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“The Joy of Love” by Pope Francis

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After several years of worldwide input, pastoral reflection, and synodal debate, Pope Francis has issued his apostolic exhortation on the family, *Amoris laetitia*, “The Joy of Love.” As always, when a Pope issues a teaching document to the entire Church, it is a great gift, and this exhortation from Pope Francis is no exception. You could say it is a hymn to the beauty and joy of marriage and family life. But it is also a realistic and down-to-earth appraisal of the challenges facing couples and families.

In the opening chapters, Pope Francis presents God’s creation and plan for marriage and family life as we find them in Sacred Scripture, and he then contrasts this divine plan with the lived experience and challenges that so many couples and families are facing in today’s world. The Pope gives a beautiful reflection on St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, and reminds us that the center of the Gospel of marriage and family is love. This authentic love is patient, kind, and merciful; it is self-giving, humble, and never rude or resentful. This love is also fruitful and always brings new life to those it touches. Francis knows, however, that this is not always the experience of our brothers and sisters. He acknowledges that the joy of love is often missing from marriages and families, and he calls upon the Church to do what she can to reach out and support those who are struggling and wounded in their life situation.

To give only a taste of its breadth, Pope Francis reflects on the vocations of spouses and the family, as well as the roles of mothers and fathers. Throughout the document he shows a profound understanding of the gift of children and offers warm praise for large families. He speaks of the extended family and the place of the elderly and historical memory in family life. The Holy Father addresses issues of infertility, adoption, foster care and children with special needs. He strongly reaffirms the message of Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *Humanae Vitae* on the fruitfulness of married love, and he firmly proclaims the sanctity of all human life. Pope Francis clearly affirms the nature of marriage between a man and a woman, and he rejects so-called gender ideology and the confusion it fosters.

The Holy Father also calls for a ministry to families that offers a fuller catechesis and formation for those who are engaged or married, for their children, for priests, deacons, religious, seminarians and all those who minister to families. He observes that formation for marriage and family life should not begin with the engagement, but must happen early on at home and at school. He notes too that newly married couples need to be accompanied as they begin their lives together.

Those who expected a change in the Church’s teaching on marriage, family life, sexuality and divorce, will be disappointed. The Holy Father reaffirms all that the Church has held in its great body of teaching on these issues. Much attention has been given to speculation that the Pope would change the Church’s law and pastoral practice regarding the reception of the Eucharist by those who are divorced and remarried. He makes no such explicit change, but urges close and generous pastoral care in continuity with the Church’s teaching and practice. The Pope specifically urges the Church toward a more personal accompaniment of all those who struggle to live out their vocations as spouses, parents and children in the context of family life. The document emphasizes the need for deeper reflection and discernment by pastors and Catholic couples in so-called “irregular” situations, so that they may be integrated and participate as fully as possible in the life of the Church.

Giuseppina DeSimone, a married philosophy professor who spoke at the Vatican press conference introducing the exhortation, gave her impression of it. She observed that the Pope is taking people “by the hand to discover the beauty of our families - imperfect, fragile, but extraordinary because they are supported in their daily journey by the love of the Lord who never tires, doesn’t renege, and makes everything new.”

It is important to note that the Holy Father makes no apologies for the fullness of the Church’s teaching and vision of marriage and the family. The Pope very directly tells us that Christian marriage is

not a burden placed upon humanity, but is a gift from God to his beloved children. It is a way of life that reflects God's own love for his people and that joins us more fully to his own Son. Marriage gives husbands and wives their own part in "salvation history," the whole story of God's love, constancy and fidelity towards his people. It is not merely an ideal for a select few, but is part of God's plan for the whole of humanity.

As always, Pope Francis refers us back to Jesus Christ as the ground of our faith and our Christian lives. Quoting the Second Vatican Council, he tells us, "Only in contemplating Christ does a person come to understand the deepest truth about human relationships." Christ himself is the guide to love, self-giving, and fidelity in marriage and family.

This document can be found at www.fargodiocese.org/joyoflove. The Pope himself encourages us to read it thoroughly and reflectively. It is somewhat lengthy, but is certainly accessible to any adult who is interested in our faith and in the "Gospel of the family." I invite all the faithful of our Diocese to read it, perhaps a few pages at a time, and allow its message to sink in. Over time, I am confident that our lives will be enriched by reading and praying over "The Joy of Love."