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"Holy Spouses, Holy Families"

Reflections on the final days of the Synod on the Family by Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles. "How many holy spouses there are, hidden saints of the everyday, in every time and every place in the Church."

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**Holy Spouses, Holy Families:
Reflections on the Synod's Final
Days**

by Archbishop Jose H. Gomez

As Synod-2015 began its final week of work, Pope Francis canonised a married couple, Louis and Zélie Martin, whose nine children included the Doctor of the Church, St Thérèse of Lisieux.

Louis and Zélie led a humble, hidden life. It was rooted in the rhythms of daily Mass and everyday duties – earning a living, making meals and doing the housework, teaching the children, serving in the community and simply enjoying time together as a family. The couple knew love and joy and also suffering and sadness – four of their children died as infants.

In his homily on Sunday, Pope Francis called them “holy spouses.”

Saints Louis and Zélie are not rarities. How many holy spouses there are, hidden saints of the everyday, in every time and every place in the Church. There are holy spouses and holy families in every

part of the world today – ordinary men and women trying to live faithfully by the Church’s teachings and the grace of her sacraments.

This is what the Synod on the Family is meant to be all about – helping spouses in their vocations as husbands and wives, helping them to meet the challenges they confront in society, inspiring them to live out God’s beautiful plan for their lives.

In the media coverage of the Synod, we can be tempted to think that the Church’s doctrines and practices are a kind of political “policy” or a set of “positions” on issues. But the truth is that the Catholic faith is not programme or a set of rules.

Catholicism is a vision of creation, a vision of the human person and the human family, a vision that is grand and transcendent. Everything in the Church – all our teachings, practices and disciplines – flows from this

vision, which is given to us by God in the Scriptures and the Church's living Tradition.

Pope Francis has said that in thinking about the family, we must be “led by the Word of God, on which rests the foundation of the holy edifice of the family, the domestic Church and the family of God.” This is true. And as we enter this final week of Synod, I think it is important for us to keep this “foundation” in mind, to try to see God's vision for the family more clearly and to understand how important the family is for the Church's future and the future of civilization.

God's dream

St Paul called marriage a “great mystery.” This mystery is written into the pages of sacred Scripture from beginning to end – from the marriage of the first man and woman at creation to the cosmic

wedding feast of Christ and his Bride when the new heavens and earth come and time is no more. Pope Francis speaks of the Creator's design in terms of wonder and awe. At last year's extraordinary consistory, he invoked "God's magnificent plan for the family." At the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia and again in his homily opening the current synod, he called marriage "God's dream for his beloved creation." Jesus Christ revealed this dream by coming into the world in a human family. The Holy Family of Nazareth shows us that every family is meant to be an "icon" of God, an image of the Holy Trinity in the world.

I always remember the beautiful words of St John Paul II at Puebla, Mexico, at the beginning of his pontificate: "Our God in his deepest mystery is not a solitude but a family, since he has in himself fatherhood,

sonship and the essence of the family, which is love.”

This is God’s plan for the human family. Every family is called to be a “domestic church” reflecting the communion of love in the Trinity. Every married couple is given a vocation — to live their love forever in a mutual and complete gift of self; to renew the face of the earth with children, who are the fruits of their love and the precious love of our Creator. Married love is forever and cannot be dissolved because it is the sign of God’s own covenant with creation.

The Church’s mission is to continue God’s “family plan” for creation – to call men and women from every nation and people to form a single family of God, united in his Son, Jesus. So that is why the Church will always take these matters of human sexuality, marriage, family and

children so seriously. That is why the litany of the Church's great martyrs includes countless men and women who died defending the Church's doctrines and practices – Agnes and Cecilia in ancient Rome; Thomas More and Charles Lwanga; the Franciscans martyred in Georgia during the evangelisation of the New World. And there were many more.

The family crisis

Some of my brother bishops have remarked on the sense of urgency – some even call it anxiety – that has been felt during this Synod. The somber mood is reflected in the working document that has formed the basis for our discussions during these past three weeks. Pope Francis has spoken often of the profound cultural crisis facing the family. And there is a sense in this Synod that the family “as we know it” is in danger of disappearing – threatened by forces

that are economic, cultural and ideological.

At the root of the family crisis is a crisis of confidence in God – a loss of the sense that he is our Father and Creator, and that he has a plan, a “dream” for his creation, a plan for our lives. The family today is threatened by the same “anthropocentric” and “technocratic” mentality that Pope Francis warns about in *Laudato Si'*, his encyclical on creation. This mentality rejects the “realities” of creation and human nature. Everything – nature, the human body and mind, social institutions – is seen as so much “raw material” to be “engineered” using technology, medicine, even law and public policy. What the Pope calls the “technocratic paradigm” underlies the existential threats that confront human life and the family today – from artificial contraception and embryonic experimentation, to

the surgical manipulations of femininity and masculinity required for “transgenderism,” to the redefinition of marriage and the forced sterilisation and abortion policies prevalent in some parts of the world.

The way forward

In confronting this broad cultural crisis of the family, the Church needs to proclaim once more the beautiful truth about the human person and God’s loving plan for creation and the family. “The best way to restore men and women to their rightful place ... is to speak once more of the figure of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world,” Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si’*. At the centre of our Father’s plan for the world, we find the married couple and the family. That is why the Church cannot allow marriage and family to be reduced to cultural

constructs or arbitrary living arrangements. Because if we lose the family, we lose God's plan for our lives and for the world.

Marriage and the family are gifts from the Creator that are "written into" the order of his creation and expressed in the bodily differences of men and women and their vocation to a communion of love that is faithful for life and fruitful in creating new life. Pope Francis affirms this in *Laudato Si'* and he emphasised it again during his year-long catechesis on the family. The human person is God's "masterpiece," created body and soul in his image and likeness, the Pope said. The natural differences between men and women and their "complementarity" stand at the "summit of divine creation," and order the couple to "communion and generation, always in the image and likeness of God."

These basic truths of creation are the source for everything that the Church believes, teaches and practices about marriage and family. The Church is called to proclaim these truths to the world in all their fullness and in all their beauty. We are called to do everything that we can to support those couples and families who are trying to live these truths – to be “holy spouses” and “holy families.” The Church is also called to reach out with tenderness to those who are having trouble understanding and living these truths. But Pope Francis has also urged us in strong words not to sacrifice the truths of creation in a vain effort to “please the people” or to make the Church’s teachings sound less demanding. At the end of the extraordinary synod last year he cautioned against “a destructive tendency ... that in the name of a deceptive mercy binds the wounds without first curing them and

treating them; that treats the symptoms and not the causes and the roots.” This is always a natural temptation when we are faced with human weakness and misunderstanding. But the Pope reminds us that kindness and compassion can never be separated from the truth of God’s plan. A person’s conscience is sacred. But our conscience is only reliable if it is formed according to the truth that God has written into our hearts and the loving plan he has for our lives.

The words we speak in mercy must always be the truth, or our words are not merciful at all, just sentimental feelings. Telling people what they want to hear will never do them any good, unless what we are saying is the truth they need to know.

All of us in the Church, in these difficult times, are called to accompany people, to meet them

where they are at and to walk with them in charity and tenderness and compassion. But the journey of the Christian life is always a journey of conversion. Our “destination” is not where *we* want to go, but where God wants to lead us.

A moment for mission

So as we enter these final days of the Synod, I find myself turning to our newest saints. Not only the holy spouses Saints Louis and Zélie Martin. But also our newest American saint, St Junípero Serra, who blazed the trails of holiness in the New World.

I believe that all of us in the Church need a new missionary confidence and courage for the times we are living in. In fact, we are living in a time of hope, a new missionary moment – a time when the Church has a great opportunity for the new evangelisation of our continents and

the world. Every day, as bishops from around the world gather in this Synod Hall, we are witnessing the reality that the Gospel has been inculturated in “every nation under heaven.” This has been striking for me, this experience of the universal Church: to realise that the Church today is able to truly pray, teach and evangelise in one voice – as one family of God, drawn from every nation, people and language, united in our faith in the Gospel and our communion with the Holy Father in Rome.

With the unity of our doctrine and practice, and the rich diversity of our local traditions of popular piety, the Church has tremendous resources to resist pressures and worldly powers and to proclaim the Gospel to a new generation.

We need to challenge the “orthodoxies” and the

“anthropology” of our culture. We need to find creative, positive ways to proclaim God as Creator and to show the beauty of his plan for the human person and the family.

Counting on the intercession of the Holy Family of Nazareth, my prayer in this final week is that all of us in the Church will stay united in our apostolic desire to be missionary disciples. And that we will use this new moment to carry the beauty of God’s plan for our lives and his original dream for creation – to the ends of the earth.

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