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## Love made Fruitful: *Amoris Laetitia* on Cherishing the Gift of New Life

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I have been asked to speak on the topic of *Love made Fruitful: Cherishing the Gift of New Life*.

I experienced first hand the gift of new life when I gave birth to my first child only 6 months ago. (She is here in the audience somewhere). It is still a very vivid memory - both the childbearing and the long nine months of anticipation as my baby girl was formed and knitted in my womb.

To be honest, not all the memories associated with the event are **cherished** - the uncomfortable positions I was obliged to assume, the unending litany of doctor's visits, and not least of all, the nagging concern of whether I'd make it to the hospital in time!

These memories might linger, but they don't last like the reality of the **gift** that **is** the life of a child. The gift of new life is certainly a gift to cherish; a priceless gift from the hands of God.

But I also realize that new life is not always cherished. At times, a child is shunned or avoided like the plague. A child can be perceived as an inconvenience, a hindrance to achieving one's career goals, a financial burden, a whiny runny-nosed mess.<sup>1</sup>

That a child should *not* be recognized as a gift is not too hard to imagine if we take a look at current cultural trends the world over, which sever and disrespect the selfless gift of man and woman to one another.

The harsh reality is that a child is less and less the tender fruit of the self-giving love between husband and wife, and more and more a product of calculation and purchase. It then becomes the 'legal' right of the mother to give birth or not to give birth to the child in her womb, to choose the color of the child's eyes and hair, and the circumstances that are most convenient for the parents, not the child.

All of this makes Pope Francis's words in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, even more significant and necessary.

I wish to speak about three elements or ingredients from this document, and more specifically, from Chapter Five, that contribute to the making of a healthy family life. These points may seem obvious, but they are each threatened and put into question today. *Combined, these elements promote the cherishing of the gift of life.*

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* [= AL] (March 19, 2016), AAS 108 (2016), 166, 168.



It is important to point out that Chapter Five, “Love Made Fruitful” opens with a quote from the apostolic exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*, on conjugal love. Within **conjugal love**, the couple, “in giving themselves to one another, give not just themselves but also the reality of children, who are a living reflection of their love, a permanent sign of their conjugal unity...”<sup>2</sup> It is within this context of love, which is self-donation between husband and wife, male and female, that the gift of a child is best received.

Conjugal love is the first element of family life. Life is more easily welcomed as the greatest gift bestowed by God when it is received within an authentic context of love, which is marriage. Marriage is the natural nesting place for love’s greatest fruit to be received and welcomed.

Where marriage between a man and a woman as the best context for welcoming life is threatened, life is threatened.

A life-giving love, is the second element for family life. Unfortunately, this is not as obvious as it sounds. Our present-day society frequently separates love and marriage from life.

In this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, we are reminded that the reciprocal gift of the husband and wife requires the totality of the person; therefore, anything that substantially limits or reduces that gift severs the two-fold meaning of the conjugal act, the unitive and the procreative, which, are written into the nature of man and woman.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, contraception is contrary to the good of spousal love. Conversely, Pope John Paul II explains that “it is only in the logic of the reciprocal gift between man and woman that the natural regulation of fertility can be correctly understood and authentically lived as the proper expression of a *real and mutual communion* of life and love.”<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, where openness to life within marriage is threatened, life is endangered.

The third element flows from the first and second – **the gift of life is received by a mother and a father.**<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis specifies that the family consists of a mother and a father who together contribute to the healthy raising of a child. He emphasizes that “every child has a right to receive love from a mother and father; both are necessary for a child’s integral and harmonious development.”<sup>6</sup>

Experts demonstrate the unmistakable impact of the maternal presence in the life of a child during his or her first three years of life. A mother’s attention is critical to the balanced development of a child. On the other hand, recent studies have also demonstrated a strong connection between church attendance by the father and the effective transmission of faith to children.<sup>7</sup>

Where life received by a mother and a father is threatened, life is disadvantaged.

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<sup>2</sup> AL, 165; John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (November 22, 1981), AAS 74 (1982), 96.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. John Paul II, *Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the Director of the Center for Research and Study on the Natural Regulation of Fertility*, *L’Osservatore Romano*, English ed., March 2, 1998, 2. Cfr. Paul IV, Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae* (July 25, 1968), AAS 60 (1968), 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. AL, 166.

<sup>6</sup> AL, 172.

<sup>7</sup> Justin Barkus and Christian Smith, *A Report on American Catholic Religious Parenting*, McGrath Institute for Church Life, University of Notre Dame. <http://churchlife-info.nd.edu/a-report-on-american-catholic-religious-parenting>.

What then, can we do, as Catholics, concerned for the wellbeing of the family and the gift of life?

Pope Francis reminds us in Chapter Six, that families are missionary, primarily through their witness as domestic churches. Let us then, welcome and cherish the gift of life into the sanctuary of our homes. By so doing, we experience as a people of God and a family of families, the true joy of love.

