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**Bishop Laffitte says, "there is a 'contradiction' when someone without faith asks for the sacrament of marriage" (Interview).**

While the family institution remains at the heart of the concerns of Pope Francis and the Church, midway between the two synods devoted to the family, I.Media met with the Secretary of the Pontifical Council for the Family, Msgr. Jean Laffitte. The French Bishop focused on the work of the last Synod as well as on Pope Francis' suggestions to simplify marriage annulment procedures. In addition, the Secretary of the Dicastery for the family encourages a "real marriage preparation" or even "accompaniment of newlyweds" in a "context where religious culture is lacking and ethical relativism rampant".

**With the Synods in October 2014 and October 2015, Pope Francis has made the family a priority of his pontificate. How do you explain this choice?**

At the end of Benedict XVI's pontificate, there was a Synod on the new evangelization. At that time, over 100 Synod Fathers indicated the family as a means and a necessary place for a new evangelization. The family is not merely an object of evangelization; it is the primary subject of evangelization, mainly through its testimony. Consequently, it is necessary for it to be permeated with the Gospel. Pope Francis also perceived that the family needs to be encouraged, revived. This means going out to meet the families, to measure, in a pastoral approach, their suffering and wounds. In our general context, where the family institution is relativized, it is more necessary than ever to gain a deeper understanding of God's plan for human love, marriage and the family.

**What are, in your opinion, the key points that emerged from the preceding Synod, and what should be the focus of new reflections next October?**

Two actions were highlighted. The first is the reaffirmation of the fundamental value of the family institution. With respect to this, various issues were addressed such as the declining birth rate or the dangers of extending the term "family" to unions that have none of the characteristics of a family, to unions of a different kind. This means showing that the family, as the fundamental cell of society, contributes to the common good. The second action concerns Christians. Marriage is a sacrament. The Second Vatican Council said that, when this sacrament is celebrated, Christ comes to meet the spouses and stays with them. Few people are aware of the sanctity of Christian marriage, because many have now grown up in a world devoid of Christian culture. Some ask for the sacrament of marriage although they have never in their lives set foot in a church and do not have the slightest idea of what a sacrament is. The Church wants to be welcoming, and at the same time, She cannot give a sacrament unconditionally. This explains the concern of a large number of Synod Fathers who want to strengthen and develop genuine marriage preparation or, for some people, a real catechumenate. Other Synod Fathers have spoken about the need to support the newlyweds. All this is the essence of what the Fathers expressed, although some, especially the media, put emphasis on pastoral issues.

**With respect to better marriage preparation, the Pope recently suggested to members of the Tribunal of the Sacred Roman Rota to be more attentive to the criterion of the couple's faith at the moment of their "marital intent." This issue was already mentioned by Benedict XVI. What do you think about it?**

Benedict XVI reflected on this for a long time, actually from the beginning of 2000, as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Church legislation has always established that only

sacramental marriage is possible between two baptized persons. This means that the baptized can legitimately ask the Church for the sacrament. However, it is contradictory to ask for a sacrament and to not care about what the sacrament is or, even more simply, about being baptized. In this kind of case, the situation requires pastors to consider both the way in which they give the sacrament and the preparation of engaged couples. Does the fact of not having faith invalidate the sacrament that is given? The answer is 'no'; in itself, the lack of faith does not eliminate the fact that the only marriage possible between two baptized persons is a sacrament. On the other hand, one of the grounds for the revocation of a sacramental marriage is the failure to adhere to the so-called 'essential properties of marriage' (unity, indissolubility). In the context of religious non-culture and ethical relativism prevalent in many parts of the world, there is doubt about the true understanding—and the acceptance—of the nature of marriage and its essential properties. In simple terms: what understanding of the unity and indissolubility of marriage, and of its openness to life, does the person who comes to get married "sacramentally" have? When two young people consider marriage but do not believe in its indissolubility, the permanency of their relationship, of their marriage, can only be zero. Yet, their marriage, in this case, will be null not because they lack faith, but because their "non-faith" leads to "non-adherence" to what makes a marriage valid. Only two or three decades ago, when everyone—believers and unbelievers alike—adhered to these properties of marriage, the issue of "non-faith" did not appear in these terms. Today, only the Church teaches and transmits the properties of marriage.

**Pope Francis has created a special commission to simplify the procedures for marriage annulment and shorten them. Is this a good solution?**

There will of course be improvements. The Synod Fathers pointed this out. However, the fact that there are very long procedures is also the result of a legislative history of the law and of its aims, namely the caution that the Church has taken to preserve the marital relationship. When there are multiple mediations, several levels, the process may seem burdensome. Yet, we must study this problem with extreme caution and great prudence, in order to avoid suggesting that the Church's esteem for the marital relationship, which She has always defended, has diminished.

**During the Synod in October 2014, some media spoke about a "progressive" Pope, ready for more openness toward divorced and remarried persons, cohabitation or homosexual couples. Is this version close to reality?**

They attribute to the Pope intentions and beliefs that are not necessarily his. One really has to consider all of his statements. In the Philippines, he again stressed the importance of *Humanae Vitae*, the most controversial text of these past 50 years! The partial and distorted interpretation that you are talking about comes from the fact that people do not measure just how concerned the Pope is about reaching people, while taking into account their trials and their wounds. He fully adheres to the truths of the Church's teaching; but he draws the attention of the whole Church to the need to face the new challenges, and he does so with strong words and images.

*Interview in the Vatican by Bénédicte Lutaud, I.MEDIA*