

Please, Thank you, and I'm Sorry

Pope Francis

In this excerpt from chapter 4 of the post-synodal exhortation Amoris Laetitia, the Pope speaks very concretely about the various aspects of conjugal friendship. What emerges is an invitation to "to be realistic about our limits, defects and imperfections and to respond to the call to grow together, to bring love to maturity and to strengthen the union, come what may."

Love that reveals itself and increases

The love of friendship unifies all aspects of marital life and helps family members to grow constantly. This love must be freely and generously expressed in words and acts. In the family, "three words need to be used. I want to repeat this! Three words: 'Please', 'Thank you', 'Sorry'. Three essential words!"¹ "In our families when we are not overbearing and ask: 'May I?'; in our families when we are not selfish and can say: 'Thank you!'; and in our families when someone realizes that he or she did something wrong and is able to say 'Sorry!', our family experiences peace and joy".² Let us not be stingy about using these words but keep repeating them day after day. For "certain silences are oppressive, even at times within families, between husbands and wives, between parents and children, among siblings".³ The right words, spoken at the right time, protect and nurture love daily.

All this occurs through a process of constant growth. The very special form of love that is marriage is called to embody what Saint Thomas Aquinas said about charity in general. "Charity", he says, "by its very nature, has no limit to its increase, for it is a participation in that infinite charity which is the Holy Spirit... Nor on the part of the subject can its limit be fixed, because as charity grows, so too does its capacity for an even greater increase".⁴ Saint Paul also prays: "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another" (1 Th 3:12), and again, "concerning fraternal love... we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more" (1 Th 4:9-10). More and more! Marital love is not defended primarily by presenting indissolubility as a duty, or by repeating doctrine, but by helping it to grow ever stronger under the impulse of grace. A love that fails to grow is at risk. Growth can only occur if we respond to God's grace through constant acts of love, acts of kindness that become ever more frequent, intense, generous, tender and cheerful. Husbands and wives "become conscious of their unity and experience it more deeply from day to day".⁵ The gift of God's love poured out upon the spouses is also a summons to constant growth in grace.

It is not helpful to dream of an idyllic and perfect love needing no stimulus to grow. A celestial notion of earthly love forgets that the best is yet to come, that fine wine matures with age. As the Bishops of Chile have pointed out, "the perfect families proposed by deceptive consumerist propaganda do not exist. In those families, no one grows old, there is no sickness, sorrow or death... Consumerist propaganda presents a fantasy that has

nothing to do with the reality which must be faced daily by the heads of families".⁶ It is much healthier to be realistic about our limits, defects and imperfections and to respond to the call to grow together, to bring love to maturity and to strengthen the union, come what may.

Dialogue

Dialogue is essential for experiencing, expressing and fostering love in marriage and family life. Yet it can only be the fruit of a long and demanding apprenticeship. Men and women, young people and adults, communicate differently. They speak different languages and they act in different ways. Our way of asking and responding to questions, the tone we use, our timing and any number of other factors condition how well we communicate. We need to develop certain attitudes that express love and encourage authentic dialogue.

Take time, quality time. This means being ready to listen patiently and attentively to everything the other person wants to say. It requires the self-discipline of not speaking until the time is right. Instead of offering an opinion or advice, we need to be sure that we have heard everything the other person has to say. This means cultivating an interior silence that makes it possible to listen to the other person without mental or emotional distractions. Do not be rushed, put aside all of your own needs and worries and make space. Often the other spouse does not need a solution to his or her problems, but simply to be listened to, to feel that someone has acknowledge their pain, their disappointment, their fear, their anger, their hopes and their dreams.

¹ *Address to the Pilgrimage of Families during the Year of Faith* (26 October 2013): AAS 105 (2013), 980.

² *Angelus Message* (29 December 2013): L'Osservatore Romano, 30-31 December 2013, p. 7.

³ *Address to the Pilgrimage of Families during the Year of Faith* (26 October 2013): AAS 105 (2013), 978.

⁴ *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 24, a. 7.

⁵ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes*, 48.

⁶ Chilean Bishops' Conference, *La vida y la familia: regalos de Dios para cada uno de nosotros* (21 July 2014).