

Living a Christian Faith

Connect, Communicate, Commit

See, Choose, Act

This year marks the 5th anniversary of the apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* on the beauty and joy of Love in the Family. Pope Francis has suggested that we all take this year as an opportunity to celebrate and reflect on *Amoris Laetitia* and the many riches it contains. For us in Teams, the emphasis on the importance of marriage and married spirituality is a highlight of *Amoris Laetitia*.

Within this context, this discussion topic brings together the ideas presented in two quite different documents. *Connect, Communicate and Commit* was the theme of the 2019 Crossroads organised by the Sydney Sector of Teamsⁱ. *See, Choose and Act* is the theme of Pope Francis' recent book *Let Us Dream: A path to a better future*ⁱⁱ, published in December 2020. While *Let Us Dream* is a response to the Covid pandemic, the implications are much broader and continues the underlying themes in Pope Francis' 2015 *Laudato Si*ⁱⁱⁱ.

These ideas have been at the forefront of the development of the programme for the 2021 Oceania Teams Gathering which will be held as a "virtual" event on 18 September 2021 and streamed into the homes of Team members over the entire Oceania Region. We suggest that individual Teams might discuss this topic at a Team meeting or two over the coming months in preparation for the Gathering. Teams couples may also use this study topic as a reflection during a sit-down or in some other way. Participating in this study topic becomes a great way to celebrate the 5th anniversary of *Amoris Laetitia*.

1. Human Love and Married Spirituality

*Far from imprisoning hearts,
True love liberates
And expands them extraordinarily (Fr Henri Caffarel)*

Although human love has always been present for couples, for cultural reasons it has not always been emphasised. In ancient Greece, for example, human love was seen as a weakness unworthy of the gods and later mattering little or not at all. In our Christian tradition, married love has been marginalised over the centuries in teaching and Canon Law.

- Prior to 1900, that is for the first 19 centuries of Christendom, there were only 12 references to married love in the Church's Magisterium documents.
- In the next 90 years, there were 396 references, the great majority following the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent years of reflection.^{iv}

This is despite the beautiful reflection on love in the well-known first letter of St Paul to the Corinthians, now included in many wedding ceremonies.

Vatican II described love within marriage as an integration of the physical and the spiritual. This was a radical departure from the previous, limited view that human love in marriage is solely for pro-creation.

To quote the Council:

This love is an eminently human love since it is directed from one person to another through the affection of the will. It involves the good of the whole person. Therefore, it can enrich the expressions of body and mind with a unique dignity, ennobling those expressions as special ingredients and signs of the friendship distinctive of marriage.

What is distinctive about Christian marriage and married spirituality?

Christian marriage is linked to faith and based on grace. We welcome God's plan for us as a Christian couple to grow spiritually together in service and in the pursuit of eternal happiness.

Central to a Christian marriage is a three-way union of the couple with Christ, reflecting the Trinity. And this provides the fertile ground for developing a deepening form of spirituality that is focussed upon the relationship of us as a couple and us as a couple with God.

The spirituality of the couple, that is 'married spirituality', builds upon each of the spouses growing in their own spiritual journey while going out to the other in a spirit of giving, helping their spouse grow in wholeness.

This progression from personal spirituality of two individuals to married spirituality of the couple has been described in the following way:

As we progress as individuals towards God....Jesus leads us to affirm ourselves and to see the unfolding wonder of the other, as we grow together as lovers into the fullness of humanity ...[with] an enduring relationship, deep intimacy and a spirit of joy and happiness.

The couple can share their dreams, aspirations and hopes, whilst taking on board all the practical implications of family, work and security... together as a couple they can execute their plan for this life and beyond....married spirituality unites the ordinary with the extraordinary!

On their wedding day couples receive a sacrament and become a sacrament of God's love...they are called to make the love of God visible to all who encounter them. Pope Francis writes in *Amoris Laetitia* about marriage being human and messy, but also divine and beautiful:

Marital joy involves accepting that marriage is an inevitable mixture of enjoyment and struggles, tensions and repose, pain and relief, satisfactions and longings, annoyances and pleasures, but always on the path of friendship.

Are we helping each other along a path of integrity, justice, humility, equality, and shared values, learning together to share, to forgive, to love?

When we encounter obstacles and disappointments in our relationship, how do we deal with them? Can we discuss and deal with them together?

2. For marriages to be fruitful...the couple must first connect with each other... and continue to connect with each other

For our Christian marriage to be a fruitful journey together, we need as a couple to walk with our God in our family, our community, our working lives and in our service to those most vulnerable. And to do this we must first connect with each other.

Connection in marriage is an ongoing call throughout married life to offer our gifts and our talents to best serve our marriage, our family and our wider community.

Our ways of connecting may need to change as life brings us opportunities and challenges. Pope Francis points out in *Amoris Laetitia*:

Longer life spans require a constant renewal of our plans for life's journey and all the challenges it may throw at us along the way. While feelings, emotions, physical appearances, and health may change, this does not mean that love and attractions need fade. The marriage bond finds new forms of expression and constantly seeks new ways to grow in strength.

What are some of the main ways that we as a couple ensure we keep building our connections?

How have these forms of connections changed over our married life?

How can we work on being "present in the moment" when at home with our family?

3. At the heart of connecting is communication

Quality Listening

Most people marry because they believe that they have found the one who fully accepts and understands them as they are. They have a great deal of trust in that person and feel free to reveal themselves as they are. This leads to growth in love and intimacy. Yet we are a constantly changing people living in a busy world. We often have difficulty in making time to listen attentively to one another. There is a danger that listening to each other and sharing our inner thoughts and feelings at a meaningful level becomes a lost art.

It is not difficult to listen to another's words and only a little more difficult to listen to the person's thoughts, but to hear and understand all of the person we have to listen to their feelings. This is not easy. It calls for listening with the ears of our heart, listening with feeling, concern and love... "the gentleness and patience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10: 1)

Grace-filled Conversation

Grace-filled conversation with our spouse and others brings together quality listening and sharing our most inner thoughts and feelings. It involves our total self, without any distractions. And it involves being open to learning and growing with the help of the other. In this way conversation becomes a prayer and source of grace, given and received.^v

During this time of upheaval in the world not only with the Covid pandemic but with many social, ecological, economic, political and even Church-related challenges, quality listening and the art of grace-filled conversation becomes increasingly important. Never more so when it involves communication with our children and grand-children.

As our married life matures, how do we adapt to ensure the effective communication with our spouse?

How well do we listen to our children and try to understand their values, their beliefs, and their view of the future? Are there any issues that we are finding particularly difficult?

4. Bringing together connecting and communicating with commitment

Whether it be in marriage, work, or our social lives, is there anything that can be achieved without commitment? We show commitment by persistence, by being ready to witness, and by being ready for leadership. And how do we work towards what we are committed to? Through connecting and communicating!

We may not realise but those who are married are all called to be in Christian leadership in a very concrete way. Linking Christian leadership with holiness, Pope Francis in *Gaudete Et Exultate* says:

To be holy does not require being a bishop, a priest or a religious....We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves. Are you married? Be holy by loving and caring for your husband or wife, as Christ does for the Church. Do you work for a living? Be holy by labouring with integrity and skill in the service of your brothers and sisters. Are you a parent or grandparent? Be holy by patiently teaching the little ones how to follow Jesus. Are you in a position of authority? Be holy by working for the common good and renouncing personal gain.

Christian leadership in all its many facets requires commitment. It requires us to roll up our sleeves and get our hands dirty. We are required firstly and foremost to be open to and cooperate with God's grace, and when we do, we bring a taste of God's kingdom here to us on earth.

Do we see Christian leadership roles as a concrete way of living a life of faith?

How have Christian leadership roles between spouses changed over the years and how has this affected their married spirituality and satisfaction in their marriage?

5. The Mission of being in Teams: helping us connect to our Church, our community and the world around us.

By couples sharing the struggles, joys and discoveries of life, through the gift of non-judgmental listening and openness, the mission of Teams promotes understanding and trust. This adds depth to the relationships of couples, and between couples, the Church, our community and the world around us. A real community emerges when faith, love and trust are gradually built up between people.

Team couples help each other to follow Christ more fully and aim to put their love at His service and, in this way, all of creation.

- Through liturgy, discussion and the "sit-down" and all the Endeavours, the mission of Teams helps couples in their ability to connect, communicate and to continue their commitment to each other and God. The value of this can never be underestimated.

Teams also helps couples with their mission to have meaningful connections with the wider community of the church and the world. This it achieves in several important ways:

- Discussion topics selected for use at Team meetings or presentations at Regional Gatherings of Team members are such a rich source of knowledge about contemporary Church and world issues, including how these interact.
- Developing strong connections with a diverse range of people can open our eyes to issues in the Church and the world of which we may not be fully aware, or do not wish to confront. From this, new ideas emerge and we are all better informed and able to live out our mission to service the whole world and all of creation.

Teams and marriage catechumenate

Pope Francis has recently advocated a permanent marriage catechumenate for fostering the sacrament of marriage. This would be an ongoing program - marriage preparation, the celebration itself, support for the newly married and support throughout married life. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference strongly supports the establishment of such a program.

This suggests a new and important role for Teams, raising the possibility that Team members become active in their parishes and dioceses in, for example: marriage preparation courses, mentoring of newly married couples, programs for ongoing formation of married couples and development of liturgies to celebrate the sacrament of marriage.

Has Teams helped you become better informed about and connected with the wider Church community and beyond?

How can we make the blessings we have received through Teams available to all Christian couples?

How might Teams play some role of marriage support in the wider Church community, including the development of a marriage catechumenate in dioceses?

6. A Time to See, Choose and Act – going beyond our local Church and community: Where do we start?

The 3Cs – connect, communicate and commit – apply not only to the way we live our spiritual lives, participating in our parishes and local dioceses and live out our routine everyday activities. Equally important, these 3Cs remind us of how we as a married couple can live a life of service in the communities around us and play our part in the stewardship of all God’s creation. This wider dimension of our Christian vocation is integral to the continuing growth of our married spirituality.

These 3Cs parallel the three key steps that Pope Francis has identified in his quest for developing a pathway to a better future for society and the world in general. *Let Us Dream* describes these three steps as a need for all of us “To See, To Choose, To Act” and is Pope Francis’ response to the COVID pandemic, the many world-wide crises of conflict and famine, environmental destruction and the geo-political tensions that currently exist.

Especially after a year of change and world-wide crises, it is easy to feel paralysed: there are so many places of seemingly ceaseless conflict; there’s so much suffering and need. I find it helps to focus on concrete situations: you see faces looking for life and love in the reality of each person, of each people. You see hope written in the story of every nation. Rather than overwhelm you, this invites you to ponder, and to respond with hope.

Pope Francis describes our need to see concrete issues, choose a path to follow and then act in such a way as to at least start resolving an issue, such as the many arising from the pandemic – bereavement, lingering and mental illness, loss of employment, and social isolation. He believes that this also applies to many of the other issues facing the most vulnerable in the world, and the vulnerability of our physical environment to pollution, resource depletion and climate change.

A Time for All to See

Pope Francis continues...

You have to go to the edges of existence if you want to see the world as it is. I've always thought that the world looks clearer from the periphery. You have to make for the margins to find a new future.....But you can't go to the periphery in the abstract. To go to the margins in a concrete way allows you to touch the suffering and the wants of people.

This call by Pope Francis to see the reality of life is an essential part of our Christian spirituality. In this way, our spirituality itself becomes defined by our reactions to seeing the many issues facing the most vulnerable in the world and the vulnerability of the very environment in which we all live.

Does Teams have a role in helping us better “see” the plight of those on the periphery or is that a general Church and societal responsibility?

What are some issues that we have had our eyes and ears opened to in recent years in our Church, in our country, and across the world?

A Time for All to Choose

Listening and conversing gracefully when seeing with our eyes and heart the faces of the most vulnerable or the destruction of the environment often takes us beyond our everyday comfort zone. We begin to truly connect with all of God creation.

When choosing the right path and then acting with commitment, both *Let Us Dream* and *Laudato Si'* highlight the urgent need for all people to challenge the current models of economic and social development, resulting in so much inequality across the world and environmental deterioration.

However, it is extraordinarily difficult to choose the right path and act with commitment on our own, purely as individuals. We need each other - our spouse, fellow Team members, and social justice movements in the Church and in our wider communities. Or else we will become captives of our own limited knowledge, beliefs or ideologies and not be open to those of others with opinions different to ours – or we might simply turn our backs on what we see and not act.

For it is those interactions among people with different experiences and ideas which, Pope Francis suggests, will lead to far better understandings as a basis for choosing the right path. Some of these “overflows” that arise from people working together, despite their differences, may be quite unexpected yet extremely fruitful. He believes the fruits of interaction in a spirit of discernment is a sign of the Holy Spirit in action, as at the Amazonian Synod in 2019.

The 2019 Amazonian Synod – Overflows

Whilst there was much expectation that the Synod might reach agreement on the ordination of married priests being the way forward to address priest shortages in isolated regions of the Amazon, this did not occur. For now, that was not resolved through the process of discernment.

However, there were significant overflows that did arise:

- Due to the realisation that much of the priest shortage was due to many priests not willing to work in the more isolated regions of the Amazon, the role of the laity and deacons was to be heavily strengthened.
- The synod gave a clear mission and vision of the importance that the Church stand with the indigenous peoples, being sensitive to the maintenance of their local culture and supporting their efforts in opposing much of the ecological destruction of the Amazon.

Bringing these two points together, Pope Francis believes that it is crucial to trust lay people, and especially women who run many of the communities, to develop a distinctively Amazonian holiness.

This is directly relevant to the Church in Australia where the first meeting of the Plenary Council will be held in October this year. With such differing views on many of the issues that have been raised during the lengthy and widespread consultation process, how will Council members choose the right path and course of action? Through a process of discernment, will they allow the Holy Spirit to flourish and guide them towards quite unexpected outcomes or will they remain entrenched in their ideologies?

Let Us Dream provides much guidance in this regard, especially as it relates to synodality, yet Pope Francis admits that many Bishops and members of the laity across the world remain unskilled in the discernment process and retain quite fixed positions within their own ideologies.

How might we better ‘choose the right path to follow’ when confronted with issues affecting the most vulnerable in our society or the environment?

Have we allowed the Holy Spirit to flourish in our hearts when preparing for the Plenary Council? Will there be overflows? Have we been open through listening and dialogue to totally different outcomes than we originally expected?

A Time for All to Act

Five years ago, Pope Francis in *Amoris Laetitia* encouraged us all to face today’s challenges, whether they be in our personal and married lives or across much broader societal issues. He felt we needed to go forward in hope:

We should not be trapped into wasting our energy in doleful laments, but rather seek new forms of missionary creativity. In every situation that presents itself, “the

Church is conscious of the need to offer a word of truth and hope ... The great values of marriage and the Christian family correspond to a yearning that is part and parcel of human existence". If we see any number of problems, these should be,.... a summons to "revive our hope and to make it the source of prophetic visions, transformative actions and creative forms of charity.

Let Us Dream reinforces Pope Francis' call that our actions be based on recognising the dignity of all peoples, regardless of culture, status, geographical or political boundaries. In this way he is passionate that we focus our efforts on the common good, restoring the bonds of a community of mutual support for all people and removing any aspect of individualism. Importantly, we should take responsibility for the stewardship of the health of our environment. Bringing together the messages of *Let Us Dream* and *Laudato Si*, we must design ways to

- offer every person access to a dignified existence while protecting and regenerating the natural world.

While we can leave decisions about what to do to others, even when 'seeing' them, then are we acting as children of God, carrying out God's mission of service?

Do you agree with the links recently drawn by Pope Francis between the poor and the state of the environment and his more general condemnation of the domination of market forces and a consumerist lifestyle across much of the world? What might a new lifestyle the Pope advocates look like?

In Conclusion

Whether we refer to and undertake the 3Cs of ***Connect, Communicate and Commit*** or adopt *Let Us Dream's See, Choose and Act* – or all six – this is a way forward for all of us to live out our Christian faith to the fullest within the mantle of married spirituality.

***'This is a time for integrity, for exposing the selective morality of ideology, for embracing the full implications of what it means to be children of God.'* (Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream*)**

ⁱ We thank the Sydney Sector of Teams for providing a copy of the transcript used during their Crossroads Day

ⁱⁱ *Let Us Dream: A path to a better future*, Pope Francis in conversation with Austen Ivereigh, 2020

ⁱⁱⁱ *Laudato Si': on care for our common home*, Pope Francis, 2015

^{iv} Statistics from the address by J.Silvio Botero Giraldo (Latran University Rome) to the International Conference of Teams Regional Couples, Rome, 2003

^v To quote from the Sydney Sector's workshop on the 3Cs: At the heart of it when we talk about the core essence of communication.... essentially, we are speaking about making ourselves present to the other. We are allowing ourselves to be open to them, we are giving them our senses – we see, hear, and sometimes hold them...we give them our words ...We are in fact giving them a part of our own being...We become spiritually connected in the presence of Christ.