

INTRODUCTION



*“The joy of love experienced by families
is also the joy of the church.”*

With these words, Pope Francis opens his latest apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of Love*, and sets the church as a whole—starting with the smallest of all churches, the family—on a course to deeper understanding of its essential holiness and witness of Christ’s love.

This carefully worded and very pastoral document sums up the results of the two-year Synod on the Family. Its overarching theme is that the family, the domestic church, is where true practice of the faith begins, is nourished, and comes to fruition. As always, Pope Francis writes to hit the heart, to form persons into disciples, and to make us all aware of how God’s love for us is to be reflected in how we love one another.

What follows are thirty reflections on the thoughts of Pope Francis from *The Joy of Love*. May they deepen your prayer and your life of faith!

The quotes from Pope Francis were chosen by Deborah McCann, who also wrote the reflections and the “Ponder” and “Pray” pieces.

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1 | FAMILIES ARE HOLY

*The family reflects the communion of love
that is the Holy Trinity.*

In the midst of daily tasks and obligations—from getting everybody up and out in the morning to finding time to share conversation at the end of a busy day—it’s very easy to forget that the family is holy in God’s sight. Pope Francis speaks of the way the family reflects God’s love by using the image of the Holy Trinity. As Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct and yet one God in a communion of love, so too the family members each have their own identity but share a greater relationship, a communion of love, as one family. In their love, they share in the life of God.

PONDER

Have I ever considered family life as sharing in the life and love of God? What might it mean to me?

PRAY

God of joy and love, open my soul to see my family as your gift, and help me to serve it well!

2 | THE TABLE OF THE LORD

*A family's home could be a place
for Eucharist—for meeting Christ.*

When thinking of the home as a holy place, it's natural to think of the kitchen table as the gathering spot. Less so these days, it seems, with families rarely eating together, given everyone's crazy schedules. But Pope Francis is asking us to see with new eyes—if each opportunity to share time together is a time to be Eucharist for one another, mightn't we put down the phones, turn off the TV, and really pay attention to one another? Pope Francis is calling for us to do just that, and thereby meet Christ in our midst.

PONDER

How much time a day do I spend on my phone and on the computer, and how much in real conversation with my loved ones?

PRAY

God of joy and love, help me to put aside all that distracts me from you!

3 | LET'S START AT THE VERY BEGINNING...

Parents are their children's first teachers in the faith.

That image of parents as first guides in the faith can be a challenging one for many of us. Many parents' own experience of practicing the faith is sketchy, and it may seem easier (and better) to leave religious formation to the "professionals." But Pope Francis is reminding us that the very act of loving our spouse and children is the holiest work there is, and action is much more powerful than mere words. Is church important? Of course! But home is the first church our children see. They will learn much more from how we act than from what we say!

PONDER

Would the people I interact with each day know that I am a Christian?

PRAY

God of joy and love, help me to make every moment of every day a mirror of your love!

4 | IT GOES BOTH WAYS...

*Jesus offers children as teachers, too,
in their simple trust and spontaneity.*

I think Pope Francis might agree with a friend of mine who once said that you'll notice God only created adults *once* — then he created children, who got the message better. It's a good point — it's certainly true that children, in their curiosity, their fearlessness, and their lack of guile, point the way for us to meet Christ in one another. Pope Francis very strongly holds up the image of children as their families' teachers. The deeper theme is that families, in witnessing their love for one another, invest each family member with dignity. All members have as much to teach as to learn. Even the littlest among us.

PONDER

When was the last time I learned something from a child?

PRAY

God of joy and love, help me to see the world through a child's eyes — and to meet you there!

5 | A TEMPLE FOR THE SPIRIT

Families are called to practice the faith and in this way to become a place for the Spirit to dwell.

Praying together, reading Scripture together, and celebrating the Eucharist—all these ways of practicing the faith make it real for the family. Muscles grow slack when not used; keeping the faith green by keeping it ever in sight is the way to grow holy families, Pope Francis says. Imagine picturing your own house being sanctified each day by remembering God in your midst! How greatly that would deepen the weekly experience of Mass for all! How much more alive the faith will become when it is a part of the everyday!

PONDER

What do I need to do to make my home a fitting place to welcome the Holy Spirit?

PRAY

God of joy and love, help me to make prayer time as important as gym time or work time, so that I may grow into a stronger disciple!

6 | NEVER GO TO BED ANGRY

*My best advice is to make peace in the family
before the end of the day.*

One of Pope Francis' hallmarks is plain speaking, and it's clear that he enjoys making himself understood. To make a simple adage like "Never go to bed angry" a point worthy of special mention in *The Joy of Love* shows that he is deeply connected to the lives of real people. How often do we grow impatient and forget to apologize? How often do we nurse our grudges instead of forgiving? The way parents act is the way children will act. There are so many ways to end a day badly. Why not end it well by saying, "I'm sorry," "Thank you," and "I love you"?

PONDER

Have I said "I love you" to at least one person today?

PRAY

God of joy and love, help me to recognize my failings and to take responsibility for them.