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Dancing to the Future With Hope: Strengthening Marriage & the Family

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There is something tremendously appropriate about dancing as an image for how Catholics should be living out our vocations in the world of 2018. It captures the aspects of joy and dynamism that Pope Francis has been continually proposing to us as to how our lives should be in sync or in harmony with the Joy of the Gospel.

Of course, here in the Ireland of 2018 and indeed across much of the Western world, striving to be faithful Catholics and being happy to proclaim the Gospel in the public square can invoke a very different image of dancing. Sometimes it can feel like we are dancing on eggshells and that a mis-step on our part will bring public disapproval or opprobrium to our door steps. Or even worse, that we are dancing in a minefield and one where the disconnect between the lives that are proposed by the Gospel and those mandated by modern liberal democracies might cause altogether more disturbing consequences.

In the kind of climate where being people of faith is only tolerated so long as it's a private little matter that is confined behind the closed doors of our homes and churches, the temptation to retreat from society and to do our 'dancing' in private will be huge and is a temptation that is only going to grow and grow in the short term.

The understandably attractive temptation to retreat is one that we are called upon to resist. We would like to propose a different model of 'dancing to the future with hope'. In the words of Pope John Paul 2 in his address to young people in Galway, 'something more is needed'.

A few years ago, Sting, the former lead singer of the popular British band, 'The Police' released a very spiritual, semi-autobiographical album, *The Last Ship*, which led to a Broadway Musical which has since crossed the Atlantic, albeit in a diminished form compared to the richness of the original. One of the central characters in the story is Gideon, a tough young streetwise shipyard worker, who has a reputation for never being bested in a fistfight. However when it comes to pursuing a relationship with the young woman he believes to be the love of his life, he too realises that 'something more is needed'.

Gideon's signature song 'The Night the Pugilist Learned How to Dance' is a surprisingly wonderful parable of marriage and family and being a Catholic in the world today, where the temptation to react to public unpopularity by becoming a fighter might seem overwhelming. Let us explain. Gideon realises that the rough and ready skills of the admittedly fleet of foot street fighter are just not going to cut it in the world of love and relationships.

" a girl is attracted to skills more refined,
Than the pugilist's art, and so I inclined,
To take meself serious as a modern romancer,
And I secretly learnt all the moves of a dancer."



Just as Nicodemus realises that Jesus is proposing a radically different way to live and he comes in secret to meet with him out of the glare of the public and learn about this Gospel of life, Gideon realises that his old ways aren't good enough in the world of true love. He decides to change his life and practice for all he is worth 'the moves of the dancer'. Dancing incorporates the person he is with the physical talents he's been given but allows them to be transformed and infused with a new found grace.

'Practice' and 'grace' are two wonderful words in the worlds of marriage and family today, even if one, practice, has gained slightly negative connotations in the context of communities of faith and the second, grace, has somewhat fallen out of our modern lexicons.

Religious practice is often equated with attendance at Mass and is often used by sociologists and commentators as a measure of the health or otherwise of religious communities. But it can sometimes be presented as a minimalist and maybe even slightly pejorative term to describe the depth and sincerity of the commitment of religious people to the faith they claim to profess. It is as if the practices associated with religious belief somehow get in the way of a rich and authentic embrace of becoming the kinds of people Jesus called on us to be. But in what other area of life would practice be seen as a dirty word? I mean how many great artists, musicians, architects and yes, dancers, would we have if none of them ever practised?

We are called to be great husbands and wives, great mothers and fathers, great sons and daughters, great brothers and sisters and we don't do ANY of that without practice.

But practice what? As Aristotle said all those years ago, we are what we habitually do, or as the writer of the Gospel of St Matthew said in a different way many years later, wherever your treasure is there your heart will be also.

In the Catholic Church, we have the unique treasure of the Eucharist where the creator of everything that is makes himself utterly vulnerable and available to us every day of our lives in a way that he promises will nourish and transform us as individuals and communities. When Jesus asked us to 'Do this in memory of me', how can we as married couples and families NOT actively engage and participate and seek to grow in love with our weekly parish liturgies and hope to be faithful followers of Christ? But not only do we need to be active participants, we need to start building a culture of bringing others with us to these celebrations, especially those who have recently simply fallen out of the habit. Let us arrange to meet up beforehand and go together and maybe initiate a chat over tea or coffee afterwards. So much the better if this can happen close to our parish churches and if not, well, maybe we could sow the seeds of creating a space where this could happen as a little step in extending the community of family into the community of our parishes.

And just as we have the ultimate treasure in the Eucharist where heaven literally meets earth, so too do we have the rich gifts of our sacraments. Imagine, for example, if as spouses and parents we were models for each other, our children and our friends of the healing efficacy of availing of the Sacrament of Reconciliation regularly. Let's all help to rebuild a culture of celebrating and participating in the Sacrament where we acknowledge before the community our sinfulness but also our mutual desire to begin again. As a young adult, I was always hugely encouraged by the sight of my peers attending a Service of Reconciliation. In time, it was something we would call to each other's houses to attend together. We need to be the families - adults, young people and children- who are initiating these kinds of practices in our parishes again. And if the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a bit of a well-buried treasure in our own parish, well, let's follow the lead of Pope Francis and help to dig it out of there. Work with your local priest to come up with new ways of getting the word out. As the movie says, build it and they will come! And to those priests who are here among us - there is something very



powerful about seeing that our priests need the grace of the sacrament of reconciliation just as much as we do.

But Jesus asked us to go and teach all nations and as Pope Francis says so often, we have to bring the good news out from our homes and our Churches. We are a people of the Resurrection and the time for huddling in hidden Upper Rooms or meeting secretly by night is gone.

But before we step outside, one more thing about what goes on inside our houses. Our homes HAVE to become little schools of the Gospel: open schools of the Gospel. Where the first and most important lesson that we teach our children and constantly remind each other of, is that loving God is our primary task on earth. Not acquisition of wealth, not a beautiful house, not success, not our careers, not public recognition...none of these things. And our homes have to be places where EVERY SINGLE DAY things happen in our home which help each member of our families to grow in love and understanding of God. And that task has to extend to the people who are made welcome in our home, to our friends, to our children's friends and even the to unexpected visitors who turn up at the most inopportune times. Our daily conversations in the kitchen, around the dinner table and in the car have to be shot through with talk of the Kingdom of God. We have to be at ease and open to even the most challenging questions of our children and their friends from the moment they can talk, right through their childhood years and right through their teenage and young adult years. So often, the once strong faith of family members is weakened or lost completely because their homes are NOT places where the challenges of being a Christian in the world are part of the daily conversation. The treasure we have is one that we need to be constantly sharing with each other, conversing, teasing things out, and praying about them together, daily.

And yes, taking that treasure outside the safety of our homes.

At the Last Supper, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples in a humble act of service. We are called upon to do THIS too in memory of Him. There was no disconnect between the words that Jesus spoke and the things that he did. He was the living embodiment of the Beatitudes. And when Pope Francis talks about us having the smell of the sheep on us, he might have added that as shepherds of each other we are called to have the smell of the lost sheep about us, the smell of the Beatitudes. Perhaps in each of our families there should be a copy of the Beatitudes displayed prominently to remind us of who we are all called to be in and out of our homes.

Oh, and let's remember our street fighter and 'scrapper' Gideon - he risked the mockery of his friends, his self-image and everything he stood for, for the sake of love. In the end, not only did he learn how to dance but he did so with style and grace and as he puts it himself in one song, with such 'fire in his belly' that his transformation was not just noticed but cheered and approved of by his friends and his wider community.

And there's that great word that we don't hear so much of any more - Grace. Let us be people who drink deeply of the Grace that God gives freely in our sacraments and let us be people of grace, who are not afraid to let grace work through us, or for grace to be visible in our actions.

Towards the end of Sting's album, Gideon's mentor who is portrayed as a priest in the Broadway production of the musical, says that 'love is the only true power we wield and eternal love is all ye should seek'. That's our message today.

Let our family lives be a seamless garments of Love.



Let our seeking out of opportunities to visit the sick, or those in prison, or give drink or food to those who are thirsty or hungry, be one with our pro-life advocacy; let our faithful and enthusiastic participation in our parish celebration of the Eucharist colour and mould our family relationships. It should change the way we interact with the people we encounter in our workplaces, in shops, at social events or when we are engaged in the business of politics. It should influence everything that we do, great or small.

In the world of 2018 we are called to be dancers not pugilists. Like Gideon, and like Gideon's namesake in the Old Testament, let's take the chance and let miracles happen. Let's get out there and dance together into the future with hope.