



“The Heart of the Deepest Truth”

Pope John Paul II: Synod Closing Homily

Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Saturday 25 October 1980

We have just heard the apostle St Paul giving thanks to God for the Church at Corinth “that in every way it was enriched in Christ Jesus, with all speech and all knowledge” (cf. I Cor 1,5). We too feel impelled at this moment first and foremost to give thanks to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, before we bring this Synod of Bishops to an end.

We came together to celebrate it, whether as members or as assistants, in the mystery of that supreme unity which belongs to the most Holy Trinity. It is to the Holy Trinity therefore that we express our thanks that we have completed the Synod, which is an outstanding sign of vigour and of great importance for the life of the Church. For the Synod of Bishops - to use the words of the council, in accordance with whose wishes the Supreme Pontiff Paul VI instituted it “acting for the whole Catholic episcopate, is a sign that all the bishops in hierarchical communion share in the cares of the universal Church” (Christus Dominus, 5).

We give thanks together for these four weeks during which we have been working. This period of time, even before the issuing of the final statements (that is, the message and the propositions) has borne fruit in us, because truth and love seem to have matured in us by a gradual process as the days and weeks have passed. It is right to mention this process, and briefly to describe how it became clear. It thus becomes plain how honestly and sincerely were manifested in it both liberty and a responsible sense of duty regarding the theme that we were discussing.

We wish today to give thanks first to him “who sees in secret” (Mt 6,4) and works as a “hidden God,” because he has directed our thoughts, our hearts and our consciences and enabled us to press on with our work in fraternal peace and spiritual joy. Indeed, such was our joy that we hardly felt the burden of work or exhaustion. And yet, how tiring it in fact was! But you did not spare yourselves in the work.

We must also express thanks among ourselves. First of all, this must be said: we must all attribute that process by which, in a way that gradually matured, we “did the truth in charity,” to the urgent prayers which the whole Church as it were standing around as has been pouring out at this time. This prayer was for the Synod and for families: for the Synod, in that it was concerned with families, and for families, because of the tasks they have to perform in the Church and in the world of today. The Synod benefited from these prayers in a quite extraordinary way. Continual and abundant prayer was made to God, especially on 12 October, when couples, representing the families of the entire world, came together to St Peter’s basilica to celebrate the sacred rites and to pray with us. If we must thank one another, we must also thank so many unknown benefactors who, throughout the world, helped us with their prayers and offered their suffering to God for this Synod.

Now we come to the time for thanking one another by name, and in this we include everybody who has helped in the celebration of this Synod: there are the presidents, the secretary general, the relator general, the members themselves, the special secretary and his assistants, the auditores and auditrices, the people appointed to help the media, the departments of the Roman Curia and especially the Consilium for the Family, and others, from the ushers to the technical assistants, typists and so on.

We are all grateful that we have been able to complete this Synod. It was an outstanding manifestation of the collegial care for the Church of the bishops of the whole world. We are grateful that we have been able to see the family as it really is in the Church and in the world of today, considering the many different situations in which it finds itself; the traditions drawn from various cultures which influence it; the aspects of civilised life that shape and affect it; and other matters of this sort.

We are grateful that we have been able again, with the obedience of faith, to look at God's eternal plan for the family manifested in the mystery of creation, and strengthened with the blood of the Redeemer, the Spouse of the Church. And finally we are grateful that we have been able to define, according to the eternal design regarding life and love, the tasks of the family in the Church and world of today.

The fruit which this Synod of 1980 brings forth here and now is contained in the propositions, accepted by the assembly, of which the first is entitled: "On knowing the will of God in the pilgrimage of the People of God. On the sense of faith." This rich treasury of propositions, 43 in number, we (sic) now receive as a singularly precious fruit of the works of the Synod. At the same time we express our joy that the assembly itself, publishing its message, has spoken to the whole Church. The General Secretariat, with the help of the organisations of the Apostolic See, will take care that this message is sent to all whom it concerns, and the episcopal conferences will help in this.

The deliberations of this Synod of 1980 and the contents of the propositions certainly enable us to see the Christian and apostolic tasks of the family in the world of today, and in a special way (quodammodo) to draw them from the total teaching of the second Vatican Council. Thus we make effective progress along the road which must enable this Synod to put its doctrinal and pastoral plans into effect.

With regard to this, this year's Synod is closely connected with the previous synods and is a continuation of the synods celebrated in 1971 and especially in 1974 and 1977, which have helped to put the second Vatican Council into practical effect and must continue to do so. These synods help the Church in a fitting way to be as she must in the conditions of our age, and so to present herself.

Within the work of this Synod must be considered of the greatest usefulness the careful examination of doctrinal and pastoral questions that especially needed such examination, and, in consequence, a sure and clear judgment of these questions.

In the wealth of interventions, relations and conclusions of this Synod, which greatly arouse our admiration there are two cardinal points - namely, fidelity to the plan of God for the family, and a pastoral way of acting which is full of merciful love and of the reverence that is owed to men, and embraces all of them, in what concerns their "being" and "living." In all this there are some parts which have especially occupied the minds of the Synod fathers, for they realised that they were expressing the expectations and hopes of many couples and families.

It is right to mention these questions among the work of the Synod, and to recognise the very useful examination that has carefully been made of them: that is, the doctrinal and pastoral examination of questions which, although they were not the only ones to be treated in the Synod's discussions, nonetheless had a special place there, in that they were discussed in an especially open and free way. This means that importance must be attached to the opinions that the Synod clearly and powerfully expressed on these questions, while still retaining that Christian view, in which the family is regarded as a gift of divine love.

So the Synod - when speaking of the pastoral care of those who after divorce have entered on a new union - rightly praised those couples who in spite of great difficulties witness in their life to the indissolubility of marriage. In their life the Synod recognises that good news of faithfulness to love which has its power and its foundation in Christ. Furthermore, the fathers of the Synod, again affirming the indissolubility of marriage and the Church's practice of not admitting to eucharistic communion those who have been divorced and - against her rule - again attempted marriage, urge pastors and the whole Christian community to help such brothers and sisters. They do not regard them as separated from the Church, since by virtue of their baptism they can and must share in the life of the Church by praying, hearing the word, being present at the community's celebration of the Eucharist, and promoting charity and justice. Although it must not be denied that such people

can in suitable circumstances be admitted to the sacrament of penance and then to eucharistic communion, when with a sincere heart they open themselves to a way of life that is not in contradiction to the indissolubility of marriage - namely, when such a man and woman, who cannot fulfil the obligation of separation, take on the duty of living in total abstinence, that is, abstaining from acts that are proper only to married couples - and when there is no scandal.

Nonetheless, (tamen) the lack of sacramental reconciliation with God should not deter them from perseverance in prayer, in penance and in the exercise of charity, in order that they may eventually receive the grace of conversion and salvation. Meanwhile the Church, praying for them and strengthening them in faith and hope, must show herself a merciful mother towards them.

The fathers of the Synod were close in mind and spirit to the great difficulties that many couples feel in their conscience about the moral laws concerning the transmission of life and the protection of human life. Knowing that every divine precept carries with it promise and grace, they openly confirmed the validity and the sure truth of the prophetic message, full of deep meaning for the conditions of today, which is contained in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. The Synod has encouraged theologians to join forces with the hierarchical magisterium so that the biblical basis and the "personalistic" reasons (as they are called) for this doctrine may be ever more clearly made known, so that the entire teaching of the Church may become accessible to all men of good will, and may be every day more clearly understood.

Thinking of those who have pastoral care of married couples and families, the synod fathers rejected any split or "dichotomy" between instruction (which is necessary for any progress in fulfilling the design of God) and doctrine (taught by the Church with all its consequences and which includes the command to live according to that doctrine). It is not a matter of keeping the law as a mere "ideal" to be obeyed in the future. It is a question of the command of Christ the Lord that difficulties should constantly be overcome. In fact, the "law of gradualness," as it is called, is not possible unless a person sincerely obeys the divine law and seeks those benefits that are protected and promoted by that law. For "the law of gradualness" (or gradual progress) cannot be the same as "gradualness of the law" as if there were various grades or forms of commandment for different men and circumstances in the divine law.

All couples are called to holiness in marriage according to the divine plan; and the dignity of this vocation becomes effective when a person is able so respond to the command of God with a serene mind, trusting in divine grace and his own will.

So it is not enough for couples - if they are not both of the same religious persuasion - to accommodate themselves passively and easily to their circumstances, but they should strive with patience and good will to come to a common intention to be faithful to the duties of Christian marriage.

The Synod fathers have acquired a deeper knowledge and awareness of the riches that are to be found in the cultural forms of different peoples and of the good things that every cultural form has to offer, the more fully the unsearchable mystery of Christ is understood. They have also recognised that - even within the confines of marriage and the home - there is a great field for theological and pastoral study, so that the adaptation of the gospel message to the character of each people may be better fostered and so that it may be learnt how the customs, special characteristics, the sense of life and the unique spirit of each human culture may be combined with the data of the divine revelation (*Ad Gentes*, 22).

This research - if carried on according to the principle of communion of the universal Church and with the encouragement of local bishops, who should be united among themselves and with the See of Peter "which presides over the whole assembly of charity" (LG 13) - will bring forth its fruits for families.

The Synod spoke timely and persuasive words with reverence and gratitude about woman, about her dignity and vocation as a daughter of God, as wife and mother. Reproving whatever harms her human dignity, the Synod stressed the dignity of motherhood. It therefore rightly said that human society should be so constituted that women are not obliged to work outside the home at a job or profession, but that the family should be able to live properly even when the mother devotes herself entirely to the family.

If we have mentioned these important questions and the replies that the Synod gave to them, we do not wish to value any less the other matters that the Synod dealt with, for, as has been shown in many interventions in these useful and fruitful weeks, these are questions worthy of being treated in the teaching and pastoral ministry of the Church with great reverence and love, full of mercy, towards men and women, our brothers and sisters, who fly to the Church for words of faith and hope. May pastors, taking their example from the Synod, address themselves to these problems, as they truly are in married and family life, with care and a firm will, that we may all “do the truth in charity.”

Now we wish to add something as the fruit of the labours that we have been carrying out for more than four weeks: that is, that nobody can “do charity” except in the truth. This principle can be applied to the life of every family no less than the life and work of pastors who truly mean to serve families.

So the principal fruit of this session of the Synod is that the tasks of Christian family, of which charity is as it were the heart, should only be full according to the whole truth. All in the Church who wish to help in the fulfilment of these tasks - be they lay people, clerics, or religious of either sex - can do this in the truth. For it is truth that sets free; it is truth that brings order: it is truth which opens the way to holiness and justice.

We have seen what the love of Christ is, what that charity is that is offered all who make up a family in the Church and in the world: not only to husband and wives, but also to boys and girls and young people, and also to widow orphans, to grandparents, and to all who in any way share in family life. For these the Church of Christ wishes to be and wishes to remain both a witness and a gate to that fulness of life of which St Paul speaks to the Corinthians in the words that we heard at the beginning: for we have been made rich in all things in Jesus with all speech and all knowledge (1 Cor 1,5).

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