

### Session 3

# The Family is Put to the Test

## A. Opening hymn and greeting

## B. Invocation of the Holy Spirit

## C. Reading from the Word of God

The angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him.” Joseph rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed for Egypt. He stayed there until the death of Herod, that what the Lord had said through the prophet might be fulfilled, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

When Herod had died, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.” He rose, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go back there. And because he had been warned in a dream, he departed for the region of Galilee.

He went and dwelt in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He shall be called a Nazorean” (Mt 2:13-15; 19-23).

## D. Biblical Catechesis

### 1. *An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream.*

Sooner or later, in various ways, family life is put to the test. Then wisdom, discernment and hope are needed, great hope, sometimes beyond all human evidence. Suffering, limitations and failure are part of our condition as creatures marked by the experience of sin, the ruin of all beauty, the corruption of all goodness.

This does not mean that we are destined to succumb; on the contrary, acceptance of this condition urges us to trust in God’s benevolent presence which can make all things new. The Gospel passage describes in dramatic tones the journey of a family, Jesus’ family, which is apparently similar to many others: the little child is in danger, and so a journey must be made immediately, by night, to a foreign land. The young family is thus forced to set out on an unexpected, complicated and disturbing road.

This is what happens today to many families who are forced to leave their homes in order to offer their children better living conditions and remove them from the dangers of the world around them. However, the account of the flight into Egypt may refer to a more universal experience that affects all families: the need to undertake a journey that will lead the parents to their maturity and their children



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to adulthood, to awareness of their vocation, which can often take place at the cost of decisions that may be painful. The journey of making a family, generating and educating children is a hard, difficult, demanding road on which the many difficulties from which no family is spared can be discouraging at times.

In the Gospel account, Jesus leaves as a child, and after he returns, he gets his adult name: "He shall be called a Nazorean" (verse 23), a title that prefigures his destiny on the cross. So from every family's journey, during which the parents also mature, adult children are born who can take on their vocation themselves. On this family journey, the main actors are the parents, especially the father, who is called to provide good living conditions for the children. The need to leave is referred to Joseph through the language of dreams. In a dream (Mt 1:20-21), Mary's pregnancy had been announced to him and he was invited to accept her and take her with him (Cfr.Mt 1:20-21).

Little is known about Joseph, but one thing is for sure: "He was a righteous man" (Mt 1:19). Justice, the virtue of interpersonal relations, puts safeguarding one's neighbor in first place. Since Joseph was just, he decided to dismiss Mary secretly rather than expose her to public judgment. In the simplicity of his heart, he got a glimpse of God's plan and saw the divine hand in the events of family life. It is fundamental to know how "to listen to the angels", to discern spiritually the events and moments in our family life so that the relationships will always be protected, favored and healed. In fact, the family lives of good relations, the exchange of positive looks, reciprocal esteem and reassurance, defense and protection. From this atmosphere the careful discernment and quick decision making are derived that can save a child's life.

This is true for every family, for those who are facing a concrete situation of danger, but also for those who are in apparently safer situations. Parents must stay focused on their children's good life in order to remove them from threats and dangers. The angel invites Joseph to wake up, to take, accept, flee...and trust, and to stay in the foreign land until He, the Lord, says so.

Joseph takes on his responsibilities, he is the protagonist of his experience, but he does not feel alone because he relies on the look of the One who provides for people's lives. Trust in God does not exonerate us from reflection, evaluation of situations or the complex decision-making process. Instead, it makes it possible to live in all situations without despairing or becoming resigned. Joseph is awake, capable of facing the events and protecting the life of mother and child, but he also acts with the full awareness that he is aided by God's effective protection.



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### 2. *Take the child and his mother.*

Joseph obeys, takes the child and his mother and brings them far from the dangerous situation. In fact, King Herod, who was supposed to be the guarantor of his people's lives, became a persecutor to flee from.

Today the family still lives in contact with dangerous and subtle threats: suffering, poverty, arrogance, but also exaggerated work rhythms, consumerism, indifference, abandonment and loneliness. The whole world can seem to be hostile, an adversary of the life of the littlest ones in many ways. All parents would like to make the world easier and more livable for their children and show them that life is good and worth living.

This desire motivates the care given to children in their early childhood. Parents are sorry if their children cry; they suffer and do everything to alleviate their pain. They do what they can so that life for their children will be beautiful, a gift, and blessed in God's name. This is the meaning of the journey into Egypt: the search for a safe place beyond the night that will protect from danger, preserve from violence, make it possible to hope again and keep a good idea about God and life.

It seems that the father is called to this task in first place: it is he who wakes up and takes the initiative. The child and his mother are entrusted to Joseph; he knows he will have to bring them both to Egypt, to safety. "Take the child and his mother", the angel says twice, and the text repeats these words two more times. They sound like an encouragement to fathers to overcome the uncertainties, to come forward and to take care of the child and his mother. Today the human sciences are rediscovering the decisive importance of the paternal figure for children's integral development.

The father – as the text suggests – finds his identity and role when he takes care of the mother; that is, when he takes care of the couple's relationship. We are well aware how decisive the parents' understanding is in order to protect, care for and encourage the children. We are also aware of how difficult it is for the man to protect the woman from the countless nights of loneliness, silence and a lack of communication. When looked at carefully, these are also dangers that make life more "difficult" for the children!

### *They took refuge in Egypt.*

A family's journey: to leave, to go from a hostile land to one that is more livable, Egypt, which, in its time, was a land of slavery and suffering, but also the place where the Lord's love for his people Israel was revealed.

Egypt fills Israel's imagination with many thoughts: it is the land where Jacob and his children were hosted, and even before them, his son Joseph, who was sold by his brothers. It is the land where the people suffered slavery and experienced



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liberation. Moses also fled from that land which had hosted him. The angel asks Joseph to bring the child to safety precisely there, almost as if to say that when revisited and inhabited with hope and trust, even a place of death can become a cradle for life. But for this to happen the courage is needed to go back there, and the decision to live in that difficult place, supported by trust in the God of life. Faith in God is capable of making all things new and giving back vitality to families.

Joseph leaves “by night”. At night we see nothing, as if we were blind, but we can hear the voice that supports and encourages us. Many “dark nights” descend on family life: those populated by dreams, both good and bad; those which see the couple groping in the dark of a relationship that has become difficult; those of children going through a crisis who become silent, distant or even accusers and rebels...and almost unrecognizable. All of these nights – as the account of the flight into Egypt teaches us – can be gotten through by bringing the child to safety and listening carefully and confidently to the Word of the Lord.

Parents are asked to protect their children from the many dark nights of their relationship, their problems, and from their children’s own dark nights, which are sometimes more painful because of their choices contrary to what is good. Especially in these moments, the father takes care of the child by maintaining the certainty, also in the eyes of the mother who is suffering, that he will find a place of refuge for him. Not rarely, this refuge is the father’s and the mother’s own heart where the child’s image is kept intact and where the parents can find the patience and hope to go on loving him.

Jesus will die in Jerusalem, the same land from which he was taken away to be protected, by the same power from which his parents removed him. A moment comes in a family’s life when the parents must withdraw. When they have completed their service by accompanying their child to recognize his vocation, it is good for them to step back and let God’s will be done. The family is not eternal, and after accompanying their children to hope in the goodness of the life they have received, it should encourage them to leave, to go on their way.

Parents give proof of their wisdom through their discreet presence and by stepping aside, which is never abandonment, but rather a form of respect and freedom that prepares the future of the world. Again in a dream, Joseph understands that the moment has come to bring his family back to the land of Israel. Wisely he takes steps, evaluates the situation and – enlightened by a mysterious prophecy – decides to live in Nazareth, a safer place than Judea.

Once again, a dream is the place of revelation and victory over hostility and violence, and although it is invisible and almost unsubstantial, it becomes the place of careful and courageous discernment and manages to overcome the most obvious, solid arm of power. Nothing can jeopardize God’s providence, which can



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save all those who entrust themselves to Him from the most difficult and dangerous situations. He is present in the dark nights of our families, and in the hidden, often obscure web of events, he weaves his design of salvation.

### E. Listening to the Magisterium

No. 18 of Familiaris Consortio depicts an evocative fresco of the “dark nights of the family” that close in on all the ages of life and seasons of existence. The text helps us to interpret the peculiar difficulties of families in every part of the world at the present time with the intelligence of the mind and the compassion of the heart. In gathering together the pastoral concerns of the Synod Fathers, John Paul II’s great affection directs the “eyes” of the Church to read the sufferings and difficulties that affect family life with love, and he asks pastors, lay ministers, and families today to enrich the Church’s “look” at the countless crowds that are like “a flock without a shepherd”.

#### *Support the family in difficulty*

*An even more generous, intelligent and prudent pastoral commitment, modeled on the Good Shepherd, is called for in the case of families which, often independently of their own wishes and through pressures of various other kinds, find themselves faced by situations which are objectively difficult [...]*

*Such for example are the families of migrant workers; the families of those obliged to be away for long periods, such as members of the armed forces, sailors and all kinds of itinerant people; the families of those in prison, of refugees and exiles; the families in big cities living practically speaking as outcasts; families with no home; incomplete or single-parent families; families with children that are handicapped or addicted to drugs; the families of alcoholics; families that have been uprooted from their cultural and social environment or are in danger of losing it; families discriminated against for political or other reasons; families that are ideologically divided; families that are unable to make ready contact with the parish; families experiencing violence or unjust treatment because of their faith; teenage married couples; the elderly, who are often obliged to live alone with inadequate means of subsistence [...]*

*Other difficult circumstances in which the family needs the help of the ecclesial community and its pastors are: the children’s adolescence, which can be disturbed, rebellious and sometimes stormy; the children’s marriage, which takes them away from their family; lack of understanding or lack of love on the part of those held most dear; abandonment by one of the spouses, or his or her death, which brings the painful experience of widowhood, or the death of a family member, which breaks up and deeply transforms the original family nucleus.*

[Familiaris Consortio 77]



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## F. Questions for dialogue in the couple and as a group

### *Questions for the couple*

1. What are our family’s current “trials”? How do we live through them?
2. What man am I for the mother of my children? What woman am I for the father of my children? What father and mother are we for our children?
3. How can we grow as a couple in trust and hope in the face of difficult situations and suffering?
4. What small decisions can we make?

### *Questions for the family group and the community*

1. What are the principal threats to families in our society and culture?
2. How can we make the world more livable for our children?
3. How can we help our community to strengthen hope in the future?

## G. A commitment for family and social life

## H. Spontaneous prayers. Our Father

## I. Closing hymn



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