

The Family: “Fundamental Locus of the Covenant Between the Church and God’s Creation”*

“Locus” is not a word that is often used in conversation. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, locus means “the place where something is situated or occurs; a center of activity, attention, or concentration.” You could say that Philadelphia was a the locus of the pope’s trip to the United States; even with the other cities included in the trip, the Mass at the end of the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia was its main focus.

“Covenant” is a word with a long tradition in the Church. It means the exchange of persons; not a contract in which each person agrees to do something, but a promise to be someone. “I will be your God and you will be my people.” “I take you to be my wife” or “I take you to be my husband.” God makes a covenant with his people in creating them and renews this covenant throughout the Old Testament as he chooses a people (the Jews) to be his own. The definitive covenant occurs when Jesus Christ offers himself for the sins of the world.

Now, looking at this quote from Pope Francis’s meeting with the bishops in Philadelphia, we could read it as: the family is the primary place where God and the Church meet and give themselves to each other. This underscores the vital importance of the family. It is the ordinary means by which God enters into a person’s life. A strong family that brings children up to know, love, and serve the Lord is so important for the life of the Church that it is “fundamental.” While God’s grace can reach persons anywhere and anytime, it is the family that he ordained for that

purpose. As the Holy Father said in his speech at the Festival of Families,

God always knocks on the doors of our hearts. He likes to do that. He goes out from within. But do you know what he likes best of all? To knock on the doors of families. And to see families which are united, families which love, families which bring up their children, educating them and helping them to grow, families which build a society of goodness, truth and beauty. (Sept. 26, 2015)

God desires to give his life and his grace to every human person, from the very beginning of their existence, which occurs within another human person. In the womb, God blesses a child (cf. Ps 139:13). The Holy Spirit is present all along the way—He brings a man and a woman together in love, unites them in marriage, gives life through their act of love, strengthens a woman to give birth, and animates the continued growth of the family. He is a continual source of life for a man and woman united in sacramental marriage.

The family is also the place of the cross: how could it be otherwise if it is the “locus of the covenant” that was wrought in the Blood of Jesus? Infertility, disease, tragedy, pain, and sin also enter into human experience through the family. God and the family meet and give themselves to each other through suffering as well as joy. This is a fundamental truth that was proclaimed by the Holy Father in September.

* Pope Francis, Meeting with Bishops Taking Part in the World Meeting of Families, September 27, 2015.

Copyright © 2015, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington DC. All rights reserved.

Quotes from Pope Francis copyright © 2015, Libreria Editrice Vaticana (LEV), Vatican City State. All rights reserved.