

Families,

Christ calls us to sow joy and hope!



hat is the world's most important job? An international survey of a very wide range of people from all over the world found a surprising answer: raising a child! The vast majority of respondents stated that nothing was more important for the future of humanity than forming adults capable of giving their lives to build a more humane world.

As you might have guessed, this survey never occurred! But one can still hope that one day, society will acknowledge the essential contribution of its most fundamental unit – the family – and choose to offer more support to parents who want to spend more time and energy raising their children.



Pope Francis invites Christian families to become contagious with hope and joy!

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In the grand scheme of God's love, from the very beginning of time, the family received its primary vocation: that of promoting life... "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:27-28). Every child is willed by God and loved by God. Every single one is unique and irreplaceable – truly a gift from God to a family and to society.

"The family is the place where one learns to love; it is the natural centre of human life. It is made up of faces, of persons who love, talk, sacrifice for others and defend life, especially of the most fragile, the weakest. It could be said, without exaggeration, that the family is the engine of the world and of history."¹ It is a fertile ground for future peacemakers and promoters of a new culture of life and love.



Growing in humanity

The family is the first place where the child comes into contact with others. Surrounded by their father, mother, brothers and sisters, children gradually learn to trust both themselves and others. Each child discovers that he belongs without having to earn it, that he is worthy of being loved and respected with his own qualities, strengths and weaknesses. Thus accepted and loved for who he truly is, the child in turn becomes capable of loving.

In the privacy of the family, children are able to develop their personality and experience emotional growth. They learn to dialogue and communicate, and become aware of their own dignity and that of others. With every passing day, their parents – their primary and principal educators – convey their values to them. If parents have made the Gospel the rule of their family life, they will form the conscience and the intelligence of their children in the light of



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faith. Gradually, children will come to understand that they are called to use their talents to serve others, in love and in truth.

Young people, growing up in a family where God is the foundation of their values, also realize they must choose between "whether to live for themselves or to live for God and for others; to be served or to serve; to obey one's own ego or to obey God. [...] Following Jesus entails giving up evil and selfishness and choosing good, truth and justice, even when this demands sacrifice and the renunciation of our own interests [...] Following Jesus means being involved, because faith is not a superficial decoration, it is a strength of the soul!"²

At this time of the new evangelization, the need to form disciples and witnesses to Christ in the heart of the family is more urgent than ever. Aware of God's presence in their marital union, parents draw from the grace of the sacrament of marriage the strength to build their families; thus they try to bring each child to love, serve, welcome, respect and promote life, from the moment of conception until natural death.

Isn't that the meaning of growing in humanity: to make love grow, to make life grow?! Doesn't growing in humanity mean, first and foremost, the husband seeking to "make his wife a better woman and the wife to make her husband a better man"³? Let there be love between parents and children, and between brothers and sisters. A family's prayer, in its simplicity, shows that its members rely on the rock of God's love: "Lord, give us this day our daily love; may our love increase!" They pray for each other (reciting the Lord's Prayer or the Rosary, or during grace before meals or during a moment of Eucharistic adoration, etc.), never forgetting to include grandparents. Everybody is familiar with the saying: "A family that prays together stays together".

Recognizing the face of Jesus

Good habits are fundamental to couples and families dedicated to successfully growing in love. For example, it is important to know how to humbly say "please", "thank you" and "sorry" – as often as needed. Another love-building habit is making sure to take time to nourish one's soul with God's Word and his Bread of Life, as well as experiencing God's mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

"Participation in the Eucharist should really touch our lives and our heart; it cannot be limited to an isolated moment with no impact on our lives. [...] Since Christ gave himself for the forgiveness of sins, does the Mass give us the grace to feel forgiven, and to forgive in turn?

"His pride is invaluable to me" – Alexandre Bilodeau, Olympic ski champion

An image of the 2014 Sochi Olympics flashed around the world: Canadian skier Alexandre Bilodeau, 26 – immediately after winning the gold medal in moguls – running to kiss his brother Frédéric, who suffers from cerebral palsy.

Alexandre credits his brother for the inspiration behind his gold medal: "Every day I feel I'm a man who has the opportunity to make my dreams come true. And he does not have that opportunity. So, out of respect for him, I have to do it", he told *USA Today*.

Frédéric, he adds, has always been by his

Tweet from Pope Francis

January 30th, 2014 (@Pontifex): "I cannot imagine a Christian who does not know how to smile. May we joyfully witness to our faith."

"In the Eucharist, Christ always acts again, giving the gift of himself that He gave on the Cross. His whole life is an act of total sharing of himself out of love; for this reason he loved being with the disciples and with those people he was able to know. For him this meant sharing their desires, their problems, what agitated their soul and their life. Now we, when we participate in the Holy Mass, we meet



© Getty Images

side during the past four years of preparation for the Olympic Games in Sochi, encouraging him but "working hard" too. "If it rains or if the temperature drops to -40 degrees, I might be tempted to skip training for that day", says Alexandre. One look at his brother is enough to drive out any hesitation: "Frédéric is so proud, and he's living a dream through me. Seeing his eyes shine with pride is invaluable to me" (Zenit.org, Rome, February 20, 2014).



with men and women of all kinds: young people, elderly people, children, poor people and the welloff, native to the place and foreigners, accompanied by relatives or alone ...

"Does the Eucharist I celebrate lead me to truly regard them all as brothers and sisters? Does it increase my capacity to rejoice with the joyful, and to weep with those who weep? Does it lead me to go to the poor, the sick, the marginalized? Does it help me to recognize in them the face of Jesus?"⁴

A heart that sees and takes action

Jesus himself tells us: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Mt 25:40). But who are these brothers and sisters around us, the least among our brethren, towards whom we need to be attentive? Who are they that we can take our children to them in order to teach our children to give freely, to be compassionate and generous? Our children must understand that we, as Christians, should always seek to recognize our brothers and sisters in the human family who are in need, in order to "heal wounds, build bridges, strengthen relationships and help carry the burdens of one another (Gal 6:2)."⁵

"Come to me and I will give you rest." It is we who must be the voice of Jesus. Yes, today, our Christian Communities should be able to repeat these words of Jesus while reaching out to the crowds who need help and reassurance: "Come and we will give you rest." We need a new boldness, which can only spring from a heart similar to that of Jesus. Let us witness with more courage, by our words and deeds, to the extraordinary and unique mercy of Jesus. The "rest" of which the Gospel speaks is none other than Jesus himself: rest on his chest and feed on His Word...

> Bishop Vincenzo Paglia, quoted by the Magnificat missal, July 17, 2014

Could it be that Grandma sometimes grows bored of watching TV all week? And, might that elderly neighbour need help to go to the doctor? Does the family of refugees that recently arrived in my parish have enough to eat? What can be done for this teenager living with an unplanned pregnancy, for this cousin who lost his job, for this couple whose son has just committed suicide, for



Top: © Peppi18 | Dreamstime.com Bottom: © Gstrange | Dreamstime.com

this mother and her children suffering the consequences of divorce? What can be done for this family in crisis, for this disabled colleague who finds it so difficult to get to work during the winter, for this child in an underdeveloped country who has nothing to eat, for this grandfather who just settled into a seniors' residence, or for that terminally ill friend who just got admitted to the hospital?

An attentive heart is all we need to develop the capacity to identify the vulnerable, the sad, the hopeless; so many people are afraid, so many thirst for love, for compassion, solidarity and tenderness – they thirst for a presence at their side. "A Christian's program – the program of the Good Samaritan, the program of Jesus – is to develop a heart that can see. This heart sees where love is needed and acts accordingly."⁶

Three types of poverty

"In imitation of our Master, we Christians are called to confront the poverty of our brothers and sisters, to touch it, to make it our own and to take practical steps to alleviate it. Destitution is not the same as poverty: destitution is poverty without faith, without support, without hope. There are three types of destitution: material, moral and spiritual. Material destitution is what is normally called poverty, and affects those living in conditions opposed to human dignity: those who lack basic rights and needs such as food, water, hygiene, work and the opportunity to develop and grow culturally. [...] In the poor and outcast we see Christ's face; by loving and helping the poor, we love and serve Christ. Our efforts are also directed to ending violations of human dignity, discrimination and abuse in the world, for these are so often the cause of destitution. When power, luxury and money become idols, they take priority over the need for a fair distribution of wealth. Our

Tweet from Pope Francis

October 26th, 2013: "Too often we participate in the globalization of indifference. May we strive instead to live global solidarity."

consciences thus need to be converted to justice, equality, simplicity and sharing.

"No less a concern is moral destitution, which consists in slavery to vice and sin. How much pain is caused in families because one of their members often a young person – is in thrall to alcohol, drugs, gambling or pornography! How many people no longer see meaning in life or prospects for the future, how many have lost hope! And how many are plunged into this destitution by unjust social conditions, by unemployment, which takes away their dignity as breadwinners, and by lack of equal access to education and health care. In such cases, moral destitution can be considered impending suicide. This type of destitution, which also causes financial ruin, is invariably linked to the spiritual destitution which we experience when we turn away from God and reject his love. If we think we don't need God who reaches out to us in Christ, because we believe we can make do on our own, we are headed for a fall. God alone can truly save and free us.

"The Gospel is the real antidote to spiritual destitution: wherever we go, we are called as Christians to proclaim the liberating news that forgiveness for sins committed is possible, that God is greater than our sinfulness, that he freely loves us at all times and that we were made for communion and eternal life. The Lord asks us to be joyous heralds of this message of mercy and hope!"⁷



Eiving with dignity... until the end

A heart attentive to others is sooner or later confronted by a big question: what constitutes the value and dignity of a human being? Today, not everybody agrees on the answer. Some, supported by a very effective global and national lobby, refuse to lose their independence, or to watch helplessly while their physical and mental abilities deteriorate. Because they fear pain, or because they are concerned about becoming a "burden" to their loved ones, they claim the "right to die with dignity". To attain this goal, they want to be free to choose the time and place of their death, and how it will happen – either by euthanasia or assisted suicide, but always with the help of a third party. The question for them is what lives are worth living.



And all this despite the fact that, for over 40 years, dedicated medical staff have developed pain control protocols to ensure proper end-of-life care. Medical, social, emotional and spiritual care is also available to those who are close to death, making it possible for the sick to live their lives until their natural end, and to do so with courage. This is what palliative care is all about: allowing people to go through life – and death – with dignity.

Having been brought up in a family, we know that we are relational beings; that we are capable of loving and caring for others. The respect we show to the sick or disabled person will greatly influence their perception of their own dignity. How does the way we see these people influence the way they see themselves? A person who is sick or handicapped is a person like any other. A human being cannot be reduced to his illness or disability. Disabled or sick people have the same feelings, the same needs, the same desires and the same dreams as the healthy. An indifferent, absent-minded glance, or worse yet, an uneasy or condescending look, can really hurt.

We all have the power to respond to the illness of others in friendship, love and solidarity; we can support and protect their "right to life" until the time of natural death. We need each other in death as well as in life. From birth to death, we are all more or less dependent on each other. Full autonomy is an illusion, an impossible dream.

Created in the image of God

Human dignity is based on the inherent value of every human person, a value that cannot be taken away by circumstances or external factors such as health. Human dignity does not derive from a "quality of life" which, according to proponents of death on demand, is defined rather by physical or mental health, autonomy, productivity or "usefulness" to society.

The mere fact of being human confers this dignity which no other living being possesses. Furthermore, as Christians, we know that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. Our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. What amazing dignity!

"A society is truly open to life when it recognizes that life is precious even in the elderly population, in the disabled, and even in those who are gravely ill or in the process of dying; when society affirms that the call to the realization of one's humanity does not exclude suffering, and instead teaches how to see sick and suffering persons as gifts for the entire community, whose presence calls everyone Tweet from Pope Francis

February 17th, 2014: "To all who are sick, do not lose hope, especially when your suffering is at its worst. Christ is near you."

to solidarity and responsibility. [...] The testimony offered by the family becomes crucial in the sight of every facet of society in its consistent affirmation of the importance of the aged person as he or she is a subject of the community, who has a mission to fulfill, and about whom it is always false to say he or she receives without offering anything in return."⁸ The message is clear: every life is worth living to the end.

Unconditional love confirms an other's dignity

In Québec, in 2013, a group of young people aged 14 to 18 submitted a brief to the Select Committee on Dying with Dignity. During the hearings, these volunteers, who work with young adults with serious mental and physical handicaps, said that "knowing them more and more we came to realize that their main need is the same one that we all have: to be loved the way we are".

From Eric, James, Cristina, Mathieu, Bettina and Matthiew they came to understand "that dignity is not defined by a physical condition, but by the love you receive from others". They stated their opposition to the proposed legislation on euthanasia and assisted suicide and expressed the wish that "If one day we were in a difficult situation, that might even lead us to contemplate the idea of ending our lives, we hope we will find people around us (doctors, family, friends . . .) who will be willing to accompany us in that struggle, loving us unconditionally. Choosing death is not the real answer to the lack of such a companionship".

Let us reject the "throwaway" culture

Pope Francis has concluded that the great problem of our societies, dominated by relentless economic logic, is that "we have created a 'throw away' culture which is now spreading. [...] The excluded are not the 'exploited' but the outcast, the 'leftovers'",⁹ starting with the elderly – especially if, for one reason or another, they are sick, disabled or vulnerable.

Euthanasia is not the only threat to vulnerable seniors and people with disabilities. Because it is often difficult for them to get around, and because they live alone, many put off seeking medical attention. Then there is the proliferation of a certain utilitarian mentality that leads some citizens to denounce the use of public funds to treat people who, according to them, no longer contribute to society and have become a burden. Others believe that these people have already benefited enough from the system, and that it would be wise to avoid wasting resources on treatments for people who will soon be dead anyway. In short, they have become "disposable".

No citizen should ever have to imagine that he or she would be robbed of life because of our desires, feelings or suffering. "The lack of health or the fact of one's disability are never valid reasons for exclusion or, and what is worse, the elimination of persons. The gravest deprivation experienced by the aged is not the weakening of one's physical body, nor the

> "Saint Paul says that in the Body which is the Church the weakest are the most indispensable; they make present Jesus crucified."

> > Letter of Jean Vanier to Christians in the Middle-East, Christmas 2013



disability that may result from this. Rather, it is the abandonment, exclusion and deprivation of love."¹⁰

Isn't it time to stop viewing old age as a problem, and older people as a burden? Christian wisdom helps us to understand that aging is a normal part of life, and encourages us to live the virtue of piety: the grateful respect due to our parents, grandparents and ancestors. It is thanks to them that we are alive today. They are the ones who gave us life, who fed us, protected and educated us. As they enter old age, they in turn need us. They must be able to count on us to provide them with affection, care and time. "In *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II talked about the need to recover 'the covenant between the generations': the idea that each generation owes and gains certain things from the generations before and after it. [...] How, for instance, can we ensure that our legal systems, healthcare systems and social security systems don't disadvantage the elderly and disabled? How, as a Church, can we better provide for them spiritually, emotionally and in other ways? And again we ask these questions not because we see elderly or disabled people as a problem, but because we see them as ordinary members of our community who have particular needs and gifts, as we all do at different stages of our lives."¹¹

The challenge we are now facing is to put those who are ill at the center of our families and our communities, and to pray for them and with them. In short, we must imitate Jesus' attitude toward all the sick and ailing, taking care of them, sharing their suffering and helping them to keep hope. Pope Francis encourages "families, where it is normal to take care of a sick person", knowing that the situation can become very burdensome, "I tell them: Do not fear vulnerability! Help one another in love, and you will feel the comforting presence of God."¹²

Tweet from Pope Francis

August 30th, 2013: "Faith is not something decorative or for show. To have faith means to put Christ truly at the centre of our lives."

<mark>==</mark> "Deep down, everyone is afraid…"

A moment's reflection makes us realize that we are all vulnerable. "We are born in extreme fragility, and we die in extreme fragility. Throughout our lives we remain vulnerable, and at risk of being wounded,"¹³ this is the observation of Jean Vanier – one of the great Christian humanists of our time. Peacemaker, advocate for the vulnerable, a man of heart and compassion, Vanier founded the L'Arche community in 1964 to provide a living environment and a family to persons with mental disabilities. For him, every person is a "sacred story".

Men and women, some with and others without intellectual disabilities, now live in more than 150 L'Arche communities scattered throughout forty countries worldwide. Together, they exemplify a vision of the world where the weakest and the strongest need each other to be complete, be happy and live in harmony. Experience has convinced Jean Vanier that "those who are powerless and vulnerable attract what is most beautiful and most luminous in those who





are stronger.^{"14} The most vulnerable people in our society have the ability to profoundly transform the people who come to live or be friends with them. They are somehow peacemakers. This is a reflection that applies equally well to the sick and the aged.

"The most fragile being compels us to accept our own fragility and this acceptance of our weaknesses leads us to dialogue, openness to others and peace. But, the requirement of a society where we must be perfect, without flaws or problems, and banishes the right to make mistakes, puts us in a permanent tension with ourselves and others."¹⁵

On January 1, 2014, Jean Vanier delivered this message on the occasion of the first "24 Hours for World Peace":

"Everybody is frightened ... Frightened of what? Frightened of what is different [...] In our L'Arche communities, we welcome people who are different ... people who are different because of their disability, or perhaps because of their religion, they are different. The great difficulty with the people we welcome, people with intellectual disabilities, is that they have been humiliated. Humiliation is the feeling that nobody wants me, that I am not loved. So the whole issue when you welcome someone is to help him discover that he is more beautiful than he realizes, that he is someone, that he is a person. Behind your disability, behind your difficulties, there is you.

"[...] to be open to the culture of another person requires humility, means to accept to lose certain things, to lose a certain superiority. It is to discover that we are all human beings, with our weaknesses, our poverty, our smallness. We may have different cultures, different abilities, but fundamentally we are all human beings born in weakness and we will die in weakness. Meanwhile, we must become responsible, and then become more fragile."¹⁶

"My experience in L'Arche helped me to discover that those who are weak, small, disabled are also prophets of peace. By their presence and gestures they open our hearts to understanding and compassion rather than awaken fear. In a mysterious way they break down the barriers that surround our hearts."

Jean Vanier



Loyalty, patience, openness to life, and respect for the elderly – these are all characteristics which make the Christian family "good news" for our society. It is the presence of Jesus that makes all the difference. Why hide it?

Yes, the time has come to share with many others the secret of our happiness. What are we waiting for before courageously and respectfully revealing to them their immense dignity as children of God and the sacred character of their lives; to help them discover the beauty of marriage and the family informed by the Gospel? What are we waiting for before telling them that "the trials, sacrifices and crises of couples, as well as of the family as a whole, represent pathways for growth in goodness, truth and beauty"¹⁷?

What are we waiting for, before telling them that Christ alone can reveal the full meaning of their lives; that they can only blossom fully by responding to God's calling; that they will never be alone once

Tweet from Pope Francis

August 23rd, 2013: "Lord, teach us to step outside ourselves. Teach us to go out into the streets and manifest your love."

they open their lives to Christ and discover in the Church the treasure of the Word of God, the sacraments and the fellowship of brothers and sisters who will walk with them toward the ultimate goal which gives meaning to their lives: eternal happiness in the Heart of God.

Many others – often unknowingly – are like us "poor in love, thirsting for truth and justice, beggars





- 1. Pope Francis, 21st Assembly for the Pontifical Council for the Family, Rome, October 25, 2013.
- 2. Pope Francis, Angelus of August 18, 2013.
- 3. Pope Francis meets with over 10,000 engaged couples, Valentine's Day, Rome, February 14, 2014.
- 4. Pope Francis, Catechesis of February 12th, 2014, Saint Peter's Square.
- 5. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium, 6, 7.
- 6. Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Deus Caritas Est, 31.
- 7. Pope Francis, Lenten Message, "He became poor so that by his poverty you might become rich," 2014.
- 8. Pope Francis' Message to the General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life, Vatican City, February 20, 2014
- 9. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium, 53.
- 10. Pope Francis, Message to the General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life, February 20th, 2014
- 11. Bishop Anthony Fisher, Zenit Press Agency interview, February 21st, 2014.



of God. The greatest form of poverty is in fact the lack of Christ and until we bring Jesus to people we shall never have done enough for them."¹⁸

The time has come for us Christian families to become missionary families – to overcome fear and to propose Life! To spread our hope and our joy! We must all hear ourselves saying: "Rejoice always... the Lord is near" (Phil 4:4-5).



Acts 20: 35

- 12. Pope Francis, homily given on the occasion of the mass for the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes and the World Day of the Sick, February 11, 2014.
- 13. Citation taken from a website dedicated to Jean Vanier (http:// fondation-larche.org/english/LArche/Founder.html). With Marie-Hélène Mathieu, he also founded the international movement "Faith and Light" (http://www.faithandlight.org/)

- 15. Ibid.
- Jean Vanier, Message on the occasion of the "24 Hours for World Peace" (http://www.24hoursforworldpeace.org/en/content/ message-jean-vanier)
- 17. Pope Francis, 21st Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Family, Rome, October 25, 2013.
- Pope Francis, Message to Monsignor Francesco Lambiasi, Bishop of Rimini, on the occasion of the 34th "Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples", August 18-24, 2013.

^{14.} Ibid.

Tweets that make you think!

1 *"I cannot imagine a Christian who does not know how to smile. May we joyfully witness to our faith."* (Tweet from Pope Francis, 30.01.14)

Pope Francis invites us to make our hope and joy contagious. But in what lies our hope? And what is the source of our joy? As children of God, do we abandon ourselves to the mercy and providence of our Father? How?

2 *"Too often we participate in the globalization of indifference. May we strive instead to live global solidarity."* (Tweet from Pope Francis, 26.10.13) Who are *"the least among our brethren" towards whom we need to be attentive; those to whom we must go with our children in order to teach them to give freely with compassion and generosity? Under what conditions will our children choose to put their talents to the service of others in love and truth? How do we encourage them to love, serve, welcome, respect and promote life from the moment of conception to natural death?*

To all who are sick, do not lose hope, especially when your suffering is at its worst. Christ is near you." (Tweet from Pope Francis, 17.02.14)

How do I react to people living with a disability or serious illness? What is my view of old age? Do I recognize the crucified Jesus in these people? What importance does Jesus have for me? Is this an invitation to solidarity and responsibility? How shall I respond?

4 *"Lord, teach us to step outside ourselves. Teach us to go out into the streets and manifest your love."* (Tweet from Pope Francis, 23.08.13)

"The greatest form of poverty is in fact the lack of Christ and until we bring Jesus to people we shall never have done enough for them"... "With greater courage, let us testify by our words and deeds, to the extraordinary and unique mercy of Jesus."

Do I dare to mention the name of Jesus in conversation? Am I willing to witness to his action in my life? Why? Am I afraid?

5 *"Faith is not something decorative or for show. To have faith means to put Christ truly at the centre of our lives."* (Tweet from Pope Francis, 30.08.13)

Is Christ the centre of my life? Do I attempt to live every moment in his presence? Do I consult him before making a decision or choice? As a citizen, do I get involved in social and political debates?

For the Workshop Guide and to order: www.colf.ca



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COLF is co-sponsored by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB) and the Supreme Council of the Knights of Columbus. It promotes respect for human life and dignity and the essential role of the family.

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