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Audience to the participants in the course promoted by the Tribunal of the Roman Rota

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the participants in the course in formation for the protection of marriage and the pastoral care of suffering couples, promoted by the Tribunal of the Roman Rota and taking place from 26 to 30 November 2019 at the Palazzo della Cancelleria.

The following is the Pope's address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

I am pleased to receive you at the end of this course, which I hope will be fruitful for your preparation and competence. I thank His Excellency Msgr. Pinto, and I thank the speakers who have transmitted to you theological content and canonical procedures important for couples and for the life of the Church today.

The theme of the course unites two crucial areas of concern: the *protection of marriage* and the *pastoral care of wounded couples*.

Unconsciously we are immediately attracted by this second aspect, because it is first of all here that the care and maternal concern of the Church, of yesterday and today, manifests itself in the face of the different painful situations that a married couple may encounter along its way. Those that have been demonstrated are types that cannot be treated with a merely bureaucratic, almost mechanical approach. Rather, it is a matter of entering into the lives of people who suffer and who thirst for serenity and happiness, both personally and as a couple.

The wounds of marriage today – we know – have many and varied causes: psychological, physical, environmental, cultural – at times they are provoked by the closing of the human heart to love, by the sin that touches everyone. I will not dwell on this. I would just like to say that these causes carve deep and bitter furrows

in the hearts of the people involved, bleeding wounds, before which the Church will never be able to pass by, turning her face the other way.

That is why the Church, when she encounters these realities of wounded couples, first of all weeps and suffers with them; she approaches with the oil of consolation, to soothe and heal; she wants to take on board the pain she encounters. And if, then, she strives to be impartial and objective in seeking the truth of a broken marriage, the Church is never extraneous either humanly or spiritually to those who suffer. She never manages to be impersonal or cold in the face of these sad and troubled stories of life. For this reason, even in her canonical and jurisprudential procedures, the Church always and only seeks the good of the wounded, seeks the truth of their love; she has nothing in mind other than to sustain their just and desired happiness, which, before being a personal good to which we all humanly aspire, is a gift that God reserves for His children and that comes from Him.

That is why every ecclesiastical procedure that faces an injured marriage, and therefore the workers, the judges, the parties involved, the witnesses, must always first of all entrust themselves to the Holy Spirit, so that, guided by Him, they may listen with the right criteria, be able to examine, discern and judge. And this is very important! A case is not something mathematical, simply to see which reason weighs more than the other. No. There is the Holy Spirit that must guide the case, always. If the Holy Spirit is not there, what we do is not ecclesial.

The course you took part in also and above all considered the attentive and vigilant care of the Church so that the marriage of Christian spouses might be what the Lord Jesus wanted it to be. Saint Paul summed it up by comparing it to the union of Christ with the Church, His body, which He loves as though she were a bride, with unflinching love, to the point of sacrificing Himself on the cross (cf. *Eph 5:21-33*), so that the Father's will to make the whole of humanity the family of God may be fulfilled.

And therefore, even if marriage can fill Christian spouses with joy and human and spiritual fullness, they must never forget that they are called, as individuals and as a couple, to walk always in faith, to walk in the Church and with the Church, to walk together in the way of holiness. In fact, in the New Testament Christian marriage is lived as a journey of faith, as the intimate union of the spouses who are the "pillars" of the domestic Church[1].

It is from this journey in the Spirit, from His light that warms and satisfies the human heart, that the precious and indispensable ministry of the spouses in the Church is born, which is increasingly needed today in our parish and diocesan communities. A ministry originating from the Sacrament; a missionary ministry that proclaims that Christ is alive and working; a ministry that generously calls to life new creatures, new children of God.

This Sacrament cannot be improvised. It is necessary to prepare oneself as an engaged couple. It is not enough for Christian betrothed couples to prepare themselves to become married by achieving a good integration, in psychological, affective and relational terms and with regard to planning, which is also necessary for the stability of their future union. They must also nourish and progressively increase within themselves that specific call to model themselves as Christian spouses. This means cultivating, within the Christian vocation, the particular vocation to become missionary disciples as spouses, witnesses of the Gospel in family, working and social life, where the Lord calls them; the vocation to manifest the beauty of their belonging to Him and to give reason for that "more" of life and love which is the epiphany in the world of Christian hope offered by Christ. It is the Second Vatican Council, the Magisterium of the Church, but first of all it is the Word of God that points to this high apostolic and missionary goal inherent in the Sacrament of Marriage. And it is by looking at this horizon that engaged couples can grow, nourishing themselves with prayer, with the Eucharist and Reconciliation, with sincere concern for one another, with dedication to the brothers they meet.

The married saints Aquila and Priscilla, friends and collaborators of Paul, are a beautiful example of this vocation to the conjugal apostolate. I dedicated my catechesis to them during the General Audience on 13 November last.

The Apostle Paul found the disciples Aquila and Priscilla to be precious co-operators, chosen and called not by him but by the Lord. Thus the bishop, the parish priest, the permanent deacon and his wife, who prepare

engaged couples, must help them to be living and apostolic cells of the parish communities.

The Church, in her parochial structure, is truly a community of families, called to become, like Aquila and Priscilla, witnesses of the Gospel in that territory. And here too, it is the Holy Spirit Who performs this synergy, and therefore the Spirit must be invoked, also for this apostolic process, which is not easy, but not impossible. I encourage pastors, bishops and priests to promote, support and accompany this process, so that the Church may be renewed, increasingly becoming a capillary network of communities of families who are witnesses and missionaries of the Gospel.

Dear brothers and sisters, from my heart I bless each one of you and your ecclesial and social service. I pray for you; and you too, please, pray for me. Thank you!

[1] See Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 48-50; Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, 39; Pope Francis Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, 311.
