***TALK AT THE CATHOLIC LIFE FAMILY ASSOCIATION***

**2023 CONFERENCE:**

***“MARRIAGE AND FAMILY: A EUCHARISTIC JOURNEY FOR THE LIFETIME*”**

**Orlando, FL October 17, 2023**

Dear friends, sisters, and brothers in Christ,

*“How pleasant it is when brothers and sisters are together”* sings psalm 113. It is great for all of us to be here for the *Catholic Family Life Association 2023 Conference: “Marriage and Family: A Eucharistic Journey for the Lifetime.”*

The title “*Eucharistic Journey*” center us in the *Kairos*, the time of God’s grace we are in for the Church in the United States and the world. “*Eucharistic Journey*” places us at the heart of the Eucharistic Revival we are living nationwide. “*Journey”*: situates us also in the heart of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops “*For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.*”

But our perspective of this Eucharistic and synodal frame is “matrimony and family life.”

As you know, “*Synod*” comes from the Greek “*Syn*”, that means coming together, and “*’odos”* that is traveling, journeying, going somewhere, a road, a path.

This is what we want to do these days: walking together-as people committed to ministry to matrimony and family life- and discover the most amazing and beautiful reality of our walking together: Jesus walks with us, in a very special manner with his real eucharistic presence. And He walks with every single family in the world.

The Pope said at the inauguration of the Synod: “*In synodal dialogue, in this beautiful ‘journey in the Holy Spirit’ that we are making together as the People of God, we can grow in unity and friendship”* Let’s our Conference this year, be a “beautiful journey in the Holy Spirit”, that we make together, to grow in unity and friendship, for the sake of the matrimonies and families we are committed to serve.

1. **The Biblical frame of our understanding of “Marriage and Family: A Eucharistic Journey for the Lifetime.”**

The expression “*Eucharistic Journey*” implies the idea of a God who is present and who is on a journey. It is the idea of a God who moves from one place to another;’ who shares as a companion on the road with other people; who travels around and cover distances.

This idea seems to contradict the understanding of God’s reality according to Thomas Aquinas: God is *Actus Purus*, with no “*potency*” at all that would allow him to change in something else or to move somewhere else; God is the *Motor Immobilis* that moves everything without moving himself. Aquinas’ theology will reconcile this understanding with the biblical one of a God who incarnates to be able to walk with us in time and space.

*Process Theology*, originating in the metaphysics of the English philosopher-mathematician Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) and the American philosopher Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000), considers movements as an essential attribute of God who is fully involved in and affected by temporal processes. Process Theology affirms that God’s love is tender and responsive, perpetually moved by all that happens. God is the great companion - the fellow-sufferer who understands, the one who walks with us.

We can find the key to harmonize a concept of God who doesn’t move, with the biblical understanding of a God who moves with his people, in God’s name. God said to Moses, *“I Am Who I Am*.” (Ex. 3:13-14)   God’s name “I Am” reveals that He is existence and being itself. God is present everywhere, anytime, and He is present without moving. He is on a journey with us without moving himself.

In the Bible God reveals himself as one who walks even physically, geographically, and especially who walks along the history of salvation, with his people. He accompanies Israel in all its hardships and vicissitudes.

He did during the Exodus constantly manifesting His presence through protective and powerful actions: the cloud by day, the pillar of fire at night, the parting of the Red Sea… He is a present Saving and powerful companion on the road.

God accompanies his people in the Tent of the meeting along the way in the desert. The Tent of the Meeting in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers is the name of a place where God would meet with His people, Israel. *“Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the “tent of meeting.” Anyone inquiring of the Lord would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp. And whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose and stood at the entrances to their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent. As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the Lord spoke with Moses”.* (Exodus 33:7, 9)

Where the people of Israel settle and pitched their tents, God pitched his tent too, to manifest his presence and accompanying them on their journey through the wilderness from one camp to the next one.

God is a real and present companion on the road to the Promised Land, who makes himself close to listen to His people.

The Ark of the Covenant, the ornate, gold-plated wooden chest that in biblical times housed the two tablets of the Law given to Moses by God, was another way God used to make the people of Israel understood that He was walking with them with power while calling them to be faithful to the Law.

The ark of the covenant was the place of the presence of God. As we read in Exodus 25:22, "*There I will meet with you . . . on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you."* By carrying the Ark of the Covenant with them along the way, they experience God’s closeness to his people and his protective presence.

*“The Ark of the Covenant of the Lord stayed in Obed-Edom’s house for three months. And the Lord blessed Obed-Edom and all his family. The people told David, “The Lord has blessed the family of Obed-Edom. And all his things are blessed. This is because the Ark of the Covenant of God is there.” So, David went and brought it up from Obed-Edom’s house to Jerusalem with joy…They blew the trumpets as they brought the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord to the city.”* (2 Samuel 6:11-15.)

In Christ, God himself came to walk with humanity in the path of life. *“And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”* (John 1:14). God became the great companion of humanity in their way to salvation. He physically walked our roads with his disciples; he met people in cities, marketplaces and in the temple and helped them walk through the truth and through their perplexities and suffering.

In Christ is present the saving and powerful presence of God; he lives in the tent of the meeting, that is his own flesh where humanity and divinity meet and had a home among men’s houses. He personified the Law and God’s companionship that is blessing and protection.

Let’s take two examples of God’s presence among us as a companion in life.

*“On that very same day, -* they refer to the first day of the wee*k- two of them were on their way to a village called Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem, and they were talking together about all that had happened. And it happened that as they were talking together and discussing it, Jesus himself came up and walked by their side.”*

There is a walk along a distance: actually, seven miles. They are going from Jerusalem to Emmaus. There is a time for this walk to happen: in fact, they arrived by the evening.

But there are two walks going on: a physical one made of steps and soil; and a spiritual one: made of heart and thought. The physical one knows the hardship of tiredness and fatigue. The spiritual one knows the struggle of thinking and the anxiety of the heart: a fatigue of the heart.

Our walking in life is always twofold. Especially the interior one, the one that happens in the silence of the soul, in the interior castle of Saint Teresa, that is “*the soul as if it were a castle made of a single diamond or of a very clear crystal.”,* as she describes it.

The heart is looking for meaning, a sense and understanding where everything looks meaningless, senseless, and absurd: *“Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these days?” “The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, how our chief priests and rulers both handed him over to a sentence of death and crucified him….we were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel; and besides all this, it is now the third day since this took place.”* What a fatigue of the heart, what a turmoil in the soul…

They are two disciples. They share the same physical and spiritual walk. They share the stress and confusion while walking in search of understanding. In that walk they are family: people trying to walk together, to face the path together, to live their vocation together, and share their concerns in life.

Jesus joins them as a third member of this family of disciples walking in the path of life. He began walking the same walk and enters the spiritual one too.

*What are you talking about on the way?* Is this a rhetorical question? Is it fake? Is it a conventional way to enter a conversation with other people? I don’t see Jesus playing games with people. I think his question was real: he wants to hear about the spiritual walk they are walking. Of course, they needed reasons, meaning and sense in their spiritual walk. But specially they needed company. In life, we don’t need reasons, but company. What we need is someone to walk with us. This is very true for matrimony and for family, but above all, we need God to walk with us.

That family of disciples along the walking the distance, and the walking of the heart, they experience the walking of God with them. (It is like when you experience the strong feeling of a presence by you, that infuses in you an inexplicable joy and peace that sometimes you don’t know how to name it) In the breaking of the bread they will be able to name the fire and joy of their heart along the way: the real presence of Jesus with them.

The same we see in Mary trying to make a sense of her crucified Son: the walk to Bethlehem, the walk to Aim Karim, the walk to Egypt, the walk to the temple in Jerusalem, the walk to Calvary. Always trying to make a sense, tying to put the pieces together, trying to harmonize what seems contradictory… this is the “pondering”, the “keeping all these things in her heart”, that we read in the Gospel of Luke regarding Mary. The Greek words for these expressions indicate some fatigue of the heart, like trying to put together all the pieces to get the ultimate meaning of what is going on.

But she always walked her spiritual walk accompanied by her Son, Jesus: a baby, an infant, a boy, a young man, a man… always there by her. Because she too walks the physical paths and the spiritual one in the family: her only family, her son. I am positive that Jesus also walked his mother’s spiritual walk and filled her heart with joy and peace along the walk of days, events, emotions and suffering. I am sure that more than once they both cried together because the walk was getting very hard. But it is the company in the walk that makes all the difference.

In our case, we don’t have the physical company of Jesus like Mary along her whole life; like the two disciples of Emmaus, but we have the sacramental presence of Jesus, the Son of God and son of Mary, body, blood, soul, and divinity. And he also walks with us along the geographical paths of life and the spiritual journey of the faith.

Like in musical composition we have a theme and variations that repeat the theme with changes in melody, harmony, and rhythm, I invite you to keep this theme from Scriptures: God is the great companion of men and woman. He is really present to us in the paths of life as a saving, loving and real presence. Remember that God’s name means that he is the one always by you wherever you are. Now, this presence will take the form of a sacramental presence.

Jesus walking a distance with the disciples to give a meaning to their spiritual journey and recognizing his presence in the breaking of the bread- as the frame of the following reflections I want to offer on our “*Matrimony and Family: A Eucharistic Journey for a Lifetime.*

1. **The components of the journey**

Our first reflection regards the “pathway”, the journey. A “path” entails distance and some time to walk it. You go from the point of departure to the point of arrival. And walking carries fatigue and tiredness.

As we advance on the way we feel tired, our feet hurt, and we start sweating. The longer the way, the harder the fatigue.

For this reason, when we prepare for a journey, we bring some provisions with us: bread. We know that sooner or later we will need it to regain energy and continue waking.

Let’s recall the walk of the people of Israel from Egypt, through the desert to the Promised Land: a long way strewn with difficulties and troubles. In dire need, they pray to God for bread for the journey – the *manna*- because they were faltering and unable to continue walking. *“Then the LORD said to Moses: I am going to rain down bread from heaven for you. Each day the people are to go out and gather their daily portion.”* It was a daily portion of bread from Heaven what sustained them and allowed them to reach the promised Land.

Catalan poet Jorge Martinez writes in his poem: “*To walk is knitting with the shoes.”*

So, distance, fatigue, and bread and the three essential elements of any walking or journeying; be this a short one, or a lifelong one.

Let’s reflect on matrimony and family life as walking.

Family life happens at home. This walk is not physical, and there is no distance to cover: we don’t go from one place to another.

I said “generally” because we know there are millions of migrant and refugee families who must physically walk and who don’t have a home.

Here, I refer to a different walking that happens in family: growth: the boy becomes a man; the girl becomes a woman; the spouses mature with time… and everyone in the family grows in holiness. And through holiness families walk in life from this earth to Heaven. There is a point of departure and there is a point of arrival.

Pope Francis in his homily at the tenth World Meeting of Families in 2022 said that Family Love is a Path to Holiness”. “*I encourage you to take up with renewed conviction the journey of family love… It is not an easy journey: there will be dark moments, moments of difficulty in which we will think that it is all over.”*

*“In your journey as a family, you share so many beautiful moments: meals, rest, housework, leisure, prayer, trips and pilgrimages, and times of mutual support… Nevertheless, if there is no love then there is no joy, and authentic love comes to us from Jesus. He offers us his word, which illuminates our path; he gives us the Bread of life which sustains us on our journey.”* (Letter to Families, February 2, 2014)

Here, we find the three elements of walking the path: matrimony and family life is a walk of growth towards Heaven. Walking, spouses, and family grow in their bonding ties, in their love for each other, in holiness… and in this way the families walk toward Heaven. But the Pope also mentions that for families to walk the walk they count on Jesus’ presence with his Word and the Bread of Life.

*“A positive experience of family communion is a true path to daily sanctification and mystical growth, a means for deeper union with God”*, says in *Amoris Laetitia* (9).

It is true that along the way families will encounter difficulties, fatigue, and pain. Sometimes it is the fatigue of persevering in the walk; the fatigue of not abandoning the path, of not turning to look back:

*‘Every morning, on rising, we reaffirm before God our decision to be faithful, come what may in the course of the day. And all of us, before going to sleep, hope to wake up and continue this adventure, trusting in the Lord’s help. In this way, each spouse is for the other a sign and instrument of the closeness of the Lord, who never abandons us: “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28:20).”* (AL 9)

It is clear in the mind of the Pope that matrimony and family life is a walk, but a walk with God. A walk whose destination is Heaven.

Along the walk, the dust of the desert sticks to us, the sun burns our skin, and footwear hurts our feet. Remember: *“To walk is knitting with the shoes*!”

1. **The Bread families need for the journey**.

My third reflection regards what families need to continue the way.

In the same way God made bread come down from Heaven to feed the Israelites in the desert, God gives families the bread of the Eucharist to sustain them in their walk towards Heaven.

*“Jesus summoned his disciples and said, “My heart is moved with pity for the crowd, for they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, for fear they may collapse on the way.” (*Mt 15:32) He didn’t want to send those crowds back home him without giving them some bread. So, He made the multiplication of the loaves to make them able to walk more and arrive home. But that bread was made of wheat.

The Bread from Heaven that Christ gives to families is a living Bread: *“I am the living bread that came down from Heaven.”* (John 6:51)

The bread families need in their walk is the real presence of Jesus, a living Jesus companion on the way. Bread is always present, available, at hand. A bread that they can eat and transform into family love.

This bread is the holy Eucharist, the real presence of Jesus in the Tabernacle, it is the holy communion of the Body and Blood of the Lord; it is the strength to persevere on the path, the love to share at home.

* The family who participates every Sunday in the Eucharist and receives a living Jesus in holy communion, is filled with graces for sacrifice, pardoning, unity, love and inner joy that each member of the family brings home from the Eucharistic celebration, to share, grow together, and walk towards Heaven.
* Families know that the Eucharistic presence of Jesus protects and accompanies them from the Tabernacles that configure the eucharistic geography of the Church.
* Families know that they can come to the Eucharist in adoration when they need consolation, answers, strength, and forgiveness.
* Families transformed themselves, -through the Eucharist received in holy communion- in Eucharistic families where the Body and Soul of Jesus in them make them living hosts for the glory of the most holy Trinity. The presence of Jesus in them through the Eucharist enables them to love each other with a sacrificial and self-giving love, that works like the amalgam of families.
* Families, through their eucharistic life, open the door of their homes to go the share the love of Jesus they received in prayer and in the sacrament, especially to the poor and the suffering.

It is a silent and mysterious presence of Jesus walking along, as He walked with the disciples on their way to Emmaus, that family recognizes in the breaking of the bread at Sunday Mass, and in the joy of the disciple who receives Him in holy communion.

Dear friends, the Eucharist is the treasure of the church and of the family.

It is the bread families need to walk to Heaven, and to love deeply each other here on earth.

We said that “*To walk is knitting with the shoes*”, as in Martinez’s poem. But the poem continues: “*it is to feel that the walk is already home*”. This is true, our walking on earth, already tastes like Heaven, because the Son of God, in the Eucharist, walks with us. And remember, in this life we don’t need things to assure our journey, but company, a shoulder to lean on.

1. **Some ideas to become companions on the road.**

Those attending this CFLA 2023 conference are committed to serving matrimonies and family life. We prepare people for matrimony, offer an ear to spouses in trouble, lead apostolic movements focused on family life and matrimony, direct or coordinate Family Life offices in dioceses, and many other ways to serve them.

Many years ago, in Rome Card. Ratzinger came to our university to give a talk about the Catechism of the Catholic Church that was recently published. As usual it was a magistral talk with great theological insights. And I remember he concluded his presentation, closing the folder with his notes, looking to the audience, and saying, “and this was exactly the faith my grandmother taught me.”

In the Church our true novelty is Jesus Christ, the same faith professed for more than 2000 years. What I about suggesting is nothing new: it is the Eucharistic faith and devotion of always. We just need to bring it back the family life.

1. In *Amoris Laetitia* Pope Francis suggest that in our marriage preparation class we should underline and prefer quality over quantity, experience over thought and prayer. I think it important to include in the marriage preparation journey an introduction to the Mass, and the experience of Eucharistic adoration, even for a brief period. A guided Eucharistic adoration in the program will give God the occasion to touch the hearts, and to the couples, the experience of spending time with the living Lord in awe and adoration.
2. Families must center their week in the Sunday Mass with a family participation, sitting together, praying together, and giving the children the opportunity to witness the eucharistic faith of their parents, their participation at Mass and the reception of holy communion.
3. Families may find some time a week for eucharistic adoration as family, even for only 15 min or half an hour. (Nocturnal Adoration offer this opportunity having the “Tarcisious” (boys), “Agnesses” (girls) and parentes, men and women in adoration together every month.)
4. To practice and teach children the devotion of spiritual communion, to be said by heart any time during the day, when they pass in front of a Church or when then enter in a Church. Personally, or daily at home as family.

*“My Jesus, I believe that You are present in the Most Holy Sacrament. I love You above all things, and I desire to receive You into my soul. Since I cannot at this moment receive You sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace You as if You were already there and unite myself wholly to You.”*

1. To practice as a family -especially the witness of the parents- the external devotional signs of our faith in the real presence of Jesus in the Tabernacle in Church: silence in Church, the appropriate dress for Mass, kneeling when we pass in front of the Tabernacle, bowing when receiving holy communion…. In the past, we used to do the sign of the cross when passing in front of a church, acknowledging that Jesus is present there. Parents are the best living Eucharistic catechesis for their children.
2. Helping the poor as a family, at least once a month. And to do it and live it because of our Eucharistic faith.

Families are the greatest educators in the faith, and these signs of devotion and sacramental practices will create the awareness in families of the always present Jesus in Church and at home.

Lumen Gentium 11 says that “*the family is, so to speak, the domestic church.*” And Saint John Paul II in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* says that “*the Eucharist is the center and summit of the Church's life.*” Consequently, the domestic church cannot have another center and summit. The Eucharist at home is the presence of the blessed sacrament in the faith, hearts, love, and service lived at home.

During the pandemic, when families couldn’t go to church for the Eucharistic celebration, homes became, in a certain way, more eucharistic centered by following the Mass on TV, praying together the prayers of Mass at home… And for sure made Catholics and catholic families more aware of the need of the Eucharist and communion.

A way to connect Sunday Mass with families could be to have families taking the Eucharist as a model of life. That is, marking Catholic families with the three components of the eucharistic celebration: Sacrifice, Presence and Communion. Eucharistic families where the sacramental presence of Jesus becomes a family life of sacrifice, presence, and communion, nurtured every Sunday with holy communion and the grace of the sacrament of the Eucharist.

I think the story of the walk to Emmaus we began with, give us a very emotional picture of families on the walk of life walking with Jesus and acknowledging his presence in the Eucharist; identifying that presence in the joy of love while walking together as a family: Because God lives in that home, walks with that family, joins them in their spiritual journey with a reassuring silent and loving presence, and Sunday after Sunday let them see his face and feel his love in holy Eucharist.

The living Jesus is the greatest companion of families in their lifelong Eucharistic journey, as a family, towards Heaven.

Thank you very much for your attention.