At this moment in our history, when we are being called to carefully reflect on the pastoral challenges to the family, we are going through – more than ever – a time of grace given to us in order to proclaim the joy of the Gospel to the entire human family, starting off with the ecclesial community which, in the words of our Holy Father, itself resembles a field hospital after battle.

Speaking in my role as bishop hailing from the Church of Malta and Gozo, I can frankly attest to the fact that there abides in the hearts of believers a profound thirst for the Gospel. Even in those cases where it is harder to fully receive and implement the teaching of the Church on marriage and the family, there operates a tension inclining towards the Gospel, towards Christ. This tension gets translated for us in the form of a deeply borne plea towards us Pastors, that we might carefully discern the signs of the times and of the Spirit in order to yield forth the beauty of the Gospel and to bring the Saviour’s consoling mercy to all, particularly to those who are in difficult pastoral situations.

Dear Brothers, we must dare to venture out with courage, so that we may proclaim the Gospel faithfully and without betraying it. Neither the content nor, however, the method in itself the very activity of evangelisation – ought to reflect any disloyalty towards whatever requires to be preached and received as the Good News. It is with this criterion in mind that I wish to share with you the following three points after having listened attentively to the people of God in the Churches of Malta in Gozo.

The first point is about (doctrinal) continuity. We know very well that, as our Lord himself promised to give his Spirit to guide us to all truth (cfr. Jn 16:13) and in a spirit of complete trust in his word, the doctrine of the faith is capable of progressively acquiring a greater depth. We must not change or twist the Gospel of the Family in such a way that would lead to its disfigurement. Today’s family, however, also quite commonly includes the following scenarios: the situation of a man and woman, both divorced and who now live together in a second relationship; or the case where a son or daughter profess to be gay; or that given context whereby the exercise of responsible fatherhood proves to be a constant hurdle; relationships that are torn apart by failure; or the challenge of having to live in a framework
which renders incomprehensible the very concepts of natural law... We need to know our families very well if we are to offer them the Gospel in a practical way. A good point of departure would be in our choice of language – may it be the language of a Church that is both merciful and brings healing. I must confess to facing the urgency of this need while listening to families of homosexuals as well as to the same persons having such an orientation and who feel wounded by the language directed towards them in certain texts, for instance in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1997 edition, §2358); these persons consequently struggle both with maintaining their faith alive as well as cultivating their sense of filial belonging to the Church. It is necessary to learn to speak that language which is known to contemporary human beings and who acknowledge it as a way of conveying the truth and the charity of the Gospel: “If we wish to adapt to people’s language and to reach them with God’s word, we need to share in their lives and pay loving attention to them.” (Evangelii Gaudium [EG] 158).

The second point concerns creativity. We must explore, with the help of divine grace, new paths along which to reach out to our brothers and sisters who desire to belong to a church which “is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems.” (EG 47). People who live in a difficult pastoral situation emphatically signal for us the necessity for development and growth. If such an assembly has been summoned, it is because the need for a deepened reflection, one that would embrace new pastoral realities, is indeed perceived from across the People of God. This ‘creative’ deepening must be accomplished on behalf of the cherished continuity with tradition. It is from this very continuity that what is new must emerge: the newness that is founded in Christ (EG1). Creativity in both the language as well as in the pastoral attitude towards persons who find themselves in difficult pastoral situations requires far more than a mere external modification. On the contrary, it demands the sustained pursuit of new answers alongside new pastoral approaches some of which can be extracted from the teachings of the Church Fathers. It is desirable that such situations be closely examined with theological erudition together with a pastoral mindset, in order for suitable pastoral solutions that are built upon deepened doctrinal considerations to be obtained.

The third point is about accompaniment. The Church must offer meaningful accompaniment to all persons, acknowledging that “each person’s situation before God and their life in grace are mysteries which no one can fully know from without” (EG 172). Without complacently “giving in to frustrations or fears” (Ibid.) nor being dragged into a “do-it-yourself” attitude to the Gospel, we must develop forms of accompaniment for each person, suggesting a path forward that is conducive to real growth in faith and communion with the internal life of the Church. Such resources of accompaniment should not exhaust themselves by merely declaring such and such a situation to be “irregular” and therefore to be treated as “irreversible” without having a clear mind about the ways in which these brothers and sisters of ours may mature towards full communion.
Here I consider pertinent a reference to the Augustinian view on the patientia to be exercised by the pilgrim Church. Augustine views ecclesial patientia as a time of pressura – the time required for olives to be transformed into oil and grapes into the wine of the Kingdom. In my view couples and families marred by their woundedness represent for our own times an opportunity for the Church to manifest its own virtue in a time of pressura.

Pressura is the tension that gushes forth from the limitations of one’s own condition; it is the heavy burden imposed on the Church by sinners. Pressura is the delaying of the final judgment which will see the definitive and final selection of the elect. Let us, therefore, keep in mind that “organic mixture” is the characteristic of the Church in the present age, as underlined by the Gospel parables of the Kingdom: for instance that of the wheat and darnel, and the catch of fish (cfr. Mt 13). Augustine insists that such mixture is a token of authenticity in the Catholic Church: the bishop of Hippo reminds us that a Church in which there are no sinners and saints, strong and weak and, allow me to add, healthy families and families in crisis, would not truly be the Catholic Church. At times in the life of the Church our rash impatience could precipitate an “abortion”, thus causing an unborn person to leave its mother’s womb prematurely. Augustine warns us, “Do not violently shake by your impatience the maternal womb of the Church and do not thus restrict the doors to your own passage” Sermo 216, 7(7): PL 38, 1080. The daily striving for holiness should not mutate into insufferability towards one’s own or, even worse, other people’s weakness or misery: that would bring about the suicidal migration to a Church of the ‘pure and the perfect’. The Church is patient when it displays solidarity towards those brothers who are less gifted and who need to be instructed with love and patience rather than cause a disruption of the spirit because of their protracted learning process. The Church is rich in patientia when it willingly undertakes to carry the burdens of others. Such a Church would be willing to actively carry on its own shoulders the weak one who is unable to walk it alone.

At the very heart of the Gospel of the family is found the salvation of every human person, even of those who find themselves in uncomfortable pastoral situations. It is our duty as Pastors to proclaim the Gospel of salvation even to them. This is an urgent duty because humans are going through such trajectories today; therefore the time to answer to this plea from God’s People is now.

 Mario Grech
Bishop of Gozo
President of the Maltese Episcopal Conference

---