

This column was originally printed in the October 2015 issue of New Earth, the magazine for the Diocese of Fargo.

The visit of Pope Francis and the Gospel of the Family

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In an extraordinary week packed with activity, Pope Francis just concluded his first visit to the United States. The catalyst for his visit was the World Meeting of Families held in the city of Philadelphia. But along with this event, the Pope also visited Washington D.C., where he met with President Obama and addressed a joint meeting of Congress, the first Pope to ever do so. While in Washington D.C., he celebrated the canonization of St. Junipero Serra, the great Spanish missionary who established the California missions and did much to evangelize what is now the western part of the United States. Pope Francis also visited New York, where he addressed the United Nations General Assembly, following in the footsteps of Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI.

But from his demeanor during the many events of the week, it was clear that Pope Francis most enjoyed simply meeting and speaking with the many people who came out to greet him. Hundreds of thousands lined the streets and poured into the public venues where Pope Francis appeared, and he obviously took great delight in these encounters with the faithful.

I was especially honored to be among those bishops who greeted Pope Francis personally. As a regional representative in our Bishops' Conference, I had the privilege of meeting the Holy Father after he addressed all the U.S. bishops at St. Matthew's Cathedral in Washington D.C. And I found him to be just as warm in person as he is at public events and gatherings. Pope Francis made a point to tell all the bishops that he extended his greetings to each of the local churches that we shepherd throughout the country. Although he could not visit all of us, he was certainly with us in spirit. So, to all the people of the Diocese of Fargo, "Hello" from the Pope!

The key theme of the Holy Father's visit from beginning to end was the family. To the President and to the Congress, as well as to the delegates of the United Nations, Pope Francis reiterated the importance of the family in the social fabric of our nation and world. He remarked to the members of Congress that the family has been essential to the building of this country but is now threatened as never before from within and without. "Fundamental relationships are being called into question, as is the very basis of marriage and family. I can only reiterate the importance, and above all, the richness and beauty of family life," he said.

At the Festival of Families held in Philadelphia, Pope Francis gave a wonderful reflection on the goodness, beauty and truth of God and the family. And he further said that "a society grows strong, grows in goodness, grows in beauty and truly grows if it is built on the foundation of the family." In describing the beauty of creation, the Holy Father told us that the most beautiful thing God made was the family. He added, "All the love that God has in himself, all of the beauty that God has in himself, all of the truth that God has in himself, he gives to the family."

But the Pope offered an even more exalted notion of the family when he spoke of the coming of Christ into the world. When we estranged ourselves from God through sin, God drew even nearer to us. So great was his love that he began to walk with humanity and sent the greatest sign of his love, his only Son. And where did he send him? Not to a palace, or a city or to start a business. "He sent him to a family. God came into the world in a family." Through the loving obedience and humility of Mary and Joseph, God was able to enter into the world, into the embrace of a human family. This Holy Family is then a model for all families, a model of love, obedience to God, reverence for each other and simplicity of life.

Some might object that this model is too lofty for ordinary human beings, but Pope Francis is totally realistic. He acknowledged the obstacles that every family must face: disagreements, the challenges of children, keeping a home and a job and with a laugh he even mentioned in-laws! These are the crosses that must come into our lives that allow us to walk with Jesus as he carries his cross. But, the Pope reminded us, after the cross comes the resurrection. In a novel turn of phrase, the Pope said that the

family is a “factory of hope, hope of life and resurrection.” In other words, while every family has its own struggles and crosses, it is also the place that generates hope, which is built on the life and love we share with one another.

In his closing words at the Festival, Pope Francis urged us to care for and defend the family because in the family we find our future. I’m sure he first meant that we must care for our own families, but I believe he also wants us to look after other families too. Our neighbors and friends, but also families who are unknown to us, or who are in trouble, deserve our personal care and concern. I pray that the visit of our Holy Father and the Year of Family and Marriage in the Diocese of Fargo will heighten our awareness of the needs of all families. And I hope to see all of you at our upcoming diocesan Celebration of Marriage and Family, “Living Reflections of God’s Love,” at the Fargo Civic Center on October 24. Let us pray for each other, and in keeping with God’s plan, let us together build up the family of God.