



**FAMILY, WE LISTEN TO YOU!**  
**TOWARDS A YOUTH MINISTRY**  
**WITH THE FAMILY**

**Introduction**

«Let us then pray all together that, through these events, the Church may accomplish a true journey of discernment and may adopt adequate pastoral means to help families to face today's challenges with the light and strength that come from the Gospel.» Thus Pope Francis concluded his "Letter to the Families" written on February 2, Feast of the Presentation of the Lord.

In one of his encounters with Religious Superiors, Pope Francis spoke of the fact that the setting in which the education of children and young people takes place today is much different from the past, because many live in difficult family situations, with separated parents, new and irregular unions, sometimes homosexual and so forth.

Naturally, education and the proclamation of the faith cannot ignore this reality. They must be attentive to the good of the younger generations, which need to be accompanied with affection precisely in the practical situation in which they live, so as not to provoke in them negative reactions contrary to the acceptance of the faith itself. «I remember the case of a very sad little girl who, finally, confided the reason for the state of her mind and heart to her teacher: 'My mother's girl-friend does not love me.' On that occasion Pope Francis said, 'The percentage of the young people who study in our schools and whose parents are separated is very high'. The situations in which we live today, therefore, pose new challenges for us which at times we even find difficult to understand. How can we announce Christ to these young people? How can we announce Christ to a changing generation? We must be careful not to give them a vaccine

against the faith... The educational task today is a key, key, key-mission!»<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Listening to the family

When Jesus addressed the Samaritan woman with some of his most significant words, and sent her to witness among the people, he did not seem to be at all daunted by the fact that she had already had five husbands. He mercifully welcomed her thirst for truth and for love, and helped her to change.

This is the episode that comes to mind as we read the *Working Document* in preparation for the Synod of next October. The questions sent to the Church communities throughout the world dealt with the most sensitive points of the situation, at the heart of the confrontation between Church and society today, so as to understand real situations, to accept, welcome and forgive real persons who experience suffering, desires at times betrayed by reality, perhaps wrong ideas and, often, a thirst for acceptance and forgiveness.

The new method used by Pope Francis was interesting. Since he wanted to inaugurate a Synod event involving the whole Church, a questionnaire was sent to the individual dioceses and to every local Church, parish or community. Through this method it is possible to see his desire to listen to all Christians, to their thoughts regarding the moral issues and problems that need to be faced and dealt with urgently and on which the Church needs to speak a clear Gospel word.

*Listening* is not only a necessary choice in all human relationships, but also profoundly Christian, and essential in order to live as a “community of believers”.

The answers to the questionnaire, synthesized in the *Working Document*,<sup>2</sup> have brought to light the great suffering,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. SPADARO Antonio, *Siate veri profeti e non giocate ad esserlo*, in “L’Osservatore Romano”, Città del Vaticano, 5 gennaio 2014, 5.

especially of those who feel excluded or abandoned by the Church, because they are in a state of life which does not correspond to its doctrine or its discipline. This panorama is world-wide; however there are cultural factors facing Christian faith, and common elements can be found which often come from cultural and traditional horizons that are different or even opposed to one another.

This journey is particularly important in a historical situation like the present, in which far-reaching cultural and ethical changes<sup>3</sup> regarding the family structure and procreation are taking place very rapidly, urged on by technology and the sciences. They indicate the need, not to 'chase after progress' but rather "to learn to foresee it" in order to deal with new situations, as well as a certain moral decline and cultural slippage, with greater wisdom, and certainty and in a constructive way.

## **2. As travellers who possess only unsuitable maps**

«Luke the evangelist narrates that, according to the law of Moses, the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph brought the Child to the temple to offer him to the Lord, and that two elderly people, Simeon and Anna, moved by the Holy Spirit, went to meet them and recognized Jesus as the Messiah [...] It is a beautiful image: two young parents and two elderly persons, brought together by Jesus. Truly, Jesus leads different generations to meet and unite! He is the inexhaustible fount of that love that shatters all close-

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. SYNOD OF BISHOPS – III EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY, *Instrumentum laboris. The pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization*, Vatican City 2014.

<sup>3</sup> GIANSOLDATI Franca, *Cambio d'epoca. Intervista di Papa Francesco a "Il Messaggero"*, in "L'Osservatore Romano", Vaticano n. 27, 3 luglio 2014, 8-9.

mindedness, solitude and sadness. In your family journey you share many beautiful moments: meals, rest, house work, recreation, prayer, travels and pilgrimages, gestures of solidarity... However, if love is missing, there is no joy, and it is Jesus who gives us authentic love. He offers us his Word which lights our way; He gives us the Bread of life that sustains the daily fatigue of our journey».<sup>4</sup>

This retelling of the Gospel story by Pope Francis places us in all simplicity within the family dynamics lived by the Lord Jesus. It shows us the essential that makes love possible even in the midst of social change that leaves us searching and, at times, feeling inadequate.

We believe that the family is really the fundamental unit of the human society, the «fundamental human resource, subjected, today, to many difficulties and tensions; in need of support in its irreplaceable educational role».<sup>5</sup> We see how it constantly shows its vigour, notwithstanding the forces that try to eliminate it, since they judge it as a relic of the past or perceive it as an obstacle to the emancipation of the human person.<sup>6</sup>

It is beautiful to continue believing in the family as the place where the generations meet, love, educate, mutually sustain each other and pass on the gift of life, «where one learns to live with differences and to belong to others».<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> FRANCIS, *Letter to Families*, Vatican, February 2, 2014, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2014/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140202\\_lettera-alle-famiglie.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140202_lettera-alle-famiglie.html)

<sup>5</sup> CONGREGATION OF THE DAUGHTERS OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS, *That they may have life and have it to the full. Guidelines for the educational mission of the FMA*, Leumann (Torino), Elledici 2005, n. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Ivi* n. 7.

<sup>7</sup> FRANCESCO, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 66.

«We are no longer pilgrims, but neither are we tourists. We are travellers who move in space recognizing that the available maps are inadequate, created in other times by other travellers who saw different things».<sup>8</sup>

We realize that we need to continually update the maps that accompany and guide our adventure as women and men who are aware.

This is why we want to overcome the temptation to confront complexity by accepting certain 'shortcuts' that only apparently simplify the situations. They are the shortcuts that consider sexuality as a commodity, devalue affectivity and renunciation, and renounce critical thinking and dialogue replacing them more comfortably with distorted but reassuring clichés.

This *impasse* can only be overcome by making some choices that make us protagonists of social transformation:<sup>9</sup>

\* *coming out of self*, as the ability to decentralize in order to be open to others;

\* *understanding*, as an attitude that helps to integrate one's life and one's perspective with that of other persons;

\* *assuming* responsibility for the destiny, joy and suffering of others;

\* *giving*, as expression of gratuity and as freeing oneself from a style of life that 'calculates too much';

\* *being faithful* as the attitude of the one who ensures creative continuity to one's own gestures and relationships.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> GIACCARDI Chiara – MAGATTI Mauro, *L'io globale. Dinamiche della socialità contemporanea*, Roma-Bari, Laterza 2003, IX.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *That they may have life* n. 107.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. GALANTINO Nunzio, *Amore & Vita. Questioni di cuore e di ragione*, Saluto al XII Convegno Associazione Scienza & Vita, Roma, 23 maggio 2014.

### 3. Being present in cultural and educational commitments that favour the family, together with all persons of good will

The theme of the family that we want to tackle with frankness and with the sincere intention of knowing and understanding the restlessness and the changes that it is going through, is rich with very practical educational implications, that are certainly very delicate and much discussed.

Among us FMA and in the Educating Communities, there is a growing *awareness of a process of “de-humanization”* that is going on in today’s society, though in different ways, according to the contexts in different continents. This phenomenon challenges both adults and young people encouraging them to adopt clear positions in line with the *Gospel of mercy*.

For instance, while respecting legislation and those who are democratically elected in each nation of the world where we are present and work, we feel the duty to educate ourselves and educate our contemporaries, particularly young people, on the fact that, *above the will of Governments and peoples, there is a vocation higher than us*, and that to define a union between persons of the same sex as marriage means to “de-humanize” humanity.

In the face of the pressure of *lobbies* that manipulate the concept and way of representing life, family, sex/gender, we feel the urgent call to be *more solicitous and vocal in affirming the Gospel values publicly and, if necessary, also more capable of dissent and objection of conscience*.

In the various historical periods there have been transformations, at times even profound ones, in the family institution; however its essential dimension of being an institution composed of man-woman and children has never failed. This is why we feel that it is urgent for the Church to undertake an attentive cultural reflection and a stronger defence

of the family, in order to put it at the centre of politics, of the economy, and of culture, both in the various countries and in international bodies, helped also by the involvement of believers of other religious traditions and of persons of good will. It is a frontier that concerns the very foundations of the human society, and that challenges us, together with our educating communities.

Recently, when Pope Francis spoke to the Italian Bishops' Conference, he invited them to make *humanizing choices and experiences of Gospel neighbourliness*:

«Be interiorly free, so as to be able to come close to the people, be attentive to learn their language, to approach each one with charity. Walk with people in their nights of solitude, in their anxious restlessness and failures: accompany them, in order to warm their hearts and to urge them to undertake a search for meaning that can give back dignity, hope and fruitfulness to life».<sup>11</sup>

Today the family can be re-interpreted as a *school of humanity* that opens to the mystery of the other and to the meaning of life. Its specific nature lies in the interaction between two fundamental axes: the sexual axis (male/female) and the generational axis (parents-children).

- ✓ As carrier of this specific nature the family is unique, not comparable to other forms of affective bond, and the bearer of richness for the benefit of all in society. The same is true of consecrated life. It is the carrier of a wealth also for those who are not consecrated.
- ✓ The family is a *place of humanization*, and this is also true of religious life. Family and religious life are different worlds, but they live this humanizing mission each

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<sup>11</sup> FRANCESCO, *Discorso alla 66<sup>ma</sup> Assemblea della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana (CEI)*, Aula del Sinodo, 19 maggio 2014.

according to their own specific role and it is both beautiful and important that they can mutually exchange experiences.

- ✓ The family, in time and in the geo-social context has adapted itself and has assumed different forms. Today, faced with the contemporary crisis, we must bless it, promoting creative fidelity, capable of generating unique and healthy forms of family life, finding adequate answers to daily life. This commitment of creative fidelity also applies to consecrated life.

Families and religious communities can learn to accompany and sustain one another reciprocally, helping each other in their respective difficulties, experiencing new forms of communion and of sharing.

In the face of individualism, boredom and contemporary consumerism, it is important to affirm the value of *generativity*, not only on a biological level.

*To be generative means* to be ready to stake one's own freedom with regard to life, its risk and its adventure.

Generativity is availability to say yes to life and it can be spelled out in four verbs: *to wish, to birth, to take care, let go*, verbs that can be lived both in family life and in consecrated life.

This generativity can become an antidote to spiritual "desertification", «as a result of attempts by some societies to build without God, or to eliminate their Christian roots [...] In these situations we are called to be living sources of water from which others can drink [...] Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of hope!»<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> FRANCIS, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 86.

#### 4. Walking with parents and sustaining their educational role with regard to their children

"The family is the place where one first learns the alphabet of communication and of relationships: in it love is received and given. To accompany young people on the journey of maturing their affectivity and capacity to love, is a fundamental task for the ecclesial community [...] called to value the fundamental cell of society and to help young people to become aware of the family roots, looking at their own history with realism, serenity and hope».<sup>13</sup>

The present youth and cultural situation calls the educating communities to a fresh understanding of the presence of the adult who educates, together with other adults and with the young themselves. Young people express their discomfort at being abandoned to themselves, not having credible points of reference, not finding guides to encourage and sustain them, adults ready to "waste time" with them. At times, even in the families what prevails is silence, tendency to delegate, indifference, thus increasing aggressiveness, restlessness, insecurity, irresponsibility, confusion or anti-social attitudes in children and adolescents.

Bringing parents together in groups and associations, both at the school level and with regard to leisure time activities and initiatives (especially sport and artistic expression), is an opportunity for education and cultural formation. Here individual families can find practical support in the exercise of their own rights/duties of citizenship. In many educating communities associations are promoted that are committed to defend the fundamental freedoms and duties of the human person, in the first place the right to life.

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<sup>13</sup> *That they may have life* n. 88.

The proposals that the Catholic school offers in society lead a certain number of families to choose it – not by conviction but simply for convenience. For many other parents this decision represents the influence of a dormant mentality of the past, while for some parents their decision is determined by a vision of family life founded on Christian values.

Many parents, even non believers or persons of other religions, are ready to journey with their own children, both in the school and in the oratory-youth centres (in sport, music, in artistic activities, etc.). At times this is done simply to better understand the educational programmes and their demands. There have been very comforting experiences of the awaking of faith in parents in some countries through the offering of programmes proclaiming the faith that involve parents and children together, educators and young people.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Various types of material exist in different languages, prepared by lay associations and movements (Catholic Action – Family Sector; Families of the New Movements of the Focolari; and especially in groups of the Salesian Family, such as the Co-operators, Past pupils, FMA and SDB Educating Communities) to animate family pastoral at local, national and international level and provide valid formative content. We feel it is useful to note, for example, the Website of the Salesian Family in Verona (Italy), [www.ilgrandeducatore.com](http://www.ilgrandeducatore.com), which presents more than 700 pdf worksheets that can easily be downloaded. They are divided into themes: *Family; The children, our joy; Young People, Couples; Spirituality; Ethical challenges; Stories for the soul; Beyond the evils of the century; Salesian notes*. We also note the Website of the Pontifical Council for the Family, [www.familia.va](http://www.familia.va) and the magazines *Famiglia oggi* [www.famigliaoggi.it](http://www.famigliaoggi.it), an interesting bi-monthly edited by San Paolo, Milano; *Famiglia domani* [famiglia.domani@cpm-italia.it](mailto:famiglia.domani@cpm-italia.it) a very practical quarterly periodical produced by the Italian Centres for Marriage Preparation – Elledici, Leumann (Torino).

## 5. Choosing relationships of mutual recognition, free from prejudice and stereotypes

Dialogue is the indispensable starting point for real collaboration with the family. Within a relationship, each one brings his/her whole self and so that something meaningful may happen, each one is called to see the other as person capable of communicating sense and meaning. This is why it is necessary that educational environment and family live their relationship as one of mutual recognition.

Parents, faced with a fragmented and disorientated social context, are in continuous search for ways to organize and lead their family life, to fulfil their parental roles, without the help of those global interpretative schemes typical of the past. In today's context, transience, reversibility, being caught up in daily life, difficulty in assuming a planning mentality, are all elements that render the educational work of parents ever more fragile and uncertain.

The educational environments that we animate through our educational action are at the service of children, adolescents and youth. Through daily listening, it is possible to overcome judgments and stereotypes that distance us from their families. These families, in fact, can also be "most dysfunctional", but they are still parents; they are and always remain *their families*.

The formative programme offered to parents finds its place within this vision and aims at supporting the educational role they are called to fulfil. In the *Guidelines for the educational mission* we read:

«Parents are the principal persons in the education of their children. This responsibility is manifested in the sharing of the educative project which is the terrain for dialogue, sharing, confrontation and collaboration. As members of the educating community, they participate in research into

the formation needs of the young and in the carrying out of the educational plans».<sup>15</sup>

We are aware that offering formative support to parents allows us to work with the *preventive approach* of the Salesian educational method, allows adults to participate in a process of self-improvement, and affects the human quality of the children directly and in a positive way.

### **6. Educate so as to give to every child and young person the right to his/her own family**

We involve and value the family, even when fragile and in need of support, because all children have the right to their own family. It is therefore important to strengthen our capacity to dialogue with the family in an open and collaborative way, overcoming the eventual resistance of its members that are often the result of defence mechanisms aimed at protecting them from negative judgement, and from a growing sense of guilt, impotence and inadequacy.

The family ties, so delicate and at times wounded or apparently non-existent, torn or blocked, are in need of profound reconciliation by means of a remedial educational approach, especially at the psycho-affective-relational level. This must involve the families in a suitable way, through a competent accompaniment that is rich in faith and trust.

*Re-insertion into the family* is a challenge that we often must face in children- and among poor abandoned children, adolescents and youth in disadvantaged situations.

We carry out this re-insertion in those cases where the family environment is favourable and no longer presents risks for the growing person. In other cases we generally opt for alternative choices like foster or adoptive families. However, this is always done through an educative journey based on dialogue

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<sup>15</sup> *That they may have life* n. 65.

and understanding of all the members of the family and their history, which is often difficult, troubled and complex.

An authentic Youth Ministry *with* the family will encourage us to have an ever greater belief in the value of the family and to find creative educational and Gospel ways and means, through which even the ‘wounded’ family that is in difficulty will once more be capable of welcoming its own children. This is a challenge to be won through the Gospel of mercy.

### **7. Sustaining the families in difficult situations**

«The family is the place in which Jesus grows... May the Lord bless it and render it strong in this crisis in which the devil wants to destroy it».<sup>16</sup> This rather strong affirmation of Pope Francis urges us to continue in our choice to work together with parents and families in the educating communities in order to give ever greater space in them to the Lord of Life.

«In all environments, working together is vital if we want to develop a coherent plan of evangelising education, inspired by the Salesian charism [...]

This implies solidarity of intent and interventions, effective sharing of formation goals, and commitment to unity in our educational action. Working together means proposing a gradual passage from simple socialization, i.e. exchange of information and knowledge, to both psychological and affective integration and finally to co-operation, as interaction in reaching practical and productive goals, within a relationship of reciprocity.

A style of everyday life that bears the characteristics of a family constitutes a good way of achieving the above results. This involves prayer, dialogue, encounter,

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<sup>16</sup> FRANCESCO, *Discorso alla 37<sup>ma</sup> Convocazione del Rinnovamento dello Spirito*, Stadio Olimpico, Roma, 1° giugno 2014.

dedicating time to weekly or monthly meetings that allow for sharing in common of reflections and spiritual journeys as well as work commitments and viewpoints».<sup>17</sup>

The event of the two Synods of the Bishops on the family, with the preparation, reading of the documents, and shared reflection, can encourage our communities to take on, with greater courage, the joy of praying together in simplicity, with the families of our students, of children and young people of the oratories-youth centres, with the lay people of the educating communities, starting from daily life. If we want it to, dialogue, encountering one another, dedicating time to meeting and sharing, could truly become spiritual journeys that lead us to a more coherent, Gospel based and joyous consecrated and familial life.

In this style of daily, family life it can be easier to give mutual support and to pay attention to the *new forms of poverty* that urge us to live the preventive stile of education by offering care, defending women and children, fighting human trafficking, freeing from violence, from abuse of power, from attempts on life, welcoming the one who no longer has a family or has “difficult” family experiences,<sup>18</sup> as is already being done in many communities throughout the world.

Some choices for providing support have already been implemented by educating communities who are creative, and faithful to the Preventive System. It would be good and worthwhile to strengthen and multiply them, and lovingly to invent new ones.

**\* Communities with *entrepreneurship and micro-credit projects for young people and/or single parent-families*, particularly in**

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<sup>17</sup> *That they may have life* n. 108.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Ivi* n. 162.

those contexts marked by impoverishment, caused by economic structures, environmental situations, natural calamities, wars and injustice.

**\* Presences that, with a profound ecclesial sense, are “home for those who have no home”,** fulfilling a pedagogy of environment in which one can experience a family spirit made up of welcoming acceptance, co-responsibility, participation, sharing of values, patient waiting for the rhythms of each one’s personal growth, and respectful dialogue with those of other cultural and religious traditions.

The family style is one of relationships which overcomes barriers, encourages confidence, brings generations closer and creates an atmosphere of trust, where people can grow in freedom and collaborate with each other in reciprocity;<sup>19</sup>

**\* Presences that welcome, listen, share, translating the treasure of the Gospel message into today’s situations.**

We are challenged by the *various contemporary types of family*, in its new socio-cultural forms: cohabitation, “free unions”, divisions caused by mobility or/and by ethically confused environments. These are a cause of suffering particular for girls and women, in the *increasing pluralism in forms of family and of other types of cohabitation and social union*.

There is need of wisdom and educational competence in order to *encounter these “new” families* from a Gospel perspective, without discrimination, but rather with mercy, being aware of the need to speak to the heart with words that offer hope and joy, with gestures of understanding and goodness, with clarity, both in ethics and faith.

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. *That they may have life* n. 149.

\* **Communities that deal particularly with the *phenomena of human mobility and migration*.** These phenomena can at times bring about a better quality of life, especially at an economic and at times also at a social level. However they generally have negative repercussions on the lives of individuals and on family relationships. This is especially so in the case of the migration of women, which, at times, has particularly sad consequences in the lives of the children. They, in fact, are often left with only one parent, grandparents or other family members, or are uprooted from their own land and from all their affective ties. They may find themselves in particularly trying social settings, which are neither inclusive nor welcoming, and may even penalize them. Here it is difficult for them to experience a solid sense of belonging.

### **8. Accompanying children, adolescents and young people experiencing socio-cultural phenomena that are changing lives, relationships, and the family**

We are challenged by the *generations of adolescents and young adults without families, or who grow up ever more alone and/or within confused and complicated unions*, in which they are victims of choices made by the adults (including procreation *in vitro*) and treated as “rejects” in decisions that are at times wrong or irregular.

These are *new educational calls* that challenge educators throughout world, though in different forms and degrees. They call us to *an accompaniment rich in understanding, full of welcoming acceptance and educational clarity both in ethics and faith, which involves taking steps in trust and renewed hope*.

This attitude is suitable for dealing with adolescent mothers and fathers, or those adolescents and young adults who need to clarify and affirm their sexual identity in all contexts, as well as in different educational environments.

Favouring life and true, self-giving love helps us to:

- welcome parents and accompany them in this journey of responsible parenting and of identity;
- offer pastorally unequivocal signs, even if in contrast with what was done in the past in some Catholic institutions.

In this sense, Youth Ministry work *with* the family, is a choice to approach the more complex and difficult issues *with flexibility, giving priority not to the re-affirmation of the principles or other normative interventions on the part of the Church*, but rather to the dimension of listening, to the spirit of friendship, to the effort to understand, to look with Gospel faith, that helps us to walk with everyone, using a language capable of demonstrating truth and mercy.

### **9. Accompanying young people to love and welcome life, fruitfulness, procreation, children...**

The effort to *educate to love* is a cultural and educational commitment to be accomplished within church communities together with all persons of good will. It requires competence and preparation in order to face, with young people, *some cultural-educative issues connected with the family relationships*:

- a. the *split between and separation of sexual activity and procreation* that ends up by even depriving marriage of solidarity between spouses and generations;
- b. the *displacement of the sexual identity from nature to culture*, caused by theories of gender, that are the result of a cultural position very far from the one that has always been held and which is also the Christian vision. This believes in diversity between sexes, which in marriage are placed in a relationship that is complementary and mutual;

- c. *the reduction of matrimony to mere institution that recognises the existence of bonds of affection between spouses.* If these fail it would then be legitimate to dissolve the bond.

Education to life and to love is something that has become ever more urgent and requires inter-disciplinary competence and profound wisdom, well rooted in faith. This is especially true since they elude the law, so much so that legislators do not even demand that parents love their children and at most impose that they seek their good.

In line with this, a reflection has already begun at international level in all the Institutions of Higher Studies and Universities of the FMA, which will certainly contribute to creating a new awareness regarding these themes and will offer cultural and educational instruments to help face this reality in the various educating communities.

In accompanying university students and young professionals to love and welcome life, a marriage relationship of faithful and self-giving love, procreation, and children... we feel ourselves strongly challenged, by the “culture of wealth that – as Pope Francis said– anaesthetises us”, and by the fact that many young adults are growing up immersed in the movement of thought and social action of the “*Childfree life: when having it all means not having children*”. *Childfree*, that is free from children, by choice and for always. This word has been coined in contrast to *childless*, that is without children, usually referring to couples who want a child, but are unable to have one because of infertility.

Not to have children seems to be a condition in the search for an impossible conjugal happiness deriving from the possibility of “having everything” in life, of not putting any limits in work and leisure time, in earning and using money, in housing and travel, in private and social life.

In this context, great opportunities are offered to us as educators, to be close and sustain young people and women in being «aware of their dignity, rights and role as educators of the family and promoters of a more human society in mutual relationship with men».<sup>20</sup>

### **10. To be, together with the families, *Christian communities of reference***

«Relations with the *family* are a real challenge for the educating community. In the Salesian tradition dialogue with parents becomes openness to sharing and offering formative support in their unique role. Interaction with the family is particularly important today, when the institution of the family is seriously threatened by laws that favour new types of union, which do not respect the plan of God who created man and woman as mutually complementary. A culture of life and its promotion are at the centre of the educational dialogue with the family».<sup>21</sup>

In every place, but particularly in secularised, de-Christianised contexts, and those where the Christians are a minority presence among other religions (especially in Asia), the call is to *empower Christian communities of reference*, who, as members of the Church, accompany the various paths of Christian formation for young people and adults, celebrate and witness to the faith starting from a practical commitment to building the Kingdom of God, and to social transformation for a life in society that is ever more characterised by justice and respect for life.

We are aware that *in pre-marriage courses, in the teaching of religion, in catechesis to adolescents, youth and adults*, we must continue, with ever greater competence and

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<sup>20</sup> *That they may have life* n. 177

<sup>21</sup> *That they may have life* n. 158.

clarity, to *present the beauty of marriage* in its natural form of union between one man and one woman, a responsible pact of love, destined to last for life, a stable union, open to procreation pursued in human way and *not reduced to commercial trade and laboratory technique*.

The Christian community of reference is an important factor in the *spreading of the faith*, which today follows very different methods and rhythms from the past. It will be able to return, especially in some contexts, through the evangelizing presence of the grandparents and elderly persons in general who, at times, must substitute parental figures. In the cities and suburban areas where we are present, intergenerational relations can be re-established precisely by discovering these links for the communication of faith and of life experience.

It seems opportune to point out that between Gospel and family a kind of ‘contagion’ can take place, which shows how each reality has need of the other. This is why it is beautiful and important «to develop our skills of accompaniment, giving particular attention to young families».<sup>22</sup>

*The Gospel is incarnated in the life of the family*, because it is in the reality of daily life that God is manifested and becomes a Gospel, i.e. news which is good for life. In mutual relationships, in the care for the little ones, the most fragile and the elderly, in the daily gestures of food preparation, of welcoming a guest, of teaching to walk, parents and children live, in a not-yet explicit way, what Jesus lived and what He did.

*The family is contained in the Gospel*, because when Jesus communicates the love of God to us, he speaks of Father and Mother. When he announces the Kingdom, he speaks of the yeast and of the seed. To remind us the promise of life that is for

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<sup>22</sup> ISTITUTO FIGLIE DI MARIA AUSILIATRICE, *Strumento di lavoro del Capitolo Generale XXIII. Essere oggi con i giovani casa che evangelizza*, Roma 2014, n. 36.

every person, he describes a supper and a wedding feast. To show us the care of God for all his children he speaks of embraces, of a woman who searches, of children who ask for freedom.

The family, therefore, is the bearer of life with a Gospel flavour, and Jesus brought light to this reality and made it shine forth by incarnating himself in our human history.

### **11. Bending over the wounds of the family**

For some time now our Institute has been reflecting on mutual relations in a way that seems suitable for today. This always needs to be deepened in order to grasp its implications for relationships between men and women, young people and adults, in ecclesial and social communities. The witness of consecrated communities animated by the family spirit can be particularly incisive, when in their daily life they live the radiant joy of their vocation to care, on which life is founded. It is an experience of the daily care for family members, for the education and growth of children and adolescents, for assistance given to sick and elderly.

We are aware that in the Church we take care of many persons, young people and adults, who live in situations of crisis, and impoverishment, who lack horizons of meaning and hope. When there is no bread or work, the stability of the family is also compromised.

Taking care of families, who suffer because of these dramatic situations, means bending over the wounds of the family. The spiritual sufferings of separated parents, the divorced, whether re-married or not, persons who seek the annulment of their marriage, those who co-habit, etc, are no less devastating. They all need understanding, welcoming acceptance

«with a merciful heart»<sup>23</sup> and the proclamation of the love of God the Father who saves and forgives.

In some countries we are close to and support women in places where they suffer forced sterilization or forms of family planning that do not respect the dignity and freedom of the human person, or where, because of poverty, they live as “surrogate mothers” and “rented wombs”, savage forms of abuse of the woman, practices that generate violence and suffering, that cannot remain unpunished.

Caring for the family today means broadening our vision to the immense challenges of which we are barely aware, and participating in the building of a society that may itself become a “family”, to the point of uniting the family of peoples and of nations.

Today we are called to express the joy of being women, to live motherhood as a “calling to life”.

We feel in communion and in dialogue with all women, those who struggle the most to live their womanhood, as well as those who, though we cannot always share their cultural orientation, are living, in their own flesh, the value of reciprocity, a way of relating that often has still to be re-discovered even in church communities.

To be women with other women means to walk the way of womanhood that places the life of the other person at the centre. This makes it possible to journey with all, particularly with men – also in the Church – so as to witness to being ‘family’, a community of life in which *gift, mutuality, generativity and sexuality* are four distinctive traits.

It is on this journey that it may be possible to find answers to such questions as Communion for those divorced and

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<sup>23</sup> *Strumento di lavoro CG XXIII* n. 36.

remarried, recognition of same sex unions, or the moral evaluation of the different methods of birth control.

Respect, listening, friendship can provide guidelines for:

- a) the re-elaboration of the teaching of the Church, that centres itself once more on the essentials of the Gospel and becomes “higher proposal” of life;
- b) greater attention to and availability for those who, while immersed in everyday difficulties, feel that this proposal could help to nourish them in a new understanding of their life and, in some case, lead to a profound and authentic “regeneration”.

The example of Pope Francis, who witnesses the value of taking the first step, fascinates us with the symbolic power of his gestures. He does not speculate that the other could be the first to take the step, he just does it and he encourages us, too, to bend over the wounds of the family without hesitation, taking the first step.

### **Conclusion: Implementing a “pedagogy of life” as Christians**

Recognising the changed conditions in which the family of today lives, and in tune with the Social Teaching of the Church we commit ourselves to do everything possible, as educators, to sustain, facilitate, and value the family in its delicate and most precious role in society...

- \* ... by re-thinking directions regarding responsible parenthood, adopting a proactive attitude to the family and reflecting on its role in the public arena;

- \* ... by taking on the great responsibility of implementing a “pedagogy of life” which includes matrimony, baptism, confirmation, the anointing of the sick;

- \* ... by being aware that, precisely in this society which proclaims itself a society of many freedoms, everyone needs time

to learn the value of the other person and the profound mystery of reality.

Our wish and hope is that, in step with the lives of young people, we, together with the pastoral teams of our Provinces, may always have the vision of persons who, while educating, also observe history with wise and open eyes, grasping the signals it offers for an abundant and full Life for all.

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