

AMORIS LAETITIA - The Joy of Love

In the opening of this Apostolic Exhortation by Pope Francis he begins by saying that the recent synod on family life has revealed that issues are complex and at times they do not lend themselves to easy solutions.

Francis also points out that:

“Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. Jn 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does. Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs. For “cultures are in fact quite diverse and every general principle... needs to be inculturated, if it is to be respected and applied” (2)

He will return to this point later.

Chapter one: In the Light of the Word

This chapter begins with an exploration of how scripture helps us develop our understanding of love and relationships. Scripture is full of families, of stories of love, and images of a God who loves. From the beginning of scripture we are reminded that all of us are created in the image of God. Called to love, called to bring life to others. When scripture talks about a couple being joined together, the relationship that it envisages is one of profound closeness both physical and emotional. This same language is used to mirror our relationship with God. When we consider the concept of Trinity we come to understand that

“the couple’s fruitful relationship becomes an image for understanding and describing the mystery of God himself, for in the Christian vision of the Trinity, God is contemplated as Father, Son and Spirit of love. The triune God is a communion of love, and the family is its living reflection.” (11)

The Bible reflects too the idea that the family is a place where faith can grow and be nurtured. However it also recognises that pain, suffering, violence can often break families. When we consider the life of Jesus the picture of the Holy Family presented is not one without suffering. The early life of Jesus begins as a refugee and as Jesus grows he reflects the fact that at times children need to move away from their families to find their own path. Throughout his life Jesus encounters the anxieties, sufferings and joys of ordinary people. He always reaches out to others with acceptance and with love.

“Christ proposed as the distinctive sign of his disciples the law of love and the gift of self for others (cf. Mt 22:39; Jn 13:34).Love also bears fruit in mercy and forgiveness. We see this in a particular way in the scene of the woman caught in adultery; in front of the Temple, the woman is surrounded by her accusers, but later, alone with Jesus, she meets not condemnation but the admonition to lead a more worthy life (cf. Jn 8:1-11). (27)

Every family is encouraged to: ***look to the icon of the Holy Family of Nazareth. Its daily life had its share of burdens and even nightmares, as when they met with Herod’s implacable violence”(30).***

For Reflection

For Governors:

- Given that scripture is so important in our story how do you know that teachers know enough to draw out from scripture its meaning?
- How do we share our understanding with families

For Teachers:

- When teaching scripture do we take enough time to reflect on the meaning it might convey to us today?

Chapter Two: The experiences and challenges of families

This chapter considers the experience of families today and the challenges they face. The welfare of families is decisive for the future both of the church and the world. Families are subject to different influences. Roles within the family have changed, there is less support for family life and a growing tendency towards individualism can weaken family life. Cultural practices can also weaken family structures: Having to move for work, the stress of our fast paced existence, fear of commitment, an emphasis on freedom of choice, all of these can weaken family life.

“It is easy nowadays to confuse genuine freedom with the idea that each individual can act arbitrarily, as if there were no truths, values and principles to provide guidance, and everything were possible and permissible. The ideal of marriage, marked by a commitment to exclusivity and stability, is swept aside whenever it proves inconvenient or tiresome. The fear of loneliness and the desire for stability and fidelity exist side by side with a growing fear of entrapment in a relationship that could hamper the achievement of one’s personal goals.” (34)

In the face of this, Pope Francis says, it is no good simply trying to impose views simply by authority; we need to present in a more effective way our reasons and motivations for choosing marriage and the family. We need to be clear about what we really do believe. Catholics are often guilty of presenting *“marriage in such a way that its unitive meaning, its call to grow in love and its ideal of mutual assistance are overshadowed by an almost exclusive insistence on the duty of procreation. Nor have we always provided solid guidance to young married couples, understanding their timetables, their way of thinking and their concrete concerns. At times we have also proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families” (36)*

If we give out the wrong message, if we do not provide support for those who need it, if we do not listen to people and their stories then we cannot be surprised if others fail to understand. Pope Francis reminds us that *“We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them”.* (37)

We need to ensure that people have sufficient knowledge and understanding to consider situations and make informed choices.

The pope continues then to talk about the witness of loving marriages where people do experience the grace of God and through that love are able to reach out to others. He reflects on the fact that:

“Many people feel that the Church’s message on marriage and the family does not clearly reflect the preaching and attitudes of Jesus, who set forth a demanding ideal yet never failed to show compassion and closeness to the frailty of individuals like the Samaritan woman or the woman caught in adultery.” (39)

He warns however about the dangers of ignoring or not speaking out against a culture which speaks against commitment, which encourages self-interest and encourages a purely romantic idea of love. He says that: ***We need to find the right language, arguments and forms of witness that can help us reach the hearts of young people, appealing to their capacity for generosity, commitment, love and even heroism, and in this way inviting them to take up the challenge of marriage with enthusiasm and courage.”(40)***

The document also notes the challenges marriages may face in contemporary society. The problems of isolation and lack of support, growing consumerism which exacerbates financial pressures, a lack of affordable housing, the difficulties of caring for the elderly or ill, the lack of work opportunities for the young, extended work hours for many and caring for children with disabilities. In many areas the need to move from your own country splits up families, makes young people more vulnerable and increases pressure on ordinary families. Poverty also splits up families and makes it difficult to provide for children. The Pope reminds us that where we encounter those suffering from a variety of problems:

“the Church must be particularly concerned to offer understanding, comfort and acceptance, rather than imposing straightaway a set of rules that only lead people to feel judged and abandoned by the very Mother called to show them God’s mercy.”(49)

This chapter ends with a discussion of identity and gender. Whilst the rise of rights for woman are welcomed, and there is strong condemnation of any form of sexual violence or exploitation and a reminder about the equal dignity of both men and women; there is also however a concern that society can deny ***“the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman”*** and ***“promote a personal identity and emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female.”*** There is a reminder that: ***“biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated” (56)***

For Reflection

For Governors

- It is important to have a relationship education programme that clearly not only outlines the Church’s teaching but shows a real understanding of what lies behind this. Do you constantly review your programme? Are you confident your staff have enough knowledge to accurately reflect the Church’s understanding?
- How do you listen to the stories of the families that make up your community? How do we (as far as we are able as schools) provide support for them or signpost them to the correct support?

For Teachers:

- When you teach relationship education are you doing so in a way that:
 - helps young people make informed choices
 - present a real understanding of the teaching of the Church
 - helps them to reflect on society and the way it encourages individualism

Chapter Three: Looking to Jesus

The third chapter looks to Jesus to inform our view of marriage reminding us that *“Christian family can be fully understood only in the light of the Father’s infinite love revealed in Christ.”*(59) Through the New Testament we come to understand marriage as an indissoluble union which is a gift not a burden. Looking at the life of Jesus we see someone who experienced his own and others family life. Who was concerned with mercy which enables people to change and be restored to wholeness. The teaching of recent Popes on family life including that of Pope Benedict who reminds us: *“that ‘marriage based on an exclusive and definitive love becomes an icon of the relationship between God and his people, and vice versa. God’s way of loving becomes the measure of human love”* (70) We believe that *“through the Church, marriage and the family receive the grace of the Holy Spirit from Christ, in order to bear witness to the Gospel of God’s love”* (71) Marriage within the Catholic understanding is not a social convention but a real representation of the bond between Christ and his Church. Marriage is therefore a vocation which involves mutual self-giving, faithfulness and openness to new life. Christ is with the couple within their marriage and within the joys, hopes and anxieties of our everyday lives God is present. Christ always looks at people with mercy and compassion so the Church must ensure that pastoral care for those of the faithful who are living together, or are only married civilly, or are divorced and remarried is always seen through the eyes of Christ. The Pope reminds us that:

“When faced with difficult situations and wounded families, it is always necessary to recall this general principle: Pastors must know that, for the sake of truth, they are obliged to exercise careful discernment of situations...Therefore, while clearly stating the Church’s teaching, pastors are to avoid judgements that do not take into account the complexity of various situations, and they are to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience and endure distress because of their condition”....” (79)

This is a compassionate approach which places mercy at the heart of decision making. This chapter also considers the place of children pointing out that openness to new life is an essential characteristic of marriage, that married couples share in God’s work of creation and that having a child can never be reduced to “one variable of an individual’s or a couple’s plans”. There is also a strong condemnation of abortion.

“it is urgent to state that, if the family is the sanctuary of life, the place where life is conceived and cared for, it is a horrendous contradiction when it becomes a place where life is rejected and destroyed. So great is the value of a human life, and so inalienable the right to life of an innocent child growing in the mother’s womb, that no alleged right to one’s own body can justify a decision to terminate that life, which is an end in itself and which can never be considered the “property” of another human being.” (83)

It is not just abortion however we need to focus on. This statement is accompanied by a condemnation of the death penalty and Euthanasia and the need to protect life in all its stages.

For Reflection

- **How do we teach and model mercy in our policies and practice?**
- **How do we teach and model a respect for life in our policies and practice?**

Chapter Four: Love in Marriage

Chapter 4 looks at the idea of Love and begins with St Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor 13:4-7). There is an explanation of this text here that is definitely worth reading for yourself but especially if you are going to use this text with pupils. Effectively it considers the idea that the love Paul is talking about here is not simply an emotional feeling but a decision of the will. A commitment to try to emulate Christ; reaching out to and serving others. This love rejects injustice, is motivated by a desire for equality and is moved by a compassion which truly enters into the life and sufferings of others. This is a challenging thought provoking and moving reflection on the words of St Paul and you should read it in its entirety.

This chapter also considers the way marriage can be reflected through the eyes of a consumerist society. Within the adverts family life is present as ideal. No one grows old or struggles. No one faces problems. At the other extreme marriage is presented as an 'end'. Young people fear that love may die through a formal commitment to each other. We are reminded that *"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."* (135) Marriage is not a contract or a duty but a loving relationship. *"For this reason, a love lacking either pleasure or passion is insufficient to symbolize the union of the human heart with God: "All the mystics have affirmed that supernatural love and heavenly love find the symbols which they seek in marital love, rather than in friendship, filial devotion or devotion to a cause" (142)*

It then goes on to talk about a positive view of sexuality.

"God himself created sexuality, which is a marvellous gift to his creatures. If this gift needs to be cultivated and directed, it is to prevent the "impoverishment of an authentic value. Saint John Paul II rejected the claim that the Church's teaching is "a negation of the value of human sexuality", or that the Church simply tolerates sexuality "because it is necessary for procreation". Sexual desire is not something to be looked down upon, "and there can be no attempt whatsoever to call into question its necessity" (150)

"In no way, then, can we consider the erotic dimension of love simply as a permissible evil or a burden to be tolerated for the good of the family. Rather, it must be seen as gift from God that enriches the relationship of the spouses. As a passion sublimated by a love respectful of the dignity of the other, it becomes a "pure, unadulterated affirmation" revealing the marvels of which the human heart is capable. In this way, even momentarily, we can feel that "life has turned out good and happy". (152)

Given the value we place on sex we need to be clear that any form of expression which seeks merely to use another or condones a violent or exploitative account must be condemned.

For Reflection

Read paragraphs 90 to 119 the section on St Paul to the Corinthians.

- How do you model this in your own life, the life of the school community?
- When we teach this paragraph how do we help ensure that children come to appreciate the full meaning of this text? To ensure they have a fully developed view of Love?
- How do we ensure through our relationship programme that pupils have a positive view of sexuality?

Chapter 5: 'Love always gives life.'

This chapter talks about the importance of being open to new life. The way parents love and care for their children is a reflection of the love of God who always loves us without us doing anything to deserve that love. *“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (Jer 1:5). Each child has a place in God’s heart from all eternity; once he or she is conceived, the Creator’s eternal dream comes true.” (167)*

We know however that there are children who from the moment of their birth meet nothing but rejection or suffering. It is not right however to say that such children should never have been born. This in effect is blaming children for the wrongs adults commit. We should instead try to do everything possible to ensure that each child is loved. Although we welcome children we are also reminded that:

John Paul II rightly explained that responsible parenthood does not mean “unlimited procreation or lack of awareness of what is involved in rearing children, but rather the empowerment of couples to use their inviolable liberty wisely and responsibly, taking into account social and demographic realities, as well as their own situation and legitimate desires”. (167)

This chapter also looks again at the idea of feminism and the rights of women. There is a plea that the struggle for women’s rights does not negate the idea of motherhood as an important vocation in its own right. The role of men is not ignored or undervalued. *“A father possessed of a clear and serene masculine identity who demonstrates affection and concern for his wife is just as necessary as a caring mother.” (175)*

The damage absent Fathers or men who are too controlling can do is also raised. There is a reminder that bringing life to the world, being fruitful is more than having children. It also consists of looking at our responsibilities to society and the wider world. The love that couples and families share enables them to reach out to others and make a difference in the world. Pope Francis quotes the poet Mario Benedetti (181) who says:

*“Your hands are my caress,
The harmony that fills my days.
I love you because your hands
Work for justice.
If I love you, it is because you are
My love, my companion and my all,
And on the street, side by side,
We are much more than just two”*

The idea that we have obligations to witness by our actions not simply by our words or our attendance at church is very clearly brought out.

“The celebration of the Eucharist thus becomes a constant summons for everyone “to examine himself or herself” to open the doors of the family to greater fellowship with the underprivileged, and in this way to receive the sacrament of that Eucharistic love which makes us one body. We must not forget that “the ‘mysticism’ of the sacrament has a social character”. When those who receive it turn a blind eye to the poor and suffering, or consent to various forms of division, contempt and inequality, the Eucharist is received unworthily.” (186)

The chapter ends with concern for the elderly.

“Do not cast me off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength is spent” (Ps 71:9). This is the plea of the elderly, who fear being forgotten and rejected. Just as God

asks us to be his means of hearing the cry of the poor, so too he wants us to hear the cry of the elderly.” (191) Concern is expressed that in some societies the elderly are perceived simply as an expensive burden. They can be made to feel isolated or useless. There is also a wish that the role of the wider family is not ignored.

For Reflection

- As the family of the school how do we ensure that all pupils feel that they are valued for who they are?
- How do we support those pupils who struggle with their family lives?
- How do we develop a sense of vocation within our pupils?
- As the family of the school how do we witness through our policies and practices our concern for justice?
- Do we celebrate the Eucharist in a way that brings out the social dimension?
- How do we inspire our pupils to be concerned for the elderly?

Chapter Six: Pastoral Challenges

In this chapter Pope Francis reflects on the difficulties of bringing a pastoral perspective to the challenges of family life. It looks in some detail at the different stages of married life and the help people may need.

“Pastoral care for families “needs to make it clear that the Gospel of the family responds to the deepest expectations of the human person:..... evangelization needs unambiguously to denounce cultural, social, political and economic factors – such as the excessive importance given to market logic – that prevent authentic family life and lead to discrimination, poverty, exclusion, and violence.”

In looking at where support for families comes from there is a reflection on the fact that ordained ministers are not always able or trained to help families. Concern was expressed that formation for the priesthood should not focus solely on doctrine but on studies that would better enable clergy to become fully formed mature adults who are able to help families. The church also needs lay leaders who have the appropriate skills. Marriage preparation needs to be appropriate, to encourage reflection and formation in a language that all, (perhaps especially young people) can relate to. When devising such courses, which need to be done on a local level to better reflect the needs of the community, we need to remember that it is not quantity but quality that counts. It is not necessary to overwhelm people with information but to allow time to consider their relationship, what they expect from that relationship and what they understand about love and commitment. We need to ensure too that couples fully understand the ceremony they are going to take part in and the fact that the ones they make are not simply present tense but have a future dimension.

“They need to be encouraged to see the sacrament not as a single moment that then becomes a part of the past and its memories, but rather as a reality that permanently influences the whole of married life.” (215)

The pope is concerned that support for married couples is not simply there before people marry but exists once they are married. He reflects that: *“Young love needs to keep dancing towards the future with immense hope.”(219).*

We are asked to consider how we can help witness too, strengthen and develop that hope. Parishes and pastoral workers are encouraged to consider how best they can help couples develop that hope and belief in love.

“Parishes, movements, schools and other Church institutions can help in a variety of ways

to support families and help them grow. These might include: meetings of couples living in the same neighbourhood, brief retreats for couples; talks by experts on concrete issues facing families, marriage counselling, home missionaries who help couples discuss their difficulties and desires, social services dealing with family problems like addiction, infidelity and domestic violence, programmes of spiritual growth, workshops for parents with troubled children and family meetings.”

There is a concern that sometimes in facing all the natural problems most marriages go through, rather than see these as opportunities for growth couples are encouraged to give up. This is a view reinforced by a society that holds a view of love as purely an emotional feeling. The prevailing view can be if you don't feel 'in love' then move on. Instead of which we need to realise that: *“that every crisis can be a new “yes”, enabling love to be renewed, deepened and inwardly strengthened.”* (238) However there are also times *when “separation becomes inevitable. At times it even becomes morally necessary, precisely when it is a matter of removing the more vulnerable spouse or young children from serious injury due to abuse and violence, from humiliation and exploitation, and from disregard and indifference”* Pastoral care is essential for people who find themselves in this position. There is a concern expressed that for those who are financially poor separation or divorce can cause even more harm and make people vulnerable. If someone who is divorced does remarry outside of the church then it is important that:

“the divorced who have entered a new union should be made to feel part of the Church. “They are not excommunicated” and they should not be treated as such, since they remain part of the ecclesial community. These situations “require careful discernment and respectful accompaniment. Language or conduct that might lead them to feel discriminated against should be avoided, and they should be encouraged to participate in the life of the community. The Christian community’s care of such persons is not to be considered a weakening of its faith and testimony to the indissolubility of marriage; rather, such care is a particular expression of its charity” (243)

The pope also expresses the desire that procedures for obtaining an annulment should be streamlined so that suffering is not prolonged. Also expressed here is a concern for children who suffer through marital breakup. This links back to the need to support parents whose marriages break up and who enter into new marriages. *“How can we encourage those parents to do everything possible to raise their children in the Christian life, to give them an example of committed and practical faith, if we keep them at arm’s length from the life of the community, as if they were somehow excommunicated? We must keep from acting in a way that adds even more to the burdens that children in these situations already have to bear!”* (246).

There then follows a brief look at the issues surrounding marriages where one person is a catholic and their partner is not. The situation with regard to homosexual couples is not fully explored here but the current position of the church is reiterated including the need to remove every form of unjust discrimination but remaining clear that sacramental marriage is not an option. The chapter ends with compassion for those who face bereavement and a discussion of the support needed for those who suffer bereavement.

For Reflection

- Society’s view of love can be commercialised or exploitative. How do we in school help counter those influences? (Just as an example would St Valentine’s Day be an opportunity to think about love in a more meaningful way?)
- How can we help families maintain their contact with the church?
- How can the school contribute to and support marriage preparation programmes?

- How do we support the adults in the school community when they are facing times of difficulty or stress?

Chapter Seven: Educating Children

This chapter opens with a discussion of the role of parents as educators. It then broadens out to look at the role of schools. There is a discussion of moral and ethical education.

“A good ethical education includes showing a person that it is in his own interest to do what is right. Today, it is less and less effective to demand something that calls for effort and sacrifice, without clearly pointing to the benefits which it can bring.” (265)

There is a discussion of how children can be helped to appreciate the fact that actions have consequences and our actions can impact on others, to understand the need for forgiveness, that values are important and need to be lived out as virtues. The point is raised that children and young people need to be encouraged to take responsibility.

“When children realize that they have to be responsible for themselves, their self-esteem is enriched. This in turn teaches them to respect the freedom of others. Obviously this does not mean expecting children to act like adults, but neither does it mean underestimating their ability to grow in responsible freedom.” (275)

This chapter also includes a discussion of the need for sex education and considers what the important elements in such a programme may be: *“Sex education should provide information while keeping in mind that children and young people have not yet attained full maturity. The information has to come at a proper time and in a way suited to their age.”*(281)

Finally the document considers how faith might be ‘passed on’ to children. When talking about the role parents play. When talking about how children learn it talks about the need for authenticity and witness. *“Handing on the faith presumes that parents themselves genuinely trust God, seek him and sense their need for him, for only in this way does “one generation laud your works to another, and declare your mighty acts”* (287) further on we have *“It is essential that children actually see that, for their parents, prayer is something truly important.”* (288). Although this section is directed at parents it could equally well apply to schools.

For Reflection:

- Have you reviewed your sex and relationship policy in the light of this document and diocesan guidelines?
- Is your school a place of witness and authenticity as regards faith? Does the way we treat each other reflect the priority of love and mercy?
- How do we inform parents to help them participate in the process of educating their children?
- How do we provide an ethical education?
- Do your policies and practices always represent ethical choices?

Chapter 8: Accompanying, discerning and integrating weakness

This chapter begins with a reminder that though we are called to perfection we live with our own weakness and fragility. We are a church of sinners who need the mercy of God. Though we might strive to live up to the church's teaching on marriage there are times when things may go wrong. We are reminded that: ***“the Church does not disregard the constructive elements in those situations which do not yet or no longer correspond to her teaching on marriage”*** In other words even if the relationship people are in does not fully match the ideal it may still have within it elements that reflect a God who is love. There is recognition of the need for pastoral discernment when reaching out to people or seeking to help them. ***“it is a source of concern that many young people today distrust marriage and live together, putting off indefinitely the commitment of marriage, while yet others break a commitment already made and immediately assume a new one. “As members of the Church, they too need pastoral care that is merciful and helpful”. For the Church’s pastors are not only responsible for promoting Christian marriage, but also the “pastoral discernment of the situations of a great many who no longer live this reality.” (293)***

We are reminded of St John Paul II who proposed the ‘law of gradualness’. You need to take care here. This is not under any circumstances a change in the Church's teaching about marriage but it is a recognition that it can take time for people to fully understand and live this teaching. ***“human being “knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by different stages of growth”.*** (295) What is being reinforced here is that the Church is always a Church of mercy. ***“The way of the Church is not to condemn anyone for ever; it is to pour out the balm of God’s mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart”*** (296). Life is complicated and not clear cut. The situations people find themselves in require real discernment everyone's story is different and should be listened to. The role of the Church is to help people not reject. Everyone belongs to God. When speaking of those whose relationships take them outside of sacramental marriage we are told: ***“Such persons need to feel not as excommunicated members of the Church, but instead as living members, able to live and grow in the Church and experience her as a mother who welcomes them always, who takes care of them with affection and encourages them along the path of life and the Gospel.”***(299)

It is not possible simply to produce rules that deal with complex situations. What is needed is: ***“a renewed encouragement to undertake a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases, (for those involved and the pastor accompanying them in the discernment process) one which would recognize that, since “the degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases”, the consequences or effects of a rule need not necessarily always be the same.”*** (300)

You can only enter into such a process with openness humility, a belief in the good news that you are loved by God and a desire to do God's will. We cannot make objective judgements from the outside. You cannot for example when talking about people living in an irregular union simply say that these people are living in a state of mortal sin. Only God knows people's hearts. The catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that: ***“affective immaturity, force of acquired habit, conditions of anxiety or other psychological or social factors may lessen or even extenuate moral culpability.”***(302) The Church has always considered that conscience plays an important part in our decision making but the need for an informed conscience is restated. The need to ask what is God asking of me in this situation and to try to honestly discern the response. However we are also reminded that ***“It (conscience) can also recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God, and come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one's limits,***

while yet not fully the objective ideal.” (303) In other words in the concrete and messy reality of our lives we may not always be able to live up to the ideal the church presents but may be making the best response we are capable of giving at that moment. With God’s help we may approach the ideal as we grow. The key point is for us to try to continue to grow closer to God and for the Church community to try to help us do this.

“For this reason, a pastor cannot feel that it is enough simply to apply moral laws to those living in “irregular” situations, as if they were stones to throw at people’s lives. This would bespeak the closed heart of one used to hiding behind the Church’s teachings, “sitting on the chair of Moses and judging at times with superiority and superficiality difficult cases and wounded families” (305)

“By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God. Let us remember that “a small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order, but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties”(305)

This is not relativism or a weakening of the Church’s stand. The ideal we strive for always remains the same but as our pupils might say we always need to ask the question ‘What would Jesus do?’ The chapter ends with a reminder of the mercy of God which must inform every aspect of our lives.

“At times we find it hard to make room for God’s unconditional love in our pastoral activity. We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance. That is the worst way of watering down the Gospel. It is true, for example, that mercy does not exclude justice and truth, but first and foremost we have to say that mercy is the fullness of justice and the most radiant manifestation of God’s truth.” (311)

For Reflection

- How does the school mirror the unconditional love of God
- What do we witness to our pupils about judging others?
- Do we encourage pupils (and adults) to ask the question ‘What would Jesus do?’

Chapter Nine: The Spirituality of Marriage and the Family

The chapter opens with a reminder that God is present in the everyday life of families. The love we experience and share within our families can lead us into a relationship with God. Where love is, there is God. God is with us through both the joys and sufferings of daily life. If a family prays together then it can be a means of becoming more aware of the presence of God, more open to God's love. The Eucharist is the culmination of our prayer. Going to mass as a family strengthens and renews the love that is at the heart of family life. Marriage also brings the experience of belonging completely to another person. Being faithful supporting the other person through illness, through suffering, through joy, as we grow old is a reminder and witness to the love of God who will never abandon us. We are reminded too that one person can never completely fulfil all our desires hopes and dreams; only God can do that so we need to allow each other the space and freedom to find God at the core of your life. Families need to reach out to others: "***When a family is welcoming and reaches out to others, especially the poor and the neglected, it is "a symbol, witness and participant in the Church's motherhood". (324)*** No family is perfect, we all need to grow in love. Recognising this should stop us judging those who find the journey more difficult.

***Holy Family of Nazareth,
grant that our families too
may be places of communion and prayer,
authentic schools of the Gospel
and small domestic churches.***

***Holy Family of Nazareth,
may families never again experience
violence, rejection and division;
may all who have been hurt or scandalized
find ready comfort and healing.***