

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today the Church celebrates and honors in a very special way the Holy Family. Family life is one of beautiful gifts God has given to us. The Church rightly refers to the family as the “domestic church,” where we hope and pray children first learn about mutual love and respect, selfless service, reconciliation and forgiveness. We know, especially in this modern age, that family life faces many challenges. More and more, families are captives of economic realities. The influence of modes of communication make it increasingly difficult for parents to be the first teachers to their children in the practice of the faith and to influence them to be of good moral character.

Thus, the Church has a particular responsibility and mission to accompany families and to support them in every way. As one of nine children, I know how complicated family life can be. One of the greatest privileges as a priest and as a pastor is to be present to families in many circumstances. I strive to be present to families in times of joy but also in times of sadness and grief. I feel particularly blessed that families trust me to be with them in times of crises and struggle, as couples face difficulties in their relationships with each other and their children. So often, I am awed by the goodness and beauty of family life in all its aspects. I watched many priests over the years have such great influence over my own family. This, no doubt, influenced my own desire to emulate that witness of love, compassion and support as a priest.

St. Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, offers an excellent framework with which to engage family life. “Brothers and sisters: Put on, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection.”

I would like to share the following reflection on marriage and family life captured by the pastoral constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, #48. “Husband and wife, by the covenant of marriage, are no longer two, but one flesh. By their intimate union of persons and of actions they give mutual help and service to each other, experience the meaning of their unity, and gain an ever deeper understanding of it day by day.

This intimate union in the mutual self-giving of two persons, as well as the good of the children, demands full fidelity from both, and an indissoluble unity between them. Christ the Lord has abundantly blessed this richly complex love, which springs from the divine source of love and is founded on the model of his union with the Church. In earlier times God met his people in a covenant of love and fidelity. So now the Savior of mankind, the Bridegroom of the Church, meets Christian husbands and wives in the sacrament of matrimony. Further, he remains with them in order that, as he loved the Church and gave himself up for her, so husband and wife may, in mutual self-giving, love each other with perpetual fidelity. True married love is caught up into God’s love; it is guided and enriched by the redeeming power of Christ and the saving action of the Church, in order that the partners may be effectively led to God and receive help and strength in the sublime responsibility of parenthood.

“Christian partners are therefore strengthened, and as it were consecrated, by a special sacrament for the duties and the dignity of their state. By the power of this sacrament they fulfill their obligations to each other and to their family and are filled with the spirit of Christ. This spirit pervades their whole lives with faith, hope and love. Thus, they promote their own perfection and each other’s

sanctification, and so contribute together to the greater glory of God. Hence, with parents leading the way by example and family prayer, their children - indeed, all within the family circle - will find it easier to make progress in natural virtues, in salvation and in holiness. Husband and wife, raised to the dignity and the responsibility of parenthood, will be zealous in fulfilling their task as educators, especially in the sphere of religious education, a task that is primarily their own. Children, as active members of the family, contribute in their own way to the holiness of their parents. With the love of grateful hearts, with loving respect and trust, they will return the generosity of their parents and will stand by them as true sons and daughters when they meet with hardship and loneliness of old age.”

Please know how much I think of the families of our parish each day and I pray for you. I hold you close to my heart and I pray that, day by day, we may all come to closer intimacy with our loving and benevolent God, His Son the Good Shepherd, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. May you continue to grow in familial love and know I am here to support you and accompany you on this Christian pilgrimage to heaven.

Fr. Tom