



SESSION FIVE

God's Mercy – No One Excluded

A genuine welcome that transcends any feeling of awkwardness or alienation is essential. Everyone has something to offer. Often, those who think they have least to give are, in fact, carrying with them instincts and insights that can open wide new ways of understanding and living for others. Faith should not be another of the areas in which we allow people to find themselves impoverished.

Where there is a breakdown in family life, helping the family to maintain a sense of family community, even where people are no longer living together, can make a useful contribution. The Christian community defines itself by how well it supports families in need. (*Share the Good News*, 121)

1. Welcome, Introduction and Overview (5 min)

Welcome to our fifth session. So far we have looked at the reality of family life, we have considered the Christian ideal and we have explored the importance of how love is lived out in the family.

Tonight we look at the gap for all of us between the ideal and the reality in our family

experiences. None of us is perfect, however all of us are included in God's love and mercy. We look at the challenges that Pope Francis poses to us to truly reflect that inclusive love and mercy. We also explore what Pope Francis says about the importance of accompanying newly weds and those preparing for marriage.



2. Video Clip 13: Vox Pop (10 min)

A selection of short interviews with people about their different experiences of family life. Interviewees to include: a couple whose marriage struggled but survived; a couple whose marriage

didn't survive; parents who have chosen not to marry; a couple in a second union; someone who is gay or lesbian; a single parent, etc.



3. Discussion (15 min)

What do these stories say to you?





VIDEO CLIP 14: INPUT THE PRACTICE OF GOD'S MERCY (20 MIN)

Pope Francis insists in *The Joy of Love* that God's mercy and compassion is for all, regardless of their marital status, gender, colour, age or social status. Jesus showed concern and mercy to all, especially those on the margins, even if they did

not show in their way of life that they believed in his teaching or accepted his values. We are urged to relate today with the same care and compassion to all families whether or not they meet with the ideals of Jesus' teaching.



“Although she constantly holds up the call to perfection, and asks for a fuller response to God, the Church must accompany with attention and care the weakest of her children, who show signs of a wounded and troubled love, by restoring in them hope and confidence, like the beacon of a lighthouse in a port or a torch carried among people to enlighten those who have lost their way or who are in the midst of a storm” (291)

Pope Francis encourages us to acknowledge the good that is present even in imperfect situations. Family units that may appear as if they do not conform to the ideal may at the same time be places of love, care for others, and service to the communities where they live and work. The Church upholds the ideal of marriage as a committed, permanent union between a man and a woman open to new life. However, the Church must also support families who do not match this ideal. ‘The Church’s task is often like that of a field hospital.’ (291)

Judgements, if they are made from outside of a particular family situation, may fall into the trap of failing to take account of all its complexities about which an outsider simply cannot be fully aware. People may also be highly distressed because of their situation, and to react in such a manner as to cause further distress is not the Christian way.

The choice of civil marriage or cohabitation is often not motivated by prejudice or resistance to sacramental union but simply by cultural or other practical issues. The choice to ‘live together’ is often made because of a resistance to anything institutional or it may be due to practical situations such as the cost of celebrating marriage or lack of housing or permanent well-paid employment. In such circumstances we are challenged to welcome such couples just as Jesus welcomed the Samaritan woman at the well. He addressed her desire for true love, in order to free her from the darkness in her life and to bring her to the full joy of the Gospel.



“There are two ways of thinking which recur throughout the Church's history: casting off and reinstating. The Church's way ... has always been the way of Jesus, the way of mercy and reinstatement ... The way of the Church is not to condemn anyone for ever; it is to pour out the balm of God's mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart ... for true charity is always unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous” (296)



We can help everyone to find his or her proper way to participate in the life of the Church and to experience the unconditional mercy of God, as Jesus showed it to those around him. The power of the Holy Spirit to influence people in all circumstances is immense, if we can find and keep open appropriate channels of communication. In situations where people, by their words or actions, propose something other than what the Church teaches, Pope Francis suggests offering them the possibility of coming in touch with Gospel values through

participation in prayer gatherings, charitable or social initiatives. But always, he insists, keep the door open! Pope Francis talks about the complexity of judging the 'sinfulness' of a situation. When it comes to the question of moral responsibility, we always need to take into account a person's affective immaturity, or other psychological or social factors that lessen, if not even reduce to a minimum, moral culpability. He quotes *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* which mentions the following as circumstances which may mitigate moral responsibility:

“responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments and other psychological or social factors (CCC 1735)” (302)



In situations of apparent failure an individual or a couple may be making what is for now the most generous response they can to God's call. Whatever stage a person is at is always only a particular stage along the journey, with many

possibilities for change and new stages of growth. Each of us can make a decision to do or not do something, but only God can judge its sincerity and significance.

“A small step in the midst of great human limitations can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order, but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties,” (305)



Our conscience has a defining role to play in our decisions as to what is right or wrong for us to do. There is a need to help people discern what they should do by listening to that voice deep within, rather being distracted by the myriad voices screaming from outside. We can help people to consider how they feed their internal voice so that it speaks the words of the Gospel of Christ rather than those of the Gospel of the World. Conscience is not about doing what we feel like. It involves bringing objective and sometimes difficult questions into our encounter with God. For example, ‘The divorced and remarried should ask themselves: how did they act towards their children when the conjugal union

entered into crisis; whether or not they made attempts at reconciliation; what has become of the abandoned party; what consequences the new relationship has on the rest of the family and the community of the faithful; and what example is being set for young people who are preparing for marriage’ (300). It is a conversation on these questions before God and with God, a conversation which always includes giving full consideration to the teaching of the Church, to the impact of my decisions on others, and so on. We are called to accompany people with the tenderness of Christ as they take personal responsibility for their decisions and actions and live with the consequences.

5. Discussion (20 min)

How do you feel about what Pope Francis says here?

What do you find most challenging? Most reassuring?



6. Video Clip 15: Take a moment for quiet reflection

PART II: SUPPORTING NEWLY WEDS AND THOSE PREPARING FOR MARRIAGE (20 MIN)

Pope Francis stresses the importance of whole communities being involved in helping engaged couples prepare for marriage. Christian communities themselves benefit from this important work of supporting young couples as they grow in love. The best preparation for marriage is that which happens from childhood in the context of life in a loving family.

Young couples are not expected to be experts on every detail of the Catechism. What is important is a sharing of Christian values and good advice from people who have lived married life with courage and generosity. Discussion groups and a variety of optional talks on topics of genuine interest to young people can also prove helpful.

“Learning to love someone does not happen automatically nor can it be taught in a workshop just prior to the celebration of marriage. For every couple marriage preparation begins at birth. What they received from their family should prepare them to know themselves and to make a full and definitive commitment. Those best prepared for marriage are probably those who learned what Christian marriage is from their own parents who chose each other unconditionally and daily renew this decision” (208)

The Joy
of Love

Couples should be strongly advised to discuss what each expects from marriage, what they understand by love and commitment, what each wants from the other and what kind of life

they want together. Such discussions can enable couples to discern what, if anything, they have in common and to avoid making a marriage commitment based on desire alone.

“The decision to marry should never be encouraged unless the couple has discovered deeper reasons that will ensure a genuine and stable commitment” (211)

Marriage preparation should focus not just on the marriage ceremony as the end of a process but on marriage as a lifelong commitment based on mutual love. It is important that resources are available to couples as they need them: places,

people and services that they can turn to when the need arises. It is also important to remind them of the availability of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.



Pope Francis acknowledges some of the challenges facing newly married couples:

- Learning how to accept each other's differences
- Separating from their parents
- Responding to the birth of their first child
- Dealing with financial and other practicalities

Then there are the occasional crises that affect families at different times and in different ways:

- The stresses of raising children at the various stages of their development from early

childhood to adolescence to dealing with the experience of their children eventually moving out to begin their adult lives

- Emotional, social or spiritual difficulties
- Learning how to resolve differences and to forgive
- Problems in the workplace

Difficulties will arise in all families from time to time because of human weakness. It is important that couples learn to be realistic regarding their expectations of one another and to recognise and respect each other's strengths and weaknesses.

The Joy
of Love

“Young love needs to keep dancing towards the future with immense hope. Hope is the leaven that, in those first years of engagement and marriage, makes it possible to look beyond arguments, conflicts and problems and to see things in a broader perspective. Hope also bids us live fully in the present, giving our all to the life of the family, for the best way to prepare a solid future is to live well in the present” (219)

Those best placed to accompany families in times of difficulty are their own or other families. Experienced and trained couples can be of immense support to others and it is important that such training is easily available to interested

couples. Through their ministry, God's mercy and care is mediated to families in need of support. Pope Francis also highlights the importance of parishes supporting newly wed couples.



7. Discussion (15 min)

- What helped you most as you prepared for marriage?
- If you had to deal with difficult times, what did you find helpful?
- Do you think you or your parish could help other married couples or those preparing for marriage?



8. Invite the participants to fill in the comment sheets

9. Video Clip 16: Closing Reflection (5 min)



10. Tea/Coffee



IN SUMMARY



PART I

Pope Francis draws our attention to God's unending mercy which extends to all, regardless of who they are or what they have done. Jesus showed God's mercy in action when he reached out to all who were in need, especially those who were most marginalised. Today we are called to do likewise. The Church, while upholding the ideal of Christian marriage, is called to reach out to all families with support and understanding.

It is unwise to make judgements from outside of particular situations, without full awareness of all the factors involved in the choices people have made or the realities that exist behind outward appearances.

In the midst of the business and distractions of life, people need help to discern what God is asking of them, to be able to hear the inside voice of conscience in the midst of the myriad other voices that clamour for attention. It is important to be aware that people may be responding to God's call in the best way that is possible for them at a particular time. We must always respond as Jesus did, with mercy and understanding.

There are many ways in which people can be involved in the daily life of the local Church, such as through prayer gatherings or charitable social initiatives. We must always keep the door open!

PART II

Christian communities are called to accompany young couples as they prepare for marriage. Programmes offered in a spirit of Christian love and care that help young people to openly discuss their hopes and fears for married life as well as offering good advice are most helpful.

Through open discussion young people need to discover if their mutual attraction is based on genuinely shared interests and concerns. This is a sound basis for marriage.

It is important also to minister to newly married couples as they adjust to married life. Those best placed to offer this assistance are their own and other families.

We need to help young couples to recognise the challenges they face, and to look forward with hope to the future. Parishes have an important role to play here.

There are many skills that can be of great value to young married couples and they can be helped to acquire these by other couples who are trained to do this work.

