



Months of preparation went into creating the event considered one of the highlights of the World Meeting of Families 2018: **the Festival of Families that was celebrated in Dublin's Croke Park Stadium on Saturday evening together with some 70,000 people.** Even the stage design reflected an ideal “circle of encounter” where families could sit close to Pope Francis while sharing their testimonies and enjoying the performances.

Talent and testimony

The talent was provided by some of Ireland's best performers and musicians: a 1,000-voice choir, a 50-piece orchestra, and over 700 dancers from the best Irish dance schools across the country, as well as international artists like The Riverdance Troupe, American jazz singer, Dana Masters, and Italian tenor, Andrea Bocelli.

The testimony came from five families representing Ireland, Canada, India, Iraq, and Africa. All shared a common theme of **how their families had provided them with hope, love and support during the most challenging moments of their lives.** Their testimonies focused on themes of forgiveness and hope in the family, the importance of grandparents, and even the role of social media and technology in family life.

A good cup of tea

When the Pope addressed the gathering, he described it as **“a family celebration of thanksgiving to God for who we are: one family in Christ, spread throughout the world”**. Pope Francis' speech was filled with references to his Apostolic Exhortation, Amoris Laetitia, on the joy of love.

“God wants every family to be a beacon of the joy of His love in our world”, said the Pope. “All of us are called to find, in the family, our fulfilment in love”, he continued, and immediately qualified his statement by adding that “No one said this would be easy”.

That's when **Pope Francis compared building relationships within the family to the most familiar of all Irish pastimes: brewing a pot of tea. “It is easy to bring the water to a boil”, he said, “but a good cup of tea takes time and patience. It needs to brew!”**. In the same way, it is Jesus who, every day, “warms us with His love and lets it penetrate our whole being”, he said.

Three small words

“Sorry”. **“Please”**. **“Thanks”**: these are the three small words that Pope Francis often suggests as antidotes to the tensions that can arise within the family. **“There is no such thing as a perfect family”**, he reminded his audience. **“Without the grace of forgiveness, families can grow sick and gradually collapse”**. On the contrary, said the Pope, “small and simple acts of forgiveness, renewed each day, are the foundation upon which a solid Christian family life is built”.

Social media pros and cons

Responding to the testimony of a family from India, the Pope spoke about the positive use of social media as a way to build, what he called, “a web of friendships, solidarity and mutual support”. Social media, he said, “can be beneficial if used with moderation and prudence”. While families can “connect through the internet and draw nourishment from it”, the Pope warned of overusing social media to the extent that it risks “imprisoning us in a virtual reality” that isolates us from “the very relationships that challenge us to grow to our full potential in communion with others”.

Families that pray together stay together

Although he didn't mention Fr Patrick Peyton by name, the “good Irish priest” quoted by Pope Francis, was most likely recognizable to his audience. The families that are united by prayer, are able to support other families that live in challenging and difficult situations, he said. Again referring to his Exhortation on love and the family, the Pope

confirmed that it is “the love of Christ that renews all things” and that “makes possible marriage and conjugal love marked by fidelity, indissolubility, unity and openness to life”.

In this regard, the Pope thanked another family, with their ten children, for their “witness of love and faith”. It is in “mutual self-giving”, said Pope Francis, that spouses are able to become “one flesh” and to “open their hearts to those in need of love, especially the lonely, the abandoned, the weak and the vulnerable, so often discarded by our throw-away culture”.

The Pope also reserved a special word for the older generation: “A society that does not value grandparents is a society that has no future”, he said. Grandparents are the ones who teach us “the meaning of conjugal and parental love”, he continued. Which is why it’s a “big mistake not to ask the elderly about their experience, or to think that talking to them is a waste of time”.

God's dream

Pope Francis’ final request to the families gathered in Croke Park Stadium, and to all those participating in the event via media platforms around the world, was to “help God’s dream come true”. By witnessing to the Gospel, he concluded, “you can help to draw all God’s children closer together, so that they can grow in unity and learn what it is for the entire world to live in peace as one great family”.