

Contemplation for couples

Words from

Amoris Laetitia

Pope Francis



In his recent exhortation on the “Joy of Love” Pope Francis explores many aspects of marriage and family life. As part of it he reflects on St Paul’s letter to the Corinthians where he explores the meaning of love.

Whether we are newlyweds or enjoying reflecting on many years of marriage we can take some time as a couple, to read one of the following texts together and spend some time reflecting on the reality of our married lives.

We can ask ourselves...What does that mean for me as an individual? What about as a spouse?

Perhaps spend some time discussing this together to enrich your relationship and open up some opportunity to nurture your marriage.

LOVE IN MARRIAGE.

We cannot encourage a path of fidelity and mutual self-giving without encouraging the growth, strengthening and deepening of conjugal and family love. Indeed, the grace of the sacrament of marriage is intended before all else “to perfect the couple’s love”. Here too we can say that, “even if I have faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor 13:2-3). The word “love”, however, is commonly used and often misused.

Our daily love

In a lyrical passage of Saint Paul, we see some of the features of true love: “Love is patient, love is kind, love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor 13:4-7). Love is experienced and nurtured in the daily life of couples and their children. It is helpful to think more deeply about the meaning of this Pauline text and its relevance for the concrete situation of every family.

Love is patient.

The first word used is makrothyméi. This does not simply have to do with “enduring all things”, because we find that idea expressed at the end of the seventh verse. Its meaning is clarified by the Greek translation of the Old Testament, where we read that God is “slow to anger” (Ex 34:6; Num 14:18). It refers, then, to the quality of one who does not act on impulse and avoids giving offense.

We find this quality in the God of the Covenant, who calls us to imitate him also within the life of the family. Saint Paul’s texts using this word need to be read in the light of the Book of Wisdom (cf. 11:23; 12:2, 15-18), which extols God’s restraint, as leaving open the possibility of repentance, yet insists on his power, as revealed in his acts of mercy. God’s “patience”, shown in his mercy towards sinners, is a sign of his real power.

Being patient does not mean letting ourselves be constantly mistreated, tolerating physical aggression or allowing other people to use us. We encounter problems whenever we think that relationships or people ought to be perfect, or when we put ourselves at the centre and expect things to turn out our way. Then everything makes us impatient, everything makes us react aggressively. Unless we cultivate patience, we will always find excuses for responding angrily. We will end up incapable of living together, antisocial, unable to control our impulses, and our families will become battlegrounds. That is

why the word of God tells us: “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you, with all malice” (Eph 4:31).

Patience takes root when I recognize that other people also have a right to live in this world, just as they are. It does not matter if they hold me back, if they unsettle my plans, or annoy me by the way they act or think, or if they are not everything I want them to be. Love always has an aspect of deep compassion that leads to accepting the other person as part of this world, even when he or she acts differently than I would like.

Love is at the service of others.

The next word that Paul uses is *chrestéuetai*. The word is used only here in the entire Bible. It is derived from *chrestós*: a good person, one who shows his goodness by his deeds. Here, in strict parallelism with the preceding verb, it serves as a complement. Paul wants to make it clear that “patience” is not a completely passive attitude, but one accompanied by activity, by a dynamic and creative interaction with others. The word indicates that love benefits and helps others. For this reason it is translated as “kind”; love is ever ready to be of assistance.

Throughout the text, it is clear that Paul wants to stress that love is more than a mere feeling. Rather, it should be understood along the lines of the Hebrew verb “to love”; it is “to do good”. As Saint Ignatius of Loyola said, “Love is shown more by deeds than by words”.

It thus shows its fruitfulness and allows us to experience the happiness of giving, the nobility and grandeur of spending ourselves unstintingly, without asking to be repaid, purely for the pleasure of giving and serving

Love is not jealous

Saint Paul goes on to reject as contrary to love an attitude expressed by the verb zelói –jealous or envious. This means that love has no room for discomfiture at another person's good fortune (cf. Acts 7:9; 17:5). Envy is a form of sadness provoked by another's prosperity; it shows that we are not concerned for the happiness of others but only with our own well-being. Whereas love makes us rise above ourselves, envy closes us in on ourselves. True love values the other person's achievements. It does not see him or her as a threat. It frees us from the sour taste of envy. It recognizes that everyone has different gifts and a unique path in life. So it strives to discover its own road to happiness, while allowing others to find theirs.

In a word, love means fulfilling the last two commandments of God's Law: "You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbour's" (Ex 20:17). Love inspires a sincere esteem for every human being and the recognition of his or her own right to happiness. I love this person, and I see him or her with the eyes of God, who gives us everything "for our enjoyment" (1 Tim 6:17). As a result, I feel a deep sense of happiness and peace. This same deeply rooted love also leads me to reject the injustice whereby some possess too much and others too little. It moves me to find ways of

helping society's outcasts to find a modicum of joy. That is not envy, but the desire for equality

Love is not boastful

The following word, *perpereúetai*, denotes vainglory, the need to be haughty, pedantic and somewhat pushy. Those who love not only refrain from speaking too much about themselves, but are focused on others; they do not need to be the centre of attention. The word that comes next – *physioutai* – is similar, indicating that love is not arrogant. Literally, it means that we do not become “puffed up” before others. It also points to something more subtle: an obsession with showing off and a loss of a sense of reality. Such people think that, because they are more “spiritual” or “wise”, they are more important than they really are. Paul uses this verb on other occasions, as when he says that “knowledge puffs up”, whereas “love builds up” (1 Cor 8:1). Some think that they are important because they are more knowledgeable than others; they want to lord it over them. Yet what really makes us important is a love that understands, shows concern, and embraces the weak. Elsewhere the word is used to criticize those who are “inflated” with their own importance (cf. 1 Cor 4:18) but in fact are filled more with empty words than the real “power” of the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 4:19).

It is important for Christians to show their love by the way they treat family members who are less knowledgeable about the faith, weak or less sure in their convictions. At times the opposite occurs: the supposedly mature believers within the family become unbearably arrogant. Love, on the

other hand, is marked by humility; if we are to understand, forgive and serve others from the heart, our pride has to be healed and our humility must increase. Jesus told his disciples that in a world where power prevails, each tries to dominate the other, but “it shall not be so among you” (Mt 20:26). The inner logic of Christian love is not about importance and power; rather, “whoever would be first among you must be your slave” (Mt 20:27). In family life, the logic of domination and competition about who is the most intelligent or powerful destroys love. Saint Peter’s admonition also applies to the family: “Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility towards one another, for ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble’” (1 Pet

Love is not rude

To love is also to be gentle and thoughtful, and this is conveyed by the next word, *aschemonéi*. It indicates that love is not rude or impolite; it is not harsh. Its actions, words and gestures are pleasing and not abrasive or rigid. Love abhors making others suffer. Courtesy “is a school of sensitivity and disinterestedness” which requires a person “to develop his or her mind and feelings, learning how to listen, to speak and, at certain times, to keep quiet”. It is not something that a Christian may accept or reject.

As an essential requirement of love, “every human being is bound to live agreeably with those around him”. Every day, “entering into the life of another, even when that person already has a part to play in our life, demands the sensitivity and restraint which can renew trust and respect. Indeed, the deeper love is, the more it calls for respect for the other’s freedom and the ability to wait until the other opens the door to his or her heart”.

To be open to a genuine encounter with others, “a kind look” is essential. This is incompatible with a negative attitude that readily points out other people’s shortcomings while overlooking one’s own. A kind look helps us to see beyond our own limitations, to be patient and to cooperate with others, despite our differences. Loving kindness builds bonds, cultivates relationships, creates new networks of integration and knits a firm social fabric. In this way, it grows ever stronger, for without a sense of belonging we cannot

sustain a commitment to others; we end up seeking our convenience alone and life in common becomes impossible. Antisocial persons think that others exist only for the satisfaction of their own needs. Consequently, there is no room for the gentleness of love and its expression. Those who love are capable of speaking words of comfort, strength, consolation, and encouragement. These were the words that Jesus himself spoke: "Take heart, my son!" (Mt 9:2); "Great is your faith!" (Mt 15:28); "Arise!" (Mk 5:41); "Go in peace" (Lk 7:50); "Be not afraid" (Mt 14:27).

These are not words that demean, sadden, anger or show scorn. In our families, we must learn to imitate Jesus' own gentleness in our way of speaking to one another

Love is generous

We have repeatedly said that to love another we must first love ourselves. Paul's hymn to love, however, states that love "does not seek its own interest", nor "seek what is its own". This same idea is expressed in another text: "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil 2:4).

The Bible makes it clear that generously serving others is far more noble than loving ourselves. Loving ourselves is only important as a psychological prerequisite for being able to love others: "If a man is mean to himself, to whom will he be generous? No one is meaner than the man who is grudging to himself" (Sir 14:5-6).

Saint Thomas Aquinas explains that "it is more proper to charity to desire to love than to desire to be loved"; indeed, "mothers, who are those who love the most, seek to love more than to be loved". Consequently, love can transcend and overflow the demands of justice, "expecting nothing in return" (Lk 6:35), and the greatest of loves can lead to "laying down one's life" for another (cf. Jn 15:13). Can such generosity, which enables us to give freely and fully, really be possible? Yes, because it is demanded by the Gospel: "You received without pay, give without pay" (Mt 10:8)

Love is not irritable or resentful

If the first word of Paul's hymn spoke of the need for a patience that does not immediately react harshly to the weaknesses and faults of others, the word he uses next – *paroxýnetai* – has to do more with an interior indignation provoked by something from without. It refers to a violent reaction within, a hidden irritation that sets us on edge where others are concerned, as if they were troublesome or threatening and thus to be avoided. To nurture such interior hostility helps no one. It only causes hurt and alienation. Indignation is only healthy when it makes us react to a grave injustice; when it permeates our attitude towards others it is harmful.

The Gospel tells us to look to the log in our own eye (cf. Mt 7:5). Christians cannot ignore the persistent admonition of God's word not to nurture anger: "Do not be overcome by evil" (Rm 12:21). "Let us not grow weary in doing good" (Gal 6:9). It is one thing to sense a sudden surge of hostility and another to give into it, letting it take root in our hearts: "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Eph 4:26).

My advice is never to let the day end without making peace in the family. "And how am I going to make peace? By getting down on my knees? No! Just by a small gesture, a little something, and harmony within your family will be restored. Just a little caress, no words are necessary. But do not let the day end without making peace in your family".

Our first reaction when we are annoyed should be one of heartfelt blessing, asking God to bless, free and heal that person. “On the contrary bless, for to this you have been called, that you may obtain a blessing” (1 Pet 3:9). If we must fight evil, so be it; but we must always say “no” to violence in the home.

Love forgives

Once we allow ill will to take root in our hearts, it leads to deep resentment. The phrase *ou logízetai to kakón* means that love “takes no account of evil”; “it is not resentful”. The opposite of resentment is forgiveness, which is rooted in a positive attitude that seeks to understand other people’s weaknesses and to excuse them. As Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34). Yet we keep looking for more and more faults, imagining greater evils, presuming all kinds of bad intentions, and so resentment grows and deepens. Thus, every mistake or lapse on the part of a spouse can harm the bond of love and the stability of the family. Something is wrong when we see every problem as equally serious; in this way, we risk being unduly harsh with the failings of others. The just desire to see our rights respected turns into a thirst for vengeance rather than a reasoned defence of our dignity.

When we have been offended or let down, forgiveness is possible and desirable, but no one can say that it is easy. The truth is that “family communion can only be preserved and perfected through a great spirit of sacrifice. It requires, in fact, a ready and generous openness of each and all to understanding, to forbearance, to pardon, to reconciliation. There is no family that does not know how selfishness, discord, tension and conflict violently attack and at times mortally wound its own communion: hence there arise the many and varied forms of division in family life”.

Today we recognize that being able to forgive others implies the liberating experience of understanding and forgiving ourselves. Often our mistakes, or criticism we have received from loved ones, can lead to a loss of self-esteem. We become distant from others, avoiding affection and fearful in our interpersonal relationships. Blaming others becomes falsely reassuring. We need to learn to pray over our past history, to accept ourselves, to learn how to live with our limitations, and even to forgive ourselves, in order to have this same attitude towards others.

All this assumes that we ourselves have had the experience of being forgiven by God, justified by his grace and not by our own merits. We have known a love that is prior to any of our own efforts, a love that constantly opens doors, promotes and encourages. If we accept that God's love is unconditional, that the Father's love cannot be bought or sold, then we will become capable of showing boundless love and forgiving others even if they have wronged us. Otherwise, our family life will no longer be a place of understanding, support and encouragement, but rather one of constant tension and mutual criticism.

Love rejoices with others

The expression *chaírei epì te adikía* has to do with a negativity lurking deep within a person's heart. It is the toxic attitude of those who rejoice at seeing an injustice done to others. The following phrase expresses its opposite: *sygchaírei te aletheía*: "it rejoices in the right". In other words, we rejoice at the good of others when we see their dignity and value their abilities and good works. This is impossible for those who must always be comparing and competing, even with their spouse, so that they secretly rejoice in their failures.

When a loving person can do good for others, or sees that others are happy, they themselves live happily and in this way give glory to God, for "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor 9:7). Our Lord especially appreciates those who find joy in the happiness of others. If we fail to learn how to rejoice in the well-being of others, and focus primarily on our own needs, we condemn ourselves to a joyless existence, for, as Jesus said, "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). The family must always be a place where, when something good happens to one of its members, they know that others will be there to celebrate it with them.

Love bears all things

Paul's list ends with four phrases containing the words "all things". Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Here we see clearly the countercultural power of a love that is able to face whatever might threaten it.

First, Paul says that love "bears all things" (*panta stégei*). This is about more than simply putting up with evil; it has to do with the use of the tongue. The verb can mean "holding one's peace" about what may be wrong with another person. It implies limiting judgment, checking the impulse to issue a firm and ruthless condemnation: "Judge not and you will not be judged" (Lk 6:37). Although it runs contrary to the way we normally use our tongues, God's word tells us: "Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters" (Jas 4:11). Being willing to speak ill of another person is a way of asserting ourselves, venting resentment and envy without concern for the harm we may do. We often forget that slander can be quite sinful; it is a grave offense against God when it seriously harms another person's good name and causes damage that is hard to repair. Hence God's word forthrightly states that the tongue "is a world of iniquity" that "stains the whole body" (Jas 3:6); it is a "restless evil, full of deadly poison" (3:8). Whereas the tongue can be used to "curse those who are made in the likeness of God" (3:9), love cherishes the good name of others, even one's enemies. In

seeking to uphold God's law we must never forget this specific requirement of love.

Married couples joined by love speak well of each other; they try to show their spouse's good side, not their weakness and faults. In any event, they keep silent rather than speak ill of them. This is not merely a way of acting in front of others; it springs from an interior attitude. Far from ingenuously claiming not to see the problems and weaknesses of others, it sees those weaknesses and faults in a wider context. It recognizes that these failings are a part of a bigger picture. We have to realize that all of us are a complex mixture of light and shadows. The other person is much more than the sum of the little things that annoy me. Love does not have to be perfect for us to value it. The other person loves me as best they can, with all their limits, but the fact that love is imperfect does not mean that it is untrue or unreal. It is real, albeit limited and earthly. If I expect too much, the other person will let me know, for he or she can neither play God nor serve all my needs. Love coexists with imperfection. It "bears all things" and can hold its peace before the limitations of the loved one.

Love believes all things

Panta pisteúei. Love believes all things. Here “belief ” is not to be taken in its strict theological meaning, but more in the sense of what we mean by “trust”. This goes beyond simply presuming that the other is not lying or cheating. Such basic trust recognizes God’s light shining beyond the darkness, like an ember glowing beneath the ash.

This trust enables a relationship to be free. It means we do not have to control the other person, to follow their every step lest they escape our grip. Love trusts, it sets free, it does not try to control, possess and dominate everything. This freedom, which fosters independence, an openness to the world around us and to new experiences, can only enrich and expand relationships. The spouses then share with one another the joy of all they have received and learned outside the family circle. At the same time, this freedom makes for sincerity and transparency, for those who know that they are trusted and appreciated can be open and hide nothing. Those who know that their spouse is always suspicious, judgmental and lacking unconditional love, will tend to keep secrets, conceal their failings and weaknesses, and pretend to be someone other than who they are. On the other hand, a family marked by loving trust, come what may, helps its members to be themselves and spontaneously to reject deceit, falsehood, and lies.

Love hopes all things

Panta elpízei. Love does not despair of the future. Following upon what has just been said, this phrase speaks of the hope of one who knows that others can change, mature and radiate unexpected beauty and untold potential. This does not mean that everything will change in this life. It does involve realizing that, though things may not always turn out as we wish, God may well make crooked lines straight and draw some good from the evil we endure in this world.

Here hope comes most fully into its own, for it embraces the certainty of life after death. Each person, with all his or her failings, is called to the fullness of life in heaven. There, fully transformed by Christ's resurrection, every weakness, darkness and infirmity will pass away. There the person's true being will shine forth in all its goodness and beauty.

This realization helps us, amid the aggravations of this present life, to see each person from a supernatural perspective, in the light of hope, and await the fullness that he or she will receive in the heavenly kingdom, even if it is not yet visible.

Love endures all things

Panta hypoménei. This means that love bears every trial with a positive attitude. It stands firm in hostile surroundings. This “endurance” involves not only the ability to tolerate certain aggravations, but something greater: a constant readiness to confront any challenge. It is a love that never gives up, even in the darkest hour. It shows a certain dogged heroism, a power to resist every negative current, an irrepressible commitment to goodness. Here I think of the words of Martin Luther King, who met every kind of trial and tribulation with fraternal love: “The person who hates you most has some good in him; even the nation that hates you most has some good in it; even the race that hates you most has some good in it. And when you come to the point that you look in the face of every man and see deep down within him what religion calls ‘the image of God’, you begin to love him in spite of [everything]. No matter what he does, you see God’s image there. There is an element of goodness that he can never sluff off... Another way that you love your enemy is this: when the opportunity presents itself for you to defeat your enemy, that is the time which you must not do it... When you rise to the level of love, of its great beauty and power, you seek only to defeat evil systems. Individuals who happen to be caught up in that system, you love, but you seek to defeat the system... Hate for hate only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe. If I hit you and you hit me and I hit you back and you hit me back and so on, you see, that goes on ad infinitum. It just never ends. Somewhere

somebody must have a little sense, and that's the strong person. The strong person is the person who can cut off the chain of hate, the chain of evil... Somebody must have religion enough and morality enough to cut it off and inject within the very structure of the universe that strong and powerful element of love".

In family life, we need to cultivate that strength of love which can help us fight every evil threatening it. Love does not yield to resentment, scorn for others or the desire to hurt or to gain some advantage. The Christian ideal, especially in families, is a love that never gives up. I am sometimes amazed to see men or women who have had to separate from their spouse for their own protection, yet, because of their enduring conjugal love, still try to help them, even by enlisting others, in their moments of illness, suffering or trial. Here too we see a love that never gives up.