in the family. As Tobit himself tells us: *But I did not believe her, and told her to return it to the owners; and I blushed for her. Then she replied to me, "Where are your charities and your righteous deeds? You seem to know everything!"* (*Tob* 2:14). Faced with this harsh response, Tobit is

filled with grief, and begins to weep and pray, asking God to take him to be with Him (cf. *Tob* 3:1-6).

Nevertheless, Tobit continues doing all he can to make his wife happy, although he isn't always successful. Thus, for example, when Tobias is already on his journey back home, now happily married and with the money his father had asked him to recover, his mother Anna, who right from the start was opposed to Tobias making the trip, fears the worst: *The lad has perished; his long delay proves it ... Am I not distressed, my child, that I let you go, you who are the light of my eyes?* Tobias, who is also worried, tries to reassure her: *Be still and stop worrying; he is well.* And Anna replies: *Be still and stop deceiving me; my child has perished.* But with a mother's inconsistent heart, she secretly continues hoping for his return: *And she went out every day to the road by which they had left;*

she ate nothing in the daytime, and throughout the nights she never stopped mourning for her son Tobias (Tob 10:1-7).

It is moving to see how, over the centuries, the daily challenges faced by families haven't changed much. Misunderstandings, failures to communicate, worries about the children...“We would have a poor idea of marriage and of human affection if we were to think that love and joy come to an end when faced with such difficulties.”[14] The initial process of falling in love—which provides the strength needed to dream of forming a family—tends to cover over the defects of the other person. But a few weeks of living under the same roof are enough to realize that no one arrives perfect for the wedding day, and that therefore married life needs to be a path of constant conversion for both spouses, working together as a team.

As long as husband and wife continue giving one another a new opportunity each day, their hearts will grow each day more beautiful, even though some of their limitations will still remain, and even become crystalized.

An old song says: “A heart that doesn’t want to suffer, spends its entire life free of loves.”[15] And C.S. Lewis wrote in this regard: “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness.”[16] Certainly, newlyweds don’t encounter the same danger Tobias and Sarah did, who have to be ready to face the danger

of death on their wedding night, through the malice of an evil spirit (cf. *Tob* 6:14-15; 7:11). Yet the devil of selfishness—a deadly enemy—constantly threatens all families, with the temptation to “make mountains” out of “the unimportant little frictions that selfishness could magnify out of proportion.”[17]

Hence how important it is for husband and wife to speak clearly, even when this involves broaching difficult topics, and not entrench themselves bit by bit behind a high wall: they need to rebuild, once and again, the sentiments that make love possible. Saint Josemaria said that “quarrels, so long as they don’t happen often, are also a proof of love, and they are almost a need.”[18] Water needs to flow freely, since if it becomes stagnant it begins to cover over with algae. Therefore it is also very important that parents “find time to spend with their

children, to talk with them. They are the most important thing—more important than business or work or rest. In their conversations, parents should make an effort to listen, to pay attention, to understand, to recognize the fact that their children are sometimes partly right—or even completely right—in some of their rebellious attitudes."[19]

And above all, husband and wife need to talk with God, asking Him to grant them his light: *Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path* (Ps 119:105). Although the book of Tobit never tells us of any disagreements between Tobias and Sarah, we can easily imagine these taking place, like between Tobit and Anna, and like all families. But we can also imagine them closely united right to the end of their life, because we see their marriage strengthened through intimate union with God: *Blessed art thou, O God of our fathers,*

and blessed be thy holy and glorious name for ever, Tobias prays on his wedding night. Grant that I may find mercy and may grow old together with her (Tob 8:5,7).

Saint John Paul II, “the Pope of the family,”[20] once compared the spousal love in the Song of Songs to the love between Tobias and Sarah. “The spouses in the Song of Songs, with ardent words, declare to each other their human love. The newlyweds in the book of Tobit ask God that they be able to respond to love.”[21] By bringing together these two descriptions of married love, he wanted to raise the question: which of the two reflects it better. The answer is easy: both. The day when two hearts find one another, their vocation takes on a fresh and youthful face, like the spouses in the Song. But this face recovers its

youthfulness each time that, throughout their life, the two of them welcome anew their calling *to respond to love*. And then, yes, this love becomes as strong as death.[22]

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[1] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 27.

[2] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 30. Cf. nos. 22-30, comprising the homily “Marriage: A Christian Vocation.”

[3] *The Way*, no. 27. Cf. also no. 360.

[4] Cf. Saint Josemaria, *Apuntes íntimos*, no. 1697 (10 October 1932), in Andres Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. 1, Scepter Publishers, Princeton, 2001, p.392.

[5] Saint Josemaria, notes from a meditation, 12 October 1947, in *While He Spoke to Us on the Way*, p. 31.

[6] Cf. *Ibid.* “This is the formula I chose as the blessing for a journey, adding to it an invocation to our Lady: *Beata Maria intercedente, bene ambules: et Dominus sit in itinere tuo, et Angelus eius comitetur tecum* [Through our Lady’s intercession, may you have a good journey: and may the Lord be on your path, and may his Angel go with you].”

[7] Saint John Paul II called marriage “the primordial sacrament” (cf. General audience, 20 October 1982 and 23 May 1984).

[8] Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral Letter*, 14 February 2017, no. 25.

[9] Francis, General audience, 2 September 2015.

[10] Joan Maragall, “Elogio del vivir” in *Vida escrita*, Madrid, Aguilar, 1959, p. 105.

[11] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 42.

[12] Sandor Marai, *El último encuentro*, Salamandra, Barcelona, 2007, p. 107.

[13] Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral Letter*, 4 June 2017.

[14] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 24

[15] “A los árboles altos,” a popular song Saint Josemaría alludes to in *The Way*, no. 145.

[16] C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, ch. 6.

[17] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 23.

[18] *Ibid.*, no. 26.

[19] *Ibid.*, no. 27.

[20] Francis, Canonization Homily, 27 April 2014.

[21] Saint John Paul II, General Audience, 27 June 1984.

[22] Cf. *Ibid.*, and *Song* 8:6.

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