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Celebration for families and Vigil of prayer**

Official translation

Dear Brothers and Sisters,
Dear Families,

First of all, I want to thank the families who were willing to share their life stories with us. Thank you for your witness! It is always a gift to listen to families share their life experiences; it touches our hearts. We feel that they speak to us about things that are very personal and unique, which in some way involve all of us. In listening to their experiences, we can feel ourselves drawn in, challenged as married couples and parents, as children, brothers and sisters, and grandparents.

As I was listening, I was thinking how important it is for us to share our home life and to help one another in this marvelous and challenging task of “being a family”.

Being with you makes me think of one of the most beautiful mysteries of our Christian faith. God did not want to come into the world other than through a family. God did not want to draw near to humanity other than through a home. God did not want any other name for himself than Emmanuel (cf. *Mt* 1:23). He is “God with us”. This was his desire from the beginning, his purpose, his constant effort: to say to us: “I am God with you, I am God for you”. He is the God who from the very beginning of creation said: “It is not good for man to be alone” (*Gen* 2:18). We can add: it is not good for woman to be alone, it is not good for children, the elderly or the young to be alone. It is not good. That is why a man leaves his father and mother, and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one flesh (cf. *Gen* 2:24). The two are meant to be a home, a family.

From time immemorial, in the depths of our heart, we have heard those powerful words: it is not good for you to be alone. The family is the great blessing, the great gift of this “God with us”, who did not want to abandon us to the solitude of a life without others, without challenges, without a home.

God does not dream by himself, he tries to do everything “with us”. His dream constantly comes true in the dreams of many couples who work to make their life that of a family.

That is why the family is the living symbol of the loving plan of which the Father once dreamed. To want to form a family is to resolve to be a part of God’s dream, to choose to dream with him, to want to build with him, to join him in this saga of building a world where no one will feel alone, unwanted or homeless.

As Christians, we appreciate the beauty of the family and of family life as the place where we come to learn the meaning and value of human relationships. We learn that “to love someone is not just a strong feeling – it is a decision, it is a judgment, it is a promise” (Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*). We learn to stake everything on another person, and we learn that it is worth it.

Jesus was not a confirmed bachelor, far from it! He took the Church as his bride, and made her a people of his own. He laid down his life for those he loved, so that his bride, the Church, could always know that he is God with us, his people, his family. We cannot understand Christ without his Church, just as we cannot understand the Church without her spouse, Christ Jesus, who gave his life out of love, and who makes us see that it is worth the price.

Laying down one's life out of love is not easy. As with the Master, "staking everything" can sometimes involve the cross. Times when everything seems uphill. I think of all those parents, all those families who lack employment or workers' rights, and how this is a true cross. How many sacrifices they make to earn their daily bread! It is understandable that, when these parents return home, they are so weary that they cannot give their best to their children.

I think of all those families which lack housing or live in overcrowded conditions. Families which lack the basics to be able to build bonds of closeness, security and protection from troubles of any kind.

I think of all those families which lack access to basic health services. Families which, when faced with medical problems, especially those of their younger or older members, are dependent on a system which fails to meet their needs, is insensitive to their pain, and forces them to make great sacrifices to receive adequate treatment.

We cannot call any society healthy when it does not leave real room for family life. We cannot think that a society has a future when it fails to pass laws capable of protecting families and ensuring their basic needs, especially those of families just starting out. How many problems would be solved if our societies protected families and provided households, especially those of recently married couples, with the possibility of dignified work, housing and healthcare services to accompany them throughout life.

God's dream does not change; it remains intact and it invites us to work for a society which supports families. A society where bread, "fruit of the earth and the work of human hands" continues to be put on the table of every home, to nourish the hope of its children.

Let us help one another to make it possible to "stake everything on love". Let us help one another at times of difficulty and lighten each other's burdens. Let us support one another. Let us be families which are a support for other families.

Perfect families do not exist. This must not discourage us. Quite the opposite. Love is something we learn; love is something we live; love grows as it is "forged" by the concrete situations which each particular family experiences. Love is born and constantly develops amid lights and shadows. Love can flourish in men and women who try not to make conflict the last word, but rather a new opportunity. An opportunity to seek help, an opportunity to question how we need to improve, an opportunity to discover the God who is with us and never abandons us. This is a great legacy that we can give to our children, a very good lesson: we make mistakes, yes; we have problems, yes. But we know that that is not really what counts. We know that mistakes, problems and conflicts are an opportunity to draw closer to others, to draw closer to God.

This evening we have come together to pray, to pray as a family, to make our homes the joyful face of the Church. To meet that God who did not want to come into our world in any other way than through a family. To meet "God with us", the God who is always in our midst.
