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**PASTORAL LETTER**  
**OF**  
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**On the Occasion of the Feast of the Assumption**  
**2015**

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**Balm of Mercy for the Family**

**The family: *locus* of shelter and love**

When the silvery moon glimmers in the evening summer sky my mind dwells upon those who at the end of a day's work return home. Many open the door of their houses to find the embrace of their families with whom they share their joys and satisfaction of the day's work. The warmth and communion of the family make up for the challenges of the day and help recharge their energy for the coming day.

In our country there are many families who are a haven of love and a truly human shelter. There are unmistakable signs which show that many appreciate the human, social and spiritual benefits of marriage and the family. In fact the family is the apple of the eye of the many to the extent that they are preoccupied more with what they can offer to the family than how they can benefit from it.

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**The challenges facing the family today**

There are others, however, who as they stand on their doorstep, pause and think twice before inserting the key in the lock to open the door – they are well aware that when they step inside the cold embrace of solitude awaits them. The eerie silence which pervades their house brings back the fond memories of once cherished persons. The night is long and weighs down heavily as memories of the tormented past and unfulfilled expectations come back to haunt and taunt them. Instead of affording calm, the night can ignite in their hearts feelings of anger and a marked sense of delusion. Among these one can envisage those who are in widowhood. I can also mention those whose marriage has floundered and have either gone through separation, or else have had to accept separation and divorce with the result of alienating themselves from their loved ones. There are also those who although still clothed in the garb of marriage, are living in misery as their spouses are in an adulterous relation. Even those who are in a second relationship, perhaps owing to the heavy burden of leading a solitary life, do not always succeed in overcoming the past. There are also those who would like to celebrate their love, but owing to their particular circumstance, cannot reap the benefits of love blessed by marriage between man and woman. There are also numerous families who are saddened by the fact that their children or relatives are in a relationship which is in contrast with the teaching of the Gospel!

It is eminently desirable that our families be places of solace and shelter but unfortunately facts show otherwise. I do not know where the perfect family is to be found. But certainly the family which daily affronts challenges of any type, not excluding those which are born of the clash of personalities, the upbringing of offspring, those related to work practices, commerce and economy, certainly exists. These circumstances are weighing down heavily on the relationship between the spouses and the members of the family.

It is inevitable that our families are influenced by the rapid cultural changes which are seriously questioning established convictions. Our age is witness to the enormous changes affecting marriage and the family. Many are posing challenging questions. The contemporary family has been reduced, and its resources weakened considerably. The family has become impoverished regarding values and ideals. The family is in a precarious situation: divorce legislation, civil unions, so-called *gender* issues and assisted procreation, etc. These challenges are leaving their mark on the understanding of marriage and the family. These are seriously threatening the Catholic truths regarding marriage and the family and I sympathize with those who start questioning where the real truth lies. These factors are a sign of pain, and at the same time cause further pain.

### **Crisis of faith**

Where is God in all this? When passing through a very difficult patch, one could easily fall prey to the temptation of turning one's back to God. It is a fact that one of the reasons which lead to atheism is the difficulty to reconcile a loving and merciful God with a suffering humanity. Very often, one does not question the existence of God, but finds it very hard to accept that a loving God, who is all tenderness, would remain passive and mute in the face of human tragedy. In as much as it is true that some marriages and families are faltering because God is no longer the staff which steadies them in their itinerary, I also fear that marriage crisis could induce a crisis of faith, especially in those who in spite of the fact that their present relationship is debatable, still have left the door ajar so that God could find a way into their home.

### **The Synod of Bishops regarding the Family**

In spite of the process of rapid changes, the desire to form a family remains strongly embedded in human nature, even though among the upcoming generation there are those who opt to live as a couple privately, and not as a public commitment. Convinced that the human person is naturally prone to live within a family and that Jesus Christ is the "wine" which enlivens and sanctifies the love between the spouses, the Church does not refrain from proclaiming the Gospel of the family. This was the reason that after last year's Synod, Pope Francis has recalled us Bishops so that in October we congregate in Rome to reflect upon the vocation and mission of the family today.

I can assure you that there is no thought of the Church changing her doctrine regarding marriage and the family. The foundation of the family is marriage between man and woman who are bound together by love which is everlasting, faithful and open to life. When a man and woman inspired by their faith in Christ are fully cognizant of what constitutes marriage and are endowed with the human requisites for decision taking, their marriage is a sacrament. It is true that the sacrament is a fount of grace so that the spouses are empowered to live out their vocation and mission; but the sacrament has a wider and more demanding significance. It is indeed a pity that for some the celebration of marriage means a pompous ritual, a fashion parade or a religious *pageant*.

### **An itinerary of formation**

With the explicit objective of helping the would-be spouses to celebrate and live a truly sacramental marriage, in the past years we have been organizing in our Diocese an itinerary of formation spread over two years. In these encounters, the couples are imparted skills and information so that, sustained by the Gospel, they can weather any storm, can overcome precarious economic conditions, and manage stress related to work practices. The couple is prepared to accept the second and third offspring in a society which not only does not provide an adequate social service, but promotes an anti-life mentality. The couple is prepared to exercise forgiveness when disagreement arises or when they offend each other.

All this implies living the sacrament of marriage as a story of grace. I am especially gratified when couples, who had participated in such an itinerary of formation, confess that they are particularly satisfied. I am certain that this mission with engaged couples could spawn many blessings. I take this opportunity to thank those priests and lay couples who are dedicated to this pastoral work.

### **Professional counsel**

As I reiterated earlier on, as a result of the cultural *tsunami* which is ongoing, the number of married couples who nurse grievous wounds due to the collapse of their marriage, is growing. This prompted us to open the *Family Counseling Center* in our Diocese within the Ta' Pinu Complex, where professionals offer their services to help those who are undergoing difficulties both personally and with their intimate relatives, as well those who are painfully picking up the pieces of their erstwhile marriage. I am particularly grateful to those who are running the Center.

### **Everyone is welcome in the Church**

Among the wounded persons there are those who, after the irreversible collapse of their marriage, are newly engaged in an affective relationship, some of which are civilly recognized – I am referring to the divorced and remarried who still long for Christ. Although such a situation runs counter to the Christian Sacrament, as Pope Francis has reiterated, “such persons are not excommunicated and should not be treated as such: they are always part of the Church”. In the last decades, in the Church “there is a growing awareness of the need to accept as brethren with an attentive heart, in love and in truth, the baptized who are in a new union after their sacramental marriage has collapsed”. His Holiness goes on to affirm that the “icon of the Good Shepherd (Jn 10: 11-18) expresses the mission which Jesus received from the father: to offer his life for his sheep. This is also the model for the Church, who welcomes her children as a mother would and give her life to them. “The Church is called to be the open house of the father [...]”. No door should be closed! No closed doors! - “Everyone can in a way participate in the life of the Church; everyone can be a part of the Community. The Church [...] is the House of the Father where there is a place of all, everyone with his burden” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 47).<sup>1</sup>

The Barque of Peter is the refuge for sinners. I believe that in this Barque there should be a place for any type of sinner, because as long as there is life, there is also the hope of conversion. In the Church we should never lose heart regarding anybody. God forbid that we sinners decide who can climb onto the Barque and who should remain ashore. In the Church and in society there is no one who is “needless” or “beyond repair” to the extent that one is cast off. Whatever a particular human condition, or a particular choice in life, there is

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, General audience, 5th. August 2015.

always a place for one in the ecclesial communion. In this net there is place for all who believe in God, none excluded, because there is no one who is irretrievably lost. No one is discarded material. All of us can review our lives and grow in communion with Christ. Therefore we should never put aside anyone in the ecclesial community.<sup>2</sup>

### **God's mercy inspires the pastoral mission**

We can appreciate this attitude in the Church if as disciples we contemplate the mercy of God in our regard: that mercy which we refer to as *misericordia* - God's heart ("cor") is open to let in man in his *misery*. *Misericordia* is the key-word which opens up our understanding of God's dealing with us.<sup>3</sup> Through this mercy we have to view the particular situation of the person who is seeking Christ. With these merciful eyes we should look at the upcoming Synod in October.

It is no secret that there is expectancy about the conclusions of the Synod regarding the pastoral situation of those who are divorced and are in a second relationship. Those who propose that certain barriers between those who are in an "irregular relationship" but who believe in Christ as Savior, and the rest of the community, should be removed, are in no way putting at risk the teaching about the indissolubility of marriage, but they are eager to make possible the experience of the balm of God's mercy, particularly that kind of mercy which according to the Tradition of the Church, the penitent accedes to it when he is on the road of conversion, known as the *via poenitentialis*. God's mercy is not only a doctrine alongside the doctrine of marriage and the family, but is at the heart of Christian doctrine.<sup>4</sup> God's mercy is also a revealed truth and as such could never be in contrast with other truths or with the Gospel. Merciful God means that God takes to his heart human misery, included the misery of marriage and the family. Merciful God means that God touches the open and bleeding wounds of humanity to heal them. Merciful God means that God is free from the globalized indifference which assails us.

The promoters of "God's justice" may feel uneasy when confronted with this pastoral view. "It is as if we cannot admit that justice is only a small part of mercy. Mercy is much more than that which we attribute to justice. Mercy presupposes justice, but at the same time goes much beyond. When we say that God is rich in mercy we are not implying that for God anything goes and that the Gospel and the Commandments belong to the past. Merciful God means that God gives man much more than he deserves by right. To God everything is grace. A misconception which we have inherited from the past is that God helps us as long as we are deserving of his help: as long as we merit his help – if we behave. But God gives freely, even in the experience of marriage and the family."<sup>5</sup> As Pope Francis says, "If God had to stop at justice, he would not be God, but be like the rest of us who seek justice. Justice by itself does not suffice... That's why God goes beyond justice by mercy and pardon".<sup>6</sup>

### **Learning from the Fathers of the Church**

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<sup>2</sup> Cfr. Mario Grech, "Fid-dgħajsa ta' Pietru hemm post għal kulhadd", Sannat, 20th. July 2015

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. Pope Francis, Bull *Misericordiae Vultus*, 11th April, 2015, 9

<sup>4</sup> Cardinal Georges Cottier, *Civiltà Cattolica*, 88.2015, (Antonio Spadaro S.I., 'Brutalita' del rigorismo, delicatezza della misericordia. Intervista al Cardinale Goerge Cottier O.P., *Civiltà Cattolica*, Quaderno N. 3963-3964, 08/08/2015, 263-273).

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. Mario Grech, *Il-qalb ta' Alla u l-miżerja tal-familja*, Kerċem, 13th. July 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, Bull *Misericordiae Vultus*, 11th April, 2015, 21.

In the time of persecution of the early Church, the Christians, who through weakness abjured their faith, were not few. When these opened their eyes to their predicament and wanted to reconnect with the Christian community, there were those who were “uncompromising” and shut the door in their face. There were others, who because they understood the Church as a merciful mother, re-accepted them for a second baptism, which was not the baptism of water, but the baptism of tears and contrition.<sup>7</sup> Some of the pastors, like Basil of Caesarea, received back in the fold also those who, when they had abjured their baptism, had severed their relations with their spouses and subsequently entered into a new relationship.<sup>8</sup> Pope Gregory the Great showed the same pastoral attitude when he answered St Augustine of Canterbury who faced a similar pastoral problem to accept to the sacraments those who were in a “sacrilegious” marriage.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Gospel of Mercy**

One is hopeful that in the coming Synod, Our Mother the Church, while remaining faithful to the Gospel of the Family, and sustains those families who are “steady” on their feet, seeks to be faithful to the Gospel of God’s Mercy, and as She acted in the remote forgotten past, today succeeds to find the pathways which would enable those who, in spite of the fact that they did not succeed in their first marriage/relationship, and hope in God’s mercy, to savor the delicacies of God love. We should not keep back from releasing the therapeutic energy which Jesus entrusted to us, His Church, to help the penitent sinner who yearns to break free from his past prison and reconcile himself with God and with the Church without expecting him to shoulder burdens which he morally cannot do.

### **Jesus continues to provide new wine**

The episode of Cana as recounted in the Gospel (Jn 2, 1-11) sends out a very positive message which is full of hope for those couples whose wine has run out. There are various reasons to account for this – perhaps because of lack of work, poverty, sickness and also because their love is no more. Jesus did not come to condemn or to discourage man, but to help, accompany and heal. Jesus wants to be close so that those whose wine has turned into gall to extent that their lives have lost all taste, be given the possibility to enjoy very good wine. The Cana episode is witness to the fact that when there is a break-up of marriage and the family, God is ready to pour over them his love and mercy. Not only. Jesus opts to provide the best wine to those who because of some reason or other, think that all their jars have broken.<sup>10</sup>

It is encouraging to hear Pope Francis note that the newly procured vintage wine came out of the jars which were used specifically for ritual cleansing, i.e. where the Jews deposited their “sins”. This means that the vintage wine is found where there is filth. St Paul also notes that “where sin abounded, the grace of God super-abounded” (Rm. 5, 20). So we should not be surprised that while we feel shocked by that which is “filthy”, for God could be an opportunity to perform a miracle: “today the family is in need of such a miracle”.<sup>11</sup>

Of course we should be wary as to whom we entrust this wine. This wine should not be given to whom it will prove to be fatal. We should take heed of St Paul’s words: who imbibes from this chalice unworthily, imbibes his own condemnation (1 Cor. 11: 28). On the

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<sup>7</sup> Cfr. Mario Grech, *Kristu jixxotta d-dmugh*, Itra Pastoral tar-Randan, 10th. February 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. Th. Michelet, *Sinodo sulla famiglia. La via dell’Ordo Paenitentium*, in *Novo et Vetera* 90 (2015).

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Venerable Bede, *Storia ecclesiastica degli Angli* 1.27.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. Mario Grech, *Kana f’Għawdex tagħna*, Ta’ Pinu National Shrine, 22nd. June 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis, homily during mass at the parish of Samanes di Guayaquil, Ecuador, 6th. July 2015.

other hand we should not be so rigid when it comes to offer the wine. Among us there are those who would wish to ration this wine! The jars are over full and there are many who yearn to taste this wine to experience God's tenderness and generosity. It is incumbent on everyone to scrutinize oneself before drinking this wine, but we are not empowered to judge others. Unfortunately our sieve is much more selective than God's.<sup>12</sup>

### **Mother of Mercy**

The feast of the Assumption of Our Lady reminds us that Mary interceded with Jesus who provided the new wine to the couple at Cana. I entrust to Mary all our families, particularly those persons, who in spite of everything, yearn to live in harmony with God and their fellowmen. I entreat you to pray the Rosary for the intercession of Our Lady of Mercy, so that on her example, the Church, through the Synod, continues to view with merciful eyes a deeply wounded humanity. In this manner the darkness which envelopes many hearts be dissipated by the rays of the rising Sun which are also reflected by the Moon during the night.

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<sup>12</sup> Mario Grech, *Kana f'Għawdex taġġna*, Ta' Pinu National Shrine, 22nd. June 2015