

## **Prodigal Pope Embraces the Family (and this family man)**

Francis' long awaited report on marriage and family is good news, a hearty hug of a document that encompasses the best of what marital love can be.

I consumed the 256 page exhortation—Love in the Family—as a hungry man. Pressures on my own marriage and family life had been mounting in the days leading up its release; I needed release from my clouded capacity to be a 'good-enough' gift for wife and kids. Like a father embracing his confused son who knew only to turn in the general direction of home, Pope Francis met me; his intention to reclaim and renew the value of marriage nourished me like an empanada thick with meat and vegetables. 'He set me at His banqueting table, and His banner over me is love' (S of S 2:4) conveys well the impact of Pope Francis' fatherly, at times folksy exhortation to this prodigal.

With characteristic tenderness, Francis champions marriage and family as the basic cell endowed with power to transform the world; at the same time, he realizes the anxieties and tensions faced by the modern family. He cites the impact of today's extreme individualism, consumerism, social networking, and just plain narcissism that renders people immature and unable to see the 'other' beyond one's own effort to find a 'self'.

Drawing significantly on the 'imago dei' (humanity made in God's image as male and female, Gen. 1: 26, 27) as parsed by his predecessors St. John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict, Francis summons our capacity as gendered, passionate people to be good gifts to another over the course of a lifespan, a commitment he claims can grow more beautiful over the course of a hard knock life. He melds expertly the ideological with the practical. An extended meditation on the 'love' chapter (1Cor. 13) goes hand-in-hand with tough words on why marriage must be 'open to life' then tempers the call to fruitfulness with wisdom about family planning, marital communication, and humane parenting. Uncle Francis indeed.

Most interesting to me are his limited references to homosexuality in the document. As you know, I had the privilege addressing some 'Family Synod' delegates in Rome last September as to convey an orthodox, merciful approach to persons with SSA. Those synod members wrote reports for Francis from which he created 'Love in the Family.'

Francis deflates any hope that he has joined the rainbow bandwagon. Twice he states emphatically that 'there is no ground for considering homosexual unions even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family.' And he extols every child's need for both a mother and father in order to mature into wholeness. He decries modern gender theory on the grounds that 'it promotes a personal identity and emotional intimacy that is radically separate from the biological difference between male and female.'

Pope Francis upholds the most vulnerable—children—who before God deserve the most strenuous efforts of both a mother and a father to succeed at marriage.

At the same time, Francis cites the very real difference between biological gender and how we develop a gender identity. He is nuanced and graceful with this distinction, which leaves room for women to lead and for men to dance. Yes we need to make peace with the gender of our birth in submission to our Creator, says Francis, and yes, we must respect diverse expressions of male and female identity. Alleluia. What a pope.

In regards to persons with SSA, Pope Francis directs us back to the wellspring of life, the nuclear family. He instructs family members to love us well so that 'we might understand and carry out God's will for our lives.'

I would have appreciated a little more input on pastoral care of persons with SSA (grounds for next blog, perhaps.) Perhaps that is beside the point, or at least a secondary one. Love in the Family reminds me that I am more than a person seeking freedom from disordered desire. I am a husband and a father who possesses the freedom to love well and so leave a legacy of truth and mercy for persons I love most. Thank you, Pope Francis.