

Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life

Pastoral Guidelines for Local Churches

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1. The urgency of pastoral renewal

In *Amoris laetitia*, the Holy Father Francis wishes that young people, adequately accompanied, can learn to recognize and appreciate the gifts of marriage and the family, and that local Churches would know how to present themselves as communities to accompany the contexts in which family life is carried out with effort and suffering (cf. AL 5).

Therefore, I would like to reflect with you on how to initiate a process of pastoral renewal that, concretely, brings about a change in the way of proclaiming the Gospel of marriage and family to the new generations in the local churches. The document entitled *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life, Pastoral Guidelines for Local Churches*, which the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life published in 2022 at the explicit request of the Holy Father Francis, is in some ways revolutionary. The Pontiff has entrusted it to bishops, priests and laity working in family ministry, with the goal of profoundly renewing the marriage preparation of the next generations.

It is revolutionary because if implemented, in time, it will really induce a significant change in the way marriage is proclaimed to young people and make the co-responsible and proactive presence of the laity in the local churches operative. And because the text itself does not propose a pre-packaged program to prepare engaged couples for the celebration of the rite, as most of the courses until now have been thought of, for this reason, as premarital courses.

The publication of specific programs is entrusted to the local churches, which, starting from the text proposed by the Dicastery, will have the task of inculturating it: starting

from what they consider to be a priority for local pastoral care and writing guidelines for their own operators.

The Pathways no longer provide courses that prepare only for the nuptial liturgy, but *paths* to accompany the new generations to discover from an early age that marriage is a vocation, a sacramental life to be lived together; an accompaniment, which must continue after the celebration of the rite in the first years of marriage. Therefore, not a *preparation for something*, but an *accompaniment for life* that should be able to continue, giving spouses the tools to face life together and prevent the hardest crises. It is about making young people and engaged couples understand the difference between "preparing for the wedding day" and "preparing for married life."

In short, we must be concerned with leading them to Christ. Therefore, in order to give concreteness to this need, the Holy Father writes in the preface to the text, "I recommended the implementation of a true catechumenate of future spouses including all the steps of the sacramental path: time of preparation for the marriage, its celebration and the years immediately thereafter."¹

Thus, the title: *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life*, to make explicit the Church's intent to help spouses *grow together* in the grace of the nuptial sacrament, to acquire a *Christian way of life*, feeling accompanied by the community in the most delicate phases of family life, including the crises that, naturally or for more significant causes, any family can go through. An accompaniment that, from the canonical point of view, leads the spouses to a truly conscious consent to the *bonum coniugum* ("Those who freely choose and love each other can marry" in reciprocity - AL 217. The *bonum coniugum* is built from the *principle of the reality* of the couple - EG 232).²

So, the first essential aspect: we must grasp the *permanent character* of pastoral care in conjugal life. It is indispensable to equip ourselves to this end, in order to have companions capable of carrying out this service in the various stages of the journey.

2. *What style for the new catechumenate?*

The document contains a pastoral proposal inspired by the baptismal catechumenate, which intends to introduce a style more suited to today's young people, in order to know

how to listen to their realities, their experiences, and the challenges they face on a spiritual and social level in view of their vocation. It is opportune to go beyond the style of doctrinal and theoretical lessons, to which we have become accustomed (AL 201), preferring meetings that, starting from the experience of engaged couples, can constitute moments of listening, prayer, and reflection, accompanied by mentoring couples, capable of giving rise to relationships of trust, esteem and authentic pastoral discernment. The goal is ambitious: the Holy Father calls for it, that "just as the catechumenate is part of the sacramental process for the baptism of adults, so too may the preparation for marriage form an integral part of the whole sacramental procedure of marriage, as an antidote to prevent the increase of invalid or inconsistent marriage celebrations." (Address to the Roman Rota, Jan. 21, 2017). Let the style therefore be pedagogical, gradual and ritualized.

3. The phases of the catechumenate.

The pathway, therefore, is divided into several stages: from remote preparation, that embraces childhood and youth ministry, to the catechumenal stage proper, which in turn has three stages. A first stage of proximate preparation, which is longer; a second stage of immediate preparation, which is shorter; and a third stage of accompanying couples in the first years of married life, geared to include the couple in the ordinary family ministry of the parish and diocese/eparchy.

Not only that: the document is *an outline* available to those working in **all areas of pastoral care**, from those involved in the catechesis of children to that of adolescents, including also those who accompany married couples, to foster the development of a truly *transversal* and *permanent* pastoral care. It is necessary to aim towards gradually changing the approach of pastoral vocational care to make it *holistic*, so that from childhood it explicitly considers marriage as well, alongside consecrated life.

It has been so many years, moreover, that as a Church we have been lamenting the fact that young people no longer marry; that a large proportion of the marriages celebrated are null and void; that we spouses perceive a profound loneliness in living our marriage as if it were a mountain to be climbed, continually touching on the decision to abandon everything in the face of the first crises. These are the same reasons and concerns that

led the Holy Father to propose this text; but also the same fears that torment young people today when faced with the choice of getting married: the fear of carrying out a lifelong commitment, the fatigue of overcoming obstacles in together, the difficulty of understanding marriage when it is presented as an unattainable ideal of perfection, which would discourage anyone.

The question we need to ask, then, is: Is there a way to live the Christian faith in the family, with one's spouse? Are there ways to live the family as a domestic Church, a context in which spouses, parents and children feel sustained by faith?

This is why pathways - and not courses - are urgently needed so that young people have the time to understand that marriage is not a yoke, but a step by two by which each day they say yes to a wonderful vocation, which is a mission, and spouses, not left alone "after the party," but included in the community and accompanied throughout life, can live the sacrament more consciously, feeling Grace resonate among them.

For this reason, too, the Holy Father addresses the bishops first and foremost: he trusts in the care, concern and pastoral responsibility of the episcopal ministry; in the foresight to take charge of these pathways, destined to be realized and to produce effects not in the current moment, but in the coming years, changing the future of the next generations of families.

4. Objective: to change the pastoral mentality.

The goal we must set together is to change the *culture, the ecclesial and pastoral mentality* of marriage preparation. Marriage is a vocation, as such it must be announced and requires discernment, as with the priesthood. Yet, notes the Holy Father, the Church devotes much time to preparing candidates for religious life, but devotes too little time to those preparing for marriage, even though the Lord calls with equal intensity to one vocation or the other. Such a great difference in treatment - the Holy Father observes - is not adequate. Married couples make up the vast majority of the faithful and are pillars of support in parishes and movements. From families vocations are born. It is a duty of justice - the Holy Father continues - that, wherever possible, the Church should devote more time and energy to the preparation of those whom the Lord calls to such a great

mission as the family³.

It is also true that if in Rome, the heart of Catholic Christianity, a city of more than three million inhabitants divided into about 340 parishes, only eleven priests are ordained in a year (2023), what emerges is a "sterile Church." Using a metaphor, we could say that it is not the fish to be caught that are lacking, but the very water in which the fish should swim is lacking. Youth groups in many parishes consist of a dozen or so young people, no more. The great absentees, in short, are the Christians, the families. It is not only vocations that are lacking, but the People of God⁴.

It is the People who must grow, even before vocations. We continue to take faith for granted. Perhaps it is time to review the approach of the catechism of Christian initiation, which "continues to have a scholastic and not an existential model," even in marriage preparation.

The *kerygma* must have its center in families - the real seminaries. God's people have not grown because the family as a place of Christian education has collapsed. If boys came from Christian families where they pray, train in service and forgiveness, then yes, we would have more priests. But if you don't start from a personal encounter with Christ, you can have neither Christians, nor families founded on marriage, nor priests. You have to form Christian families.

We are in the midst of a cultural flood and it is time to build an ark, which in the Bible was a boat made of couples. Those who prepare for marriage are preparing to build a "little Church." From these families can come a new generation of presbyters and marriages. In Chapter 2 of *Amoris laetitia*, the Holy Father had made explicit the challenges for today's families and came to affirm that "the contemporary reality requires renewed pastoral efforts to strengthen preparation to the Sacrament of Marriage in dioceses/eparchies and parishes on all continents"⁵. It is necessary, therefore, to think of "catechumenal paths," as for Baptism: an ongoing accompaniment in the acquisition of a *Christian way of life*, which aims to make the mystery of grace resound among engaged couples, first, and among spouses, then, forming them in faith and accompanying them in the acquisition of a Christian way of life.

Consequently, it is essential that such pathways:

- last for a long enough time to allow couples real maturation;
- while starting from the concrete experience of human love, place faith and the encounter with Christ at the center of the preparation;
- provide stages, marked - where possible and appropriate - by rites of passage to be celebrated within the community, so that the spouses feel included in the community.
- teach discernment as a Christian way of life.

5. *Who is responsible for the project?*

To this different way of accompanying we are all called to contribute: lay people and pastors. "The journey should be shared among priests, Christian spouses, religious men and women, and pastoral workers, who must collaborate among themselves and in agreement with their bishop. Marriage is not only a social act; for Christians, it is an "ecclesial" act. Therefore, the whole Church, as the body of Christ, takes charge of it, and feels the need to be of service to future families. "⁶

A special task in this apostolate falls to spouses, who can accompany new engaged couples in formation. In many local churches this is a struggle and it continues to be only the priest who deals with marriage preparation a few weeks before the event.

Indeed, it cannot be ignored that the Second Vatican Council intended to overcome the clerical conception of the Church, according to which the responsibility for mission belonged only to pastors. To a hierarchical-vertical Church, in which clericalist tendencies can easily lurk, which do not recognize an authentic action of the Holy Spirit in the lay faithful, Pope Francis⁷ is also seeking to replace a *hierarchical-participatory* Church, in which gifts and charisms are recognized, and in which pastoral responsibility is shared between laity and pastors, according to the principle of *co-responsibility for mission*. In it, new ways of intra-ecclesial dialogue are needed, including between pastors and Christian spouses, in the common mission of preparing couples for marriage. In the common priesthood, the category of disciple-missionary introduced by *Aparecida*⁸ and then by *Evangelii gaudium*⁹ (n. 24) concerns all the baptized who experience God's love and who, as such, can witness to it.

In relation to marriage preparation, we must aim at two goals: first, we must try to

overcome the dichotomy that for a long time dominated the formation of priests and laity, whereby one thing was the sacrament of marriage, as it was explained in the preparation courses for engaged couples, and another was the life of the spouses and the family, as if they were two separate and parallel realities. The sacrament, in fact, is not something that descends on the spouses, from the outside, but it is the spouses, their relationship that becomes sacrament. In this sense, they are ministers of grace to each other by virtue of the bond that unites them.

Within their marital relationship, but also in their family relationships, the *tria munera* arising from Baptism take on the connotation of a gift aimed at *the specific mission of building up their domestic Church*, both in their relationships, as well as in the wider ecclesial community. By Baptism and Matrimony, in other words, they are called to live as prophets, kings and priests by the grace of the sacrament, that is, as spouses. As *Lumen Gentium* 11 states, they "have in their state of life and in their order" a gift in the midst of God's people that makes them ministers of grace and holiness.

This *ministeriality*, which should not be misunderstood as an instituted ministry, nor should it be understood as a task linked to a charism, flows from the sacrament itself, thus from Christ Jesus, and is permanent and ecclesial. Indeed, it flows from not one but two sacraments, because in addition to Baptism, spouses have the grace of marriage. A ministry of family life that is also a task of families to help other families to become ministries, that is, domestic churches. It is this aspect that makes spouses and families co-responsible for evangelization.

This means, and we come to the second practical goal, that we can no longer consider the family as a field of application of pastoral choices of a clerical Church only, since the Second Vatican Council's definition of the family as a "domestic Church" has opened to it unexpected perspectives of apostolate and participation in the Church's saving mission.

And it is important for the bishops to urge families now, more than ever, to live out their being sacramental communities, both internally and *ad extra*: "domestic churches in action."

6. *Turn the families of the world into domestic churches: the “liturgy of family life.”*

How to act on the pastoral level, to make today's families dynamic, solid and aware domestic Churches?

As indicated by *Amoris laetitia*, the answer lies within the family itself, in the daily life of the domestic Church, where its members can learn to share the grace of the sacraments. Indeed, it is necessary to make families discover that the Christian life is not to be lived only by going to the parish to do activities and formally receive the sacraments, but it begins at home.

The normal daily activities of the family, in fact, can constitute a true *liturgy of family life*,¹⁰ punctuated, we might say, by three types of moments or practices, capable of revealing the *sacred value* of certain natural dynamics of family life, in relation to the being king, priest and prophet of each member of the family¹¹: *the practice of Christian relationships*, which helps families live out the priestly mission of baptism, with daily practices and attitudes of love, respect, and listening, which can habituate parents and children to consecrate their daily lives and intensify their relationship with God; the practice of family rituals, which serve to live out the prophetic mission of baptism, developing Christian attitudes in work, leisure, family relationships, and family prayer. And finally, *the practice of giving one's help and time to others*, in a spirit of service, to live out the royal baptismal mission within and outside the family.

Forming families to the possibility of living this *liturgy* - which is nothing less than a lived experience of the Gospel inside and outside their homes - is a concrete way to form the minds, consciences, hearts and daily behaviors of spouses and their children to a truly Christian lifestyle. In fact, educating families in the awareness that they are *churches*, animated by a true daily liturgy, means forming them in that necessary Christian discernment for which families today are thirsting. The idea of a domestic Church liturgy, in fact, helps each family member to become *familiar with Jesus*, with regular moments of prayer, dialogue, celebration, and gradual awareness of one's Christian vocation in everyday life.

This applies to all families, whatever their composition or cultural, ethnic, and social context.¹² Each family, in fact, can adapt its own cultural, ethnic, and family traditions

to the model of the liturgy of family life. The same is also true for families in difficulty, who can find solid anchors to a life of relationship with God; for cohabiting families, who can begin to make a journey toward the sacrament of marriage; and for those born of new unions, who, starting from the grace of Baptism, can begin to live an authentic Christian lifestyle especially with their children.¹³

Spouses, as *apostles*,¹⁴ will know how to find *new pastoral ways*¹⁵ to propose *family paths* to those they accompany, including in the preparation for marriage.

7. *The formation of companions.*

In order to implement a renewed pastoral care of married life, it would be desirable that both accompanying couples, in parishes and movements, and presbyters, already from seminary training, be **formed** not only in content but also in mutual complementarity and ecclesial co-responsibility. It is the *spirit of synodality* that the catechumenate wants to reflect. This call for the development of greater ecclesial co-responsibility is especially addressed to the bishops, so that they may do what they can to foster it in parishes and local churches, encouraging, for example, that more experienced and competent spouses may teach in seminaries and more seminarians experience marriage ministry in parishes.

It is also essential to train spouses in the service of accompanying engaged couples, not only with theoretical training on the sacrament of marriage, but with retreats and times of prayer that make them experience and strengthen the grace of the sacrament among them as spouses. Their marriage should be cared for at least as much as that of those preparing to celebrate it. Between priests and spouses there must be in this sense a strong alliance, a desire to guard and strengthen each other's vocations to be effective companions and witnesses of Christian life.

We must, in fact, prepare ourselves for a true *ministry of accompanying* young people to marriage, young people who today are often already cohabiting and with children, when they approach the Church to get married: preparing ourselves is indispensable in order to form ourselves for a "style" of accompaniment adapted to their reality and,

where necessary, personalized, especially with regard to people lacking a mature experience of faith, who must be able to see in already married couples, and experience for themselves, that married life is beautiful and possible.

In the formation of future formators, therefore, it is urgent to devote oneself to the new challenges of postmodernity, including issues of sexual morality, conjugal morality and bioethics, which are now part of the daily life of families.

The Pathways provide *remote preparation* for children for married life, right from the time of catechism. I believe I can say that no one today in children's catechesis and pathways talks to children about the beauty of the sacrament of marriage.

Remote preparation aims from childhood to "prepare the soil" on which the seeds of the eventual vocation to married life can be grafted; and this will happen if we transmit to children the *desire for marriage*.

According to the proposal of the catechumenate, the formation path begun with children could continue with adolescents and young people, so that they do not come to the decision to marry almost by chance and after an adolescence marked by frustrating and painful affective experiences for their personal and spiritual lives.

Having this additional goal clear, the affectivity and sexuality education courses, which help us form our children, should not be limited to preparing them only for love, because today love is interpreted as romantic love; rather, they should be included in a clear conjugal vision of love. We need to talk about Christian marriage within communities, in homilies. We need to pray for vocations to marriage during Eucharistic celebrations. The family alone cannot succeed in educating children in marriage-oriented affectivity. It needs the help of the Church. Parents, in fact, are not able today to deal with the topic of sexuality with their children, nor are they able to set up a peaceful dialogue based on clear values to accompany the children. Pedagogical and educational paths are needed. For all these reasons, the *pastoral care of preparation for married life* - as it would be good to define it from now on - should not be confined to the narrow sphere of "meetings for engaged couples," but should "cross over" in time to many other areas of pastoral care, avoiding a certain division into "watertight compartments" and always having in mind the vocational perspective, in order to unify and give coherence to

people's journey of faith and life.

8. Couple and family discernment.

It will be essential to help couples discern what God's plan of salvation is for their lives, first personally and then as a couple.

The methodology of discernment is a point that needs to be reflected upon at the pastoral level. Training companions in an appropriate discernment methodology is needed today more than ever, so that they themselves will know how to discern the situations in which they will have to help people "seek" and then "accomplish God's will" in discernment and in the concrete circumstances of personal and ecclesial life in which they find themselves. Discernment, more than ever before, requires personalized accompaniment, since it does not proceed deductively, from abstract indoctrination or theory about marriage, but inductively from concrete life experience. It requires putting oneself in the perspective of relationship with God. It needs a journey of faith, which activates in people not only right *understanding* and right *action*, but also right *feeling of God's will* and the vocation to which He calls us. The method of discernment should be taught to every married couple; it is an art (not a theory), which is learned through practice, in order to learn to recognize the signs of God's presence in our lives in concrete circumstances and to be able to choose as Christians with the help of the Holy Spirit, who is the real protagonist of discernment.

9. Accompaniment for the first years of marriage and couples in crisis.

Without dwelling on the proximate and immediate preparation for marriage, for which I entrust the document to your reading, I only wish to mention the importance of the accompaniment of the first years of married life and of couples in crisis. These are two aspects that, beyond a few lay movements and a few pastoral projects designed for this purpose, variously distributed in the countries of the world, are still rather neglected in family ministry. This is why the Holy Father wanted the accompaniment of the early

years to be part of the catechumenate, as was envisaged in *Familiaris consortio* (no. 66).

In our societies, in which divorce laws have weakened the bond and undermined at the cultural level the indissolubility of marriage, it is urgent and the responsibility of pastors to create conditions to help spouses prevent breakups, separations, and ultimate suffering. The Holy Father, in this regard, invites bishops and pastors to set up in each reality a specific *pastoral service* dedicated to those whose relationship has broken or is in difficulty, to safeguard the bond and prevent, where possible, separations. Thus, there is an urgent need to provide a ministry of accompaniment for spouses.

One of the fundamental aspects of the catechumenate in the first years of married life is then the introduction of *marital mystagogy*: bringing spouses closer to the mystery of the sacrament celebrated, helping them to understand its meaning and working action in their daily lives, guiding them in discerning the "signs" of Christ's presence in their family. It is necessary to develop the *pastoral care of the bond* - as advocated by *Amoris laetitia* in No. 211 - by accompanying spouses in overcoming difficult moments, helping them to esteem each other and guard their marriage. They must be helped to "taste internally" their marriage (St. Ignatius).

Special attention should be paid in this context to the fact that the accompaniment of spouses should be thought of with the criteria of a *ministry of mission*: the participation of Christian spouses in the pastoral life of the community should be one of the objectives of catechumenal accompaniment. Thousands of Christian families have no idea of the call to mission, which they receive when they marry. Yet, as baptized and married lay people, we need to know that we are called to be active protagonists, to be the Church and build the Church together with the pastors. Such awareness not only gives us fullness of meaning in living our married and family life, but can deeply unite spouses who are invited to serve the Church together. It is this aspect that makes them co-responsible for evangelization in the Church, and not just users of parish and church services. They must feel called by the bishops to be an outgoing sacramental community. This is a different way of thinking about marriage and the family: not as

closed places where people isolate themselves, but as *bridges* that lead to other families.¹⁶

In this way, as we read in *Lumen Gentium* 31, for their part, they will be able to fulfill according to their proper nuptial vocation, that is, as families, the mission of the Christian people in the Church and in the world.

I invite you, therefore, to study the text carefully and to share it with your collaborators, in order to be able to understand how each diocese can initiate this profound and radical change in proclaiming the vocation to marriage and family to the next generations.

Footnotes

1. FRANCIS, Discourse to the participants in the course on the marital process, Feb. 25, 2017
2. Pay attention to the significance of *ius connubii*, it does not refer to the pretext of the celebration, but to the right to celebrate an authentic marriage. Cfr Benedict XVI, 2011.
3. FRANCIS, Preface, *Catechumenal pathways*, cit. p. 9
4. FRANCIS, Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 70: "Nor can we overlook the fact that in recent decades there has been a breakdown in the way Catholics pass down the Christian faith to the young. It is undeniable that many people feel disillusioned and no longer identify with the Catholic tradition. Growing numbers of parents do not bring their children for baptism or teach them how to pray. There is also a certain exodus towards other faith communities."
5. DICASTERY FOR LAITY, FAMILY AND LIFE, *Catechumenal pathways*, cit. n. 3, p. 14.
6. DICASTERY FOR LAITY, FAMILY AND LIFE, *Catechumenal pathways*, cit. n. 6, p. 19.
7. C.f. Francis, Letter to Cardinal Marc Ouellet, President of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/letters/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160319_pont-comm-america-latina.html
8. 5th General Conference of the Latin-American Episcopate of the Caribbean, document of Aparecida (May 31, 2007).
9. "In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. *Mt* 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who

has truly experienced God's saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are "disciples" and "missionaries", but rather that we are always "missionary disciples". (EG 120).

10. This proposal is part of the task that the new apostolic constitution *Praedicate evangelium*, in Article 136, entrusts, in particular, to the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, in coordination with the Dicasteries for Evangelization and Culture and Education, "the Dicastery supports the development and sharing of models for transmitting the faith within families and encourages parents to practice their faith in daily life."

11. In the wake of *Familiaris consortio*, 50, we thus understand the content of the family's mission "in reference to Jesus Christ as Prophet, Priest and King- three aspects of a single reality-by presenting the Christian family as 1) a believing and evangelizing community, 2) a community in dialogue with God, and 3) a community at the service of man."

12. *Familiaris consortio*, 52: "The absolute need for family catechesis emerges with particular force in certain situations that the Church unfortunately experiences in some places: "In places where anti-religious legislation endeavors even to prevent education in the faith, and in places where widespread unbelief or invasive secularism makes real religious growth practically impossible, 'the Church of the home' remains the one place where children and young people can receive an authentic catechesis."

13. Every Christian, by virtue of Baptism, especially within his or her own family, is a disciple-missionary "insofar as he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus" (FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, Nov. 24, 2013, 120.).

14. *Familiaris consortio*, 71: "This is demanded as an act of docile obedience to Christ the Lord. For it is He who, by virtue of the fact that marriage of baptized persons has been raised to a sacrament, confers upon Christian married couples a special mission as apostles, sending them as workers into His vineyard, and, in a very special way, into this field of the family. In this activity, married couples act in communion and collaboration with the other members of the Church, who also work for the family, contributing their own gifts and ministries. This apostolate will be exercised in the first place within the families of those concerned, through the witness of a life lived."

15. *Amoris laetitia*, 199.

16. Outgoing Church: learning to step outside the usual patterns, stepping out into today's complex reality, stepping out toward a way of living faith as experience and witness, and not just as the application of a doctrine.

Translated by Joseph Caruso

