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Audience with the Delegation of the Forum of Family Associations

At 11.35 this morning, in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience a delegation from the Forum of Family Associations on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of its founding.

After handing to those present the address prepared for the occasion, the Pope spoke off-the-cuff to the participants.

The following are the Holy Father's extemporaneous words to those present during the audience, and the address prepared for the occasion and consigned:

The Holy Father's off-the-cuff address

Good morning everyone!

I thought this would be a welcome speech ... But on hearing Gianluigi I saw that there was fire there, there was mysticism. It is a great thing: it is a long time since I have heard about the family with such passion. And it takes courage to do this today! It takes courage. And for this, thank you! I have prepared a speech, but after the warmth with which he spoke, I find it cold. I will hand it to him to be distributed afterwards, and then I will publish it.

While he was talking, many things came to my mind and heart, so many things about the family, things that are not said, that we do not normally say, or, if we do say them, they are said in a polite way, as if it were a school on the family. ... He spoke with his heart, and you all want to talk like that. I will take something that he has said, and I too would like to speak with my heart, and say spontaneously what came into my heart when he spoke.

He used an expression: "to look each other in the eye". The man and the woman, the husband and the bride, look each other in the eye. I tell an anecdote. I like to say hello to the couples who reach their fiftieth, their twenty-fifth anniversary...; also when they come to Mass in Santa Marta. Once, there was a couple celebrating

their sixtieth anniversary. But they were young, because they were married at eighteen, as it was in those days. In those days they married young. Today, because you marry a child ... poor mothers! But the recipe is clear: do not iron the shirts anymore, and so will you marry soon, or not? I find myself in front of this couple, and they looked at me ... I said: "Sixty years! But do you still have the same love?!. And they, looking at me, looked at each other, then came back to look at me, and I saw that their eyes were wet. And they both told me: "We are in love". I will never forget it. "After sixty years we are in love". The warmth of the growing family, the love that is not a love of romance. It is a true love. Being in love all your life, with so many problems that are there ... But being in love.

Then, another thing I ask the spouses, who celebrate their fiftieth or sixtieth anniversary: "Which of you has had more patience?" It is mathematical, the answer is "Both". It is nice! This indicates a life together, a life of two. That patience to support each other.

And then, to the newlyweds who tell me: "We have been married for a month, two months ...", the question I ask is: "Have you had a fight?" They usually say, "Yes". "Ah, all right, this is important. But it is also important not to end the day without making peace". Please teach this: it is normal for you to argue, because we are free people, and if there is a problem, we need to clear it up. But do not finish the day without making peace. Why? Because the "cold war" of the next day is very dangerous.

With these three anecdotes I wanted to introduce what I would like to tell you. Family life: it is a sacrifice, but a good sacrifice. Love is like making pasta: every day. Love in marriage is a challenge for men and women. What is the greatest challenge for a man? To make more his wife more of a woman. More of a woman. To grow as a woman. And what is challenge for a woman? To make your husband more of a man. And so they both go ahead. They go ahead.

Another thing that helps a lot of married life is patience: knowing how to wait. To wait. There are situations of crisis in life – major crises, bad crises – when perhaps even times of infidelity come. When the problem cannot be solved at that moment, it takes patience to wait, to wait. So many women – because this is more of the woman than of the man, but also the man sometimes does it –so many women have waited in silence, looking away, waiting for the husband to return to fidelity. And this is holiness. The holiness that forgives everything, because it loves. Patience. Much patience, one towards the other. If one is nervous and shouts, do not answer with another shout... Be quiet, let the storm pass, and then, at the right moment, talk about it.

There are three words that are magic words, but important words in marriage. First of all, "Please": do not be intrusive towards each other. "May I?" That respect for each other. Second word: "Sorry". Apologizing is something that is so important; it is so important. Everyone makes mistakes in life, everyone. "Excuse me, I did this ...", "Sorry, I forgot ...". And this helps to keep going. Help to carry forward the family, the ability to apologize. It is true, apologizing always involves a bit of shame, but it is a holy shame! "Excuse me, I forgot ..." It is something that helps a lot in moving forward. And the third word: "Thank you". To have the greatness of heart always to thank.

Then you spoke of *Amoris laetitia*, and you said: "Here *Amoris laetitia* is made flesh". I like to hear this: read, read the fourth chapter. The fourth chapter is the core of *Amoris laetitia*. It is indeed the spirituality of every day of the family. Some have reduced *Amoris laetitia* to a sterile casuistry of "we can, we cannot". They did not understand anything! Then, in *Amoris laetitia*, problems are not hidden, problems of preparation for marriage. You help engaged couples prepare: you have to say things clearly, do you not? Clearly. Once a woman told me, in Buenos Aires: "But you priests are cunning ..." – "Why?" – "To become a priest, you study for eight years, you prepare for eight years. And then, if after a few years it does not work, you write a nice letter to Rome; and in Rome they give you permission, and you can get married. Instead we, who are given a Sacrament for life, are satisfied with three or four preparatory meetings. This is not right". And that woman was right. Preparing for marriage: yes, it takes conferences, things that explain, but it takes men and women, friends, to talk to them and help them to mature, to mature on the journey. And we can say that today there is a need for a catechumenate for marriage, as there is a catechumenate for Baptism. Prepare, help prepare for marriage.

Then, another problem we see in *Amoris laetitia* is the education of children. It is not easy to educate children. Today the children are sharper than we were! In the virtual world, they know more than us. But we must educate them in the community, educate them in family life. Educate them in making sacrifices for one another. It is not easy to educate children. There are big problems. And you, who love the family, can help other families in this way. The family is an adventure, a beautiful adventure! And today – it pains me to say this – we see that many times we think of starting a family and getting married as if it were a lottery: “Let’s go. If it goes, it goes. If it does not work, we’ll delete the thing and start again”. This superficiality on the greatest gift God gave to humanity: the family. Because, after the story of the creation of man, God shows that He created man and woman in His image and likeness. And Jesus Himself, when He speaks of marriage, says: “Man will leave his father and mother and with his wife they will become one flesh”. Because they are the image and likeness of God. You are an icon of God: the family is an icon of God. Man and woman: it is precisely the image of God. He said it, not me. And this is great, it is sacred.

Then today – it hurts to say this – we talk about “diversified” families: different types of families. Yes, it is true that the word “family” is an analogical word, because we speak of the “family” of the stars, the “families” of the trees, the “families” of the animals ... it is an analogical word. But the human family as an image of God, man and woman, is only one. It is only one. It may be that a man and a woman are not believers: but if they love and unite in marriage, they are the image and likeness of God, though they do not believe. It is a mystery: Saint Paul calls it the “great mystery”, “great sacrament” (cf. *Eph* 5: 32). A true mystery. I like everything you have said and the passion with which you said it. And this is how we must talk about the family, with passion.

Once, I think a year ago, I called a relative of mine who was getting married. At forty. At the end I said: “Tell me: in which church do you plan to marry?” – “We still do not know, because we are looking for a church that matches the dress that – and here he said the name of the girlfriend – will wear, and then we have the problem of the restaurant ...”. But think! ... The important thing was that. When what is secondary takes the place of what is important. The important thing is to love each other, receive the Sacrament, go ahead ...; and then hold all the parties you want, all of them.

Once I met a couple married for ten years, without children. It is very delicate to speak about this, because very often children are wished for but do not come, do they? I didn’t know how to manage the issue. Then I found out that they did not want children. But these people had three dogs and two cats at home... It is nice to have a dog, a cat, it is nice. ... Or when at times you hear them say to you, “Yes, yes, but we don’t want children yet because we must buy a house in the country, then travel...”. Children are the greatest gift. Children are to be welcomed as they come, as God sends them, as God permits – even if at times they are sick. I have heard it said that it is in vogue – or at least it is habitual – in the early months of pregnancy to carry out certain tests, to see if the child is not well, or if he or she comes with a problem. The first proposal in this case is: “Shall we do away with him?” The murder of children. And to have a quiet life, an innocent life is taken.

When I was a boy, the teacher taught us history and said what the Spartans did when a child with malformations was born: they took him to the mountain and threw him down, to ensure “the purity of the race”. And we were shocked. “But how, how can one do this, poor children!” It was an atrocity. Today we do likewise. Have you ever asked yourselves why we do not see many dwarves on the streets? Because the protocol of many doctors – many, not all – is to ask the question: “Is this a problem?” It pains me to say so. In the last century the world was scandalized by what the Nazis did to ensure racial purity. Today we do the same thing, but wearing white gloves.

Family, love, patience, joy, and wasting time in the family. You spoke about something bad: that there isn’t the chance to “waste time”, because to earn nowadays one has to have two jobs, because the family is not considered. You spoke also of young people who can’t get married because there is no work. The family is threatened by the lack of work.

And I would like to end with a piece of advice that a professor gave me once – he gave it to me at school – a philosophy teacher, the dean. I was in the seminary, in the philosophy phase. It was the theme of human maturity, in philosophy we study that. And he said: “What is the criteria of all times to know if a man, if a priest is mature?” We answered with various things... And he said: “No, something more simple. An adult, a priest, is

mature if he is capable of playing with children". This is the test. And to you I say: waste time with children, waste time with your sons and daughters, play with your children. Do not say to them: "Don't disturb!" I once heard a young father say, "Father, when I go to work they are asleep. When I come home, they are asleep". It is the cross of this slavery in an unjust world of work that today's society gives us.

I said that this was the last thing. No, the penultimate. The last is what I will say now, because I do not want to forget it. I spoke about children as the treasure of promise. But there is another treasure in the family: grandparents. Please, care for grandparents! Let them speak, let children speak with their grandparents. Caress grandparents, do not distance them from the family because they are bothersome, because they repeat the same things. Love grandparents, and let them speak with children.

Thank you all. Thank you for the passion, thank you for the love that you have for the family. Thank you for everything! And go ahead with courage. Thank you!

Now, before giving you my blessing, let us pray to Our Lady. Hail Mary...

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

I welcome you and address an affectionate greeting to you and to your president, whom I thank for his words. This meeting allows me to get to know your entity, the Family Forum, founded twenty-five years ago. It brings together more than five hundred associations, and it is truly a network that highlights the beauty of communion and the power of sharing. It is a particular "family of families", of an associative kind, through which you experience the joy of living together and at the same time you take on the commitment of making your effort for the common good, which you build every day both within the scope of the forum, and in the broader one of society.

The family, which you promote in various ways, is at the centre of God's plan, as shown in the whole history of salvation. For a mysterious divine plan, the complementarity and love between man and woman make them co-workers of the Creator, Who entrusts them with the task of generating new creatures to life, taking care of their growth and education. The love of Jesus for children, His filial relationship with the heavenly Father, His defence of the conjugal bond, which He declares sacred and indissoluble, fully reveal the place of the family in God's plan: being the cradle of life and the first place of acceptance and love, it has an essential role in the vocation of man, and it is like a window that opens up on the mystery of God Himself, Who is Love in the unity and trinity of Persons.

Our world, often tempted and guided by individualistic and selfish logics, often loses the sense and beauty of stable bonds, of commitment to people, of care without conditions, of the assumption of responsibility towards of the other, of gratuity and of the gift of the self. For this reason it is difficult to understand the value of the family, and we end up conceiving of it according to the same logic that privileges the individual instead of relationships and the common good. And this, despite the fact that in the last years of economic crisis the family has represented the most powerful social shock absorber, able to redistribute resources according to the needs of each person.

On the contrary, full recognition and adequate support for the family should represent the first interest of the civil institutions, called to encourage the establishment and growth of solid and serene families, who take responsibility for the education of their children and take care of situations of weakness. In fact, those who learn to experience authentic relationships within the family, will be more able to form them in larger contexts too, from school to the world of work; and those who practice respect and service at home can better practice them in society and in the world.

Now, the goal of stronger support for families and of according them their appropriate value must be achieved through tireless work of raising awareness and of dialogue. This is the effort that the Forum has been making for twenty-five years, in which you have implemented a great number of initiatives, establishing a relationship of trust and collaboration with the Institutions. I urge you to continue this work by being promoters of proposals that show the beauty of the family, and that almost compel, by being convincing, recognition of its importance and preciousness.

I therefore encourage you to witness the joy of love, which I illustrated in the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, where I gathered the fruits of the providential synodal journey on the family accomplished by the whole Church. In fact, there is no better argument than the joy which, by shining from within, proves the value of ideas and experience and indicates the treasure we have discovered and wish to share.

So, moved by this force, you will be increasingly able to take the initiative. The Apostle Paul reminds Timothy that “For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline” (2 *Tim* 1: 7). Such is the spirit that animates you too, teaching you respect but also the boldness to get involved and look for new roads, without fear. It is the style I asked of the whole Church from my first and programmatic Apostolic Exhortation, when I used the term *primerear*, to precede, which suggests the ability to go forth bravely to meet others, not to close oneself in one’s own comfort but to seek points of convergence with people, to build bridges by going to find the good wherever it is (cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, 24). God is the first to precede us: if we have really known him, we can not hide it, but must go out and act, using our talents.

Thank you for making the effort to do so! Thank you for your commitment, as required by your Statute, to an “active and responsible participation of families in cultural, social and political life” (2.1.b.), and for the “promotion of appropriate family policies that protect and support the functions of the family and its rights” (2.1.c.). Furthermore, in the school, you continue to encourage greater parental involvement and encourage many families to adopt a style of participation. Do not tire of supporting the growth of birth rates in Italy, sensitizing the institutions and the public opinion on the importance of giving life to policies and structures that are more open to the gift of children. It is a genuine paradox that the birth of children, which constitutes the greatest investment for a country and the first condition of its future prosperity, often represents a cause of poverty for families, due to the lack of support they receive or the inefficiency of many services.

These and other problems must be faced with firmness and charity, demonstrating that the sensitivity that you carry forward with regard to the family is not to be labelled as confessional in order to be able to accuse it – wrongly – of partiality. It is based instead on the dignity of the human person and therefore can be recognized and shared by everyone, as happens when, also in institutional contexts, we refer to the “Family Factor” as an element of political and operational evaluation, a multiplier of human, economic and social wealth.

Thank you again for this meeting. I urge you to continue your commitment to the service of the family and of life, and I invoke God's blessing and the protection of the Holy Family of Nazareth on all the members of the Forum. Please do not forget to pray for me.
