



CATHOLIC SYRO-MALABAR. EPARCHY OF GREAT BRITAIN

Pastoral Letter 9

Relying on God's grace, Mar Joseph Srampickal, Bishop of the Catholic Syro-Malabar Eparchy of Great Britain, writing to all Priests, Religious and the Faithful.

Spouse, a Gift from God

“I am asking on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours” (Jn. 17: 9)

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Whilst attending the canonisation ceremony of Mother Mariam Thresia in Rome on 13th October 2019, I had the opportunity to reflect deeply and form convictions on the saint's life which was dedicated to 'Family Apostolate' and its importance in the Church and the society. God is inviting each one of us now to renew our lives through 'Family Apostolate'. On this occasion of our Eparchy entering into the third phase of the Pastoral Plan - 'The Year of Couples', let me share a few reflections on this.

The God-Human relationship is portrayed in the Holy Bible through the rich character of marital relationship: in the Old Testament, between God and Israel and in the New Testament, between Jesus and the Church. The Bible reveals God's love towards humanity in the language of the unity in the unconditional love and the selfless giving of the married couples. “As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you” (Isiah 62: 5). “And I will take you for my wife for ever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD” (Hosea 2: 19-20). In the New Testament, marriage becomes the symbol of the God-Human relationship and it becomes the supreme example of the marital love. St Paul portrays the great mystery of marriage and illuminates its sacred image based on the relationship between Jesus and the Church. (Eph. 5: 32). For this reason, it is the call of all married people to testify to the Messiah's love for the Church. It is from this basis that all the teachings of the Church on marital love and family life have emerged.

Love always wishes to obtain and offer presence and companionship. Because God is love, it is clear that we have to be with Him and He wants to be with us. The covenant that God gave to the Israel was that 'you would be my people and I would be your God'. God had lived and travelled with them on every difficult journey in their history. In the New Testament, this love dwelt amongst us in flesh, beyond symbols and images. The heart of the Holy Bible in itself is, 'God who is love, loved the world so much that He gave His only begotten Son' (John 3: 16). Jesus's name is 'Emmanuel' which means 'God is with us'. He came to the world to be with us and His promise is to be with us until the end of the world (Mt. 28: 20).

Indeed, couples give each other a great message of God through the marital covenant. The words 'from today till death' have given strength and led forward many in the fiery, bitter and difficult paths of life. The altar and the word of God constantly inspire them to confirm and fulfil the promise they made in front of the altar touching the Holy Bible. The prayer of the disciples, 'Lord, stay with us' (Luke 24:29) and the promise made by Jesus to the Church "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mathew 28:20) echoes in this covenant.

Modern culture and society are undergoing drastic changes in the attitude towards marriage, family and sex. However, the Church teaches that marital love must always be free, faithful, complete and fruitful (Human Life 4:9). The Church is committed to be with families and to move with them and guide them in whatever crisis they face. The Church, which prepares couples to make the promise that they will live together in happiness, sorrow, wealth, poverty, health and sickness, assures to be with them at all times in their journey of life. It is the divine duty and joy of the Church to do so as the presence of the Messiah is experienced in the Church. It is this union with Christ that enables couples to live with one mind, one heart, one soul and one spirit.

A Christian family's great role models are the Holy Trinity and the Holy Family. In the gospel of John, Jesus who leaves his disciples and travels to his Father, prays for them like the loving prayer of a father, a head of a family. "They were yours. You gave them to me." We must all have the conviction that our spouse and children belong to God and are gifted by Him. It is only through the power of faith that we can say about our family like Jesus spoke about the disciples, 'while I was with them I protected them and kept them safe in your name, in which they were given to me'.

Through the sacrament of marriage, couples also accept God's call to be ministers in the church. That is why Second Vatican Council denotes family as the school of profound humanity (Church in Mordern World 52). Based on the words of St Paul, couples are called to grow in every way to the Messiah by living a life in truth and love (Eph. 4:15-16). It is through the Word of God that the renewal and sanctification of families can be realised. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth (John 17:17). 'Let be sanctified by the word of God and the Holy Spirit' we pray in Syro-Malabar Qurbana.

Since family is the subject and means of evangelisation, we need a more systematic pastoral plan and acts. We aim for the evangelisation of the families and evangelisation through them. When we observe the period from 1st December 2019 to 28th November 2020 as the Year of Couples, we give special emphasis on the special evangelisation of marriage and families. Let me draw your attention to some points of the action plan we are formulating to help the couples' spiritual life, at the eparchial, regional and parish/mission levels:

1. Eparchial level inauguration of the 'Year of Couples' will be held at Bethel Convention Centre, Birmingham during the '*Tota Pulchra*', the Women's Forum eparchial gathering on the 7th of December 2019. I request you to inaugurate the 'Year of Couples' in all our Parishes/Missions on the 8th of December 2019 (if not feasible during the first Holy Qurbana of this liturgical year) by lighting a lamp and with special prayers.

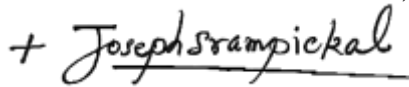
2. This year, all the Parishes and Missions of our Eparchy may conduct Special Meetings in order to discuss projects that can contribute to the welfare, sustainability and growth of the families and decide on projects that can be implemented according to the resources and circumstances of your community. The same can be done at the regional level as well.
3. At the Regional level Resource Teams should be formed comprising of individuals with expertise in various fields in order to provide, support, help and guidance to the various needs of the families. Proposed members of the team could be of Priests, Religious, Health - Social and Law Specialists, and Psychologists.
4. Home visits by priests and home blessings are highly valued traditions in our church. A special house blessing could be planned during the 2020 lent season.
5. The family that prays together stays together. Kindly make sure that there is family prayer in all our families.
6. All are requested to do the intercessory prayers and sacrifice to obtain Lord's mercy and grace upon the couples.
7. Along with the Holy Qurbana and family prayer the special prayer for the Year of Couples is to be recited.
8. All the couples are requested to join and be blessed, if possible, the Eparchial pilgrimage to Rome, Assisi and Loreto from 14th to 18th April 2020.
9. There will be retreats – Grand Mission – in all our Parishes/Missions on 'Eucharistic Marital Life' during the Lenten Season
10. The participation of all families must be ensured in the monthly Family Unit prayers.
11. Couples and their children are requested to receive the Sacrament of Confession frequently.
12. Make available Church's teachings on families and organise discussions and study sessions in light of them. You are also requested to study *Oru Nalla Appante Chavarul* of St Kuriakose Chavara, the life and teachings of St. Louis Martin, St. Marie-Azélie Guérin and St. Mariam Tresia.
13. Organise a day for chain Bible reading and Bible Quiz that encourages families to read the Holy Bible and reflect on it.
14. Organise classes and workshops at the Parish/Mission level to help parents to develop a strong bond in the families and for their children's faith formation and personality development.
15. A 'Pro Life Cell' will be initiated in our Eparchy in order to help the Families, the Sanctuaries of the God's gift of life, to value and protect it.
16. We will be organising a gathering for the newlywed couples at the Eparchial Level.
17. During the 'Year of Couples' a grand coming together of all our couples will be arranged.

You will be able to find more details and instructions regarding the 'Year of Couples' in the 'Living Stones' (pages 25-27) the guideline of our Pastoral plan. Very Rev Mgr Jino Arikkatt MCBS, the Syncellus of our Eparchy will be the coordinator to articulate and implement creative initiatives to make the Year of Couples a blessing for everyone.

Catholic Dioceses of England and Wales are celebrating this year as the Year of the Word of God under the title 'The God Who Speaks'. Therefore, let us meditate deeply the Word of God and be couples that live according to the Word of God. May the Holy Family, the model and the protection of our families be our help.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Yours in our Lord and our God,

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Mar Joseph Srampickal

Bishop, Catholic Syro-Malabar Eparchy of Great Britain

Preston, 30/11/2019

NB: This pastoral letter must be read in all Parishes/Missions/Proposed Missions during the Celebration of the Holy Qurbana before 30th December 2019.