

Pope Francis wrote an Exhortation called *Amoris Laetitia* or "*The Joy of Love*" and some people have titled it his personal *Love letter to families*. In it he invites everyone to grow as members of the family of God. It begins with:

*"The joy of love experienced by families is also the joy of the church."(1)*

He then reminds us that the Bible is full of families, births, love stories and family crises. (8) Returning to a special theme of his which he keeps repeating, he says:

*"Against the backdrop of love so central to the Christian experience of Marriage and family, another virtue stands out, one often overlooked in our world of frenetic and superficial relations. It is tenderness".*

He asks us also to consider the moving words of Psalm 131: 1-2, a very short Psalm, which says:

*"I am not puffed up with pride Lord, and I don't concern myself with great matters or things beyond me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul like a child, quieted at its mother's breast, my soul is like a settled child within me."*

Parental love is lifted high in this psalm and also in Pope Francis' understanding and it represents the union that the Lord longs for with his faithful ones. So we are asked to contemplate that in this delicate, tender intimacy between a mother and a safe secure settled child, held in its mother's arms after being nursed, that the longing of God to hold us and keep us settled and safe, is mirrored. He then reminds us of one of my favourite scriptures from Hosea 11: 1,3-4

*"When Israel was a child, I loved him. I took him up in my arms, I led them with leading strings of love, with the tender cords of compassion, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws and I bent down to them tenderly and fed them. "*

You could try repeating those verses or Psalm 131 over and over, as you nurse your baby or sit with a sleeping child, and where it says Israel, put in your own name and let God speak deeply personally to you.

In this exhortation, Pope Francis is inviting us to see the family in some mysterious way as an image or an icon of the Trinity itself, the communion of love that is God. He says:

*"The Word of God tells us that the family is entrusted to a man, woman and their children and that they become a communion of persons in the image of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Begetting and raising children, mirrors God's creative work."*

In paragraph 30, he says:

*“Every family is encouraged to look at the icon of the Holy Family of Nazareth. They had their share of burdens and even nightmares, as when they met with Herod’s terrifying violence.”*

He goes on to say that violence like that, sad to say, continues for so many refugee families today who also feel rejected and helpless.

So families are invited to contemplate the child and his mother, like the Magi or the three wise men, to bow down and worship him. (Mt 2: 11) The exhortation goes on to say that like Mary they are asked to face their family challenges with courage and serenity in good times and bad, and to keep in their hearts the great things God has done. (Lk 2: 19, 51) The treasury of Mary’s heart also contains the experiences of every family which she cherishes. For this reason Mary can help us understand the meaning of these experiences and to hear the message God wishes to communicate through our family life.

Now I’m going to leave you there and I hope that that stimulates amongst you conversation and sharing. Perhaps sharing your difficulties, but also your joys, your struggles, your hopes and I’d love to see from this, that you go away for the next 4 weeks and try to pay particular attention to the tenderness of God for you, as you tend to your family.

And any time that you hold a baby, be it a grandchild, a child, a niece, a nephew, a friend; recognise that as you gaze into the eyes of that little baby, and are captivated by that sleeping child, or that gurgling, bubbly, happy smile; that that is exactly how God looks at you, at me, at each one of us, with love beyond all telling.

God Bless.