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"Embrace your vocation with faithful love"

Homily of Pope Francis on 25 June at the Mass of Thanksgiving for the 10th World Meeting of Families, which closes the Year of the Family in the Church.

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In this Tenth World Meeting of Families, it is now the time for *thanksgiving*. Today we bring before God with gratitude – as if in a great

offertory procession – all the fruits that the Holy Spirit has sown in you, dear families. Some of you have taken part in the moments of reflection and sharing here in the Vatican; others have led them and participated in them in the various dioceses, creating a kind of vast “constellation”. I think of the rich variety of experiences, plans and dreams, as well as concerns and uncertainties, which you have shared with one another. Let us now present all of these to the Lord and ask him to sustain you with his strength and love. You are fathers, mothers and children, grandparents, uncles and aunts. You are adults and children, young and old. Each of you brings a different experience of family, but all of you have one hope and prayer: that God will bless and keep your families and all the families of the world.

Saint Paul, in today's second reading, spoke to us about freedom. Freedom is one of the most cherished ideals and goals of the people of our time. Everyone wants to be free, free of conditioning and limitations, free of every kind of "prison", cultural, social or economic. Yet, how many people lack the greatest freedom of all, which is interior freedom! The greatest freedom is interior freedom. The Apostle reminds us Christians that interior freedom is above all a gift, when he says: "For freedom Christ has set us free!" (*Gal 5:1*). Freedom is something we receive. All of us are born with many forms of interior and exterior conditioning, and especially with a tendency to selfishness, to making ourselves the centre of everything and being concerned only with our own interests. This is the slavery from which Christ has set us free. Lest there be any mistake, Saint Paul tells us that the freedom given to us by

God is not the false and empty freedom of the world, which in reality is “an opportunity for self-indulgence” (*Gal 5:13*). No, the freedom that Christ gained at the price of his own blood is completely directed to love, so that – as the Apostle tells us again today – “through love you may become slaves of one another” (*ibid.*).

All of you married couples, in building your family, made, with the help of Christ’s grace, a courageous decision: *not to use freedom for yourselves, but to love the persons that God has put at your side*. Instead of living like little islands, you became “slaves of one another”. That is how freedom is exercised in the family. There are no “planets” or “satellites”, each travelling on its own orbit. The family is the place of encounter, of sharing, of going forth from ourselves in order to welcome others and stand beside them. The

family is *the first place where we learn to love*. We must never forget that the family is the first place where we learn to love.

Brothers and sisters, even as we reaffirm this with profound conviction, we also know full well that it is not always the case, for any number of reasons and a variety of situations. And so, in praising the beauty of the family, we also feel compelled, today more than ever, to *defend the family*. Let us not allow the family to be poisoned by the toxins of selfishness, individualism, today's culture of indifference and culture of waste, and as a result lose its very DNA, which is the spirit of acceptance and service. The mark of the family is acceptance and the spirit of service within the family.

The relationship between the prophets Elijah and Elisha, as presented in the first reading,

reminds us of the *relationship between generations*, the “passing on of witness” from parents to children. In today’s world, that relationship is not an easy one, and frequently it is a cause for concern. Parents fear that children will not be able to find their way amid the complexity and confusion of our societies, where everything seems chaotic and precarious, and in the end lose their way. This fear makes some parents anxious and others overprotective. At times, it even ends up thwarting the desire to bring new lives into the world.

We do well to reflect on the relationship between Elijah and Elisha. Elijah, at a moment of crisis and fear for the future, receives from God the command to anoint Elisha as his successor. God makes Elijah realize that the world does not end with him, and commands him to pass on his mission to another. That is the

meaning of the gesture described in the text: Elijah throws his mantle over the shoulders of Elisha, and from that moment the disciple takes the place of the master, in order to carry on his prophetic ministry in Israel. God thus shows that he *has confidence in the young Elisha*. The elderly Elijah passes the position, the prophetic vocation to Elisha. He trusts the young person, he trusts in the future. In this gesture, there is hope, and with hope, he passes the baton.

How important it is for parents to reflect on God's way of acting! God loves young people, but that does not mean that he preserves them from all risk, from every challenge and from all suffering. God is not anxious and overprotective. Think about it: God is not anxious and overprotective; on the contrary, *he trusts young people and he calls each of them to scale the heights of life and*

of mission. We think of the child Samuel, the adolescent David or the young Jeremiah; above all, we think of that young sixteen or seventeen year old girl who conceived Jesus, the Virgin Mary. He trusts a young girl. Dear parents, the word of God shows us the way: not to shield our children from the slightest hardship and suffering, but to try to communicate to them a passion for life, to arouse in them the desire to discover their vocation and embrace the great mission that God has in mind for them. It was precisely that discovery which made Elisha courageous and determined; it made him become an adult. The decision to leave his parents behind and to sacrifice the oxen is a sign that Elisha realized that it was now “up to him”, that it was time to accept God’s call and to carry on the work of his master. This he would do courageously until the very end of his life. Dear parents, if you help your children to discover

and to accept their vocation, you will see that they too will be “gripped” by this mission; and they will find the strength they need to confront and overcome the difficulties of life.

I would like to add that, for educators, the best way to help others to follow their vocation is to *embrace our own vocation with faithful love*. That is what the disciples saw Jesus do. Today’s Gospel shows us an emblematic moment when Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem” (*Lk 9:51*), knowing well that there he would be condemned and put to death. On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus met with rejection from the inhabitants of Samaria, which aroused the indignant reaction of James and John, but he accepted that rejection, because it was part of his vocation. He met rejection from the very start, first in Nazareth – here we think of that day in the synagogue of

Nazareth (cf. *Mt* 13: 53-58) – now in Samaria, and he was about to be rejected in Jerusalem. Jesus accepted it all, for he came to take upon himself our sins. In a similar way, nothing can be more encouraging for children than to see their parents experiencing marriage and family life as a mission, demonstrating fidelity and patience despite difficulties, moments of sadness and times of trial. What Jesus encountered in Samaria takes place in every Christian vocation, including that of the family. We all know that there are moments when we have to take upon ourselves the resistance, opposition, rejection and misunderstanding born of human hearts and, with the grace of Christ, transform these into acceptance of others and gratuitous love.

Immediately after that episode, which in some way shows us Jesus' own "vocation", the Gospel presents

three other callings on the way to Jerusalem, represented by three aspiring disciples of Jesus. The first is told not to seek a fixed home, a secure situation, in following Jesus, for the master “has nowhere to place his head” (*Lk 9:58*). To follow Jesus means to set out on a never-ending “trip” with him through the events of life. How true this is for you married couples! By accepting the call to marriage and family, you too have left the “nest” and set out on a trip, without knowing beforehand where exactly it would lead, and what new situations, unexpected events and surprises, some painful, would eventually lie in store for you. That is what it means to journey with the Lord. It is a lively, unpredictable and marvellous voyage of discovery. Let us remember that every disciple of Jesus finds his or her repose in doing God’s will each day, wherever it may lead.

A second disciple is told not to “go back to bury his dead” (vv. 59-60). This has nothing to do with disobeying the fourth commandment, which remains ever valid and is a commandment that makes us holy. Rather, it is a summons to obey, above all, the first commandment: to love God above all things. The same thing happens with the third disciple, who is called to follow Christ resolutely and with an undivided heart, without “looking back”, not even to say farewell to the members of his family (cf. vv. 61-62).

Dear families, you too have been asked not to have other priorities, not to “look back”, to miss your former life, your former freedom, with its deceptive illusions. Life becomes “fossilized” when it is not open to the newness of God's call and pines for the past. Missing the past and not being open to the newness that God sends always “fossilizes” us;

it hardens us and does not make us more human. When Jesus calls, also in the case of marriage and family life, he asks us to keep looking ahead, and he always precedes us on the way. *He always precedes us* in love and service. And those who follow him will not be disappointed!

Dear brothers and sisters, providentially, the readings of today's liturgy speak of vocation, which is the theme of this Tenth World Meeting of Families: "*Family Love: a Vocation and a Path to Holiness*". Strengthened by those words of life, I encourage you to take up with renewed conviction the journey of family love, sharing with all the members of your families the joy of this calling. It is not an easy journey: there will be dark moments, moments of difficulty in which we will think that it is all over. May the love you share with one another be always open, directed outwards,

capable of “touching” the weak and wounded, the frail in body and the frail in spirit, and all whom you meet along the way. For love, including family love, is purified and strengthened whenever it is shared with others.

Betting on family love is courageous: it takes courage to marry. We see many young people who do not have the courage to marry and many times mothers say to me: “Do something, speak to my son, he will not marry, he is thirty-seven years old!” – “But, madam, stop ironing his shirts, start to send him away little by little so that he will leave the nest”. Family love pushes the children to fly; it teaches them to fly and pushes them to do so. It is not possessive: it is always about freedom. In the moments of difficulty and crisis – every family has them – please do not take the easy way: “I am going home to mommy”. No, move forward

with this courageous bet. There will be difficult moments, there will be tough moments, but always move forward. Your husband, your wife, has that spark of love that you felt in the beginning: release it from within and rediscover love. This will help in moments of crisis.

The Church is *with* you; indeed, the Church is *in* you! For the Church was born of a family, the Holy Family of Nazareth, and is made up mostly of families. May the Lord help you each day to persevere in unity, peace, joy, and in moments of difficulty, that faithful perseverance, which makes us live better and shows everyone that God is love and communion of life.

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