



“The Heart of the Deepest Truth”

The Easter People 1980

Paragraphs 99-111

E. CALLED TO LIVE IN RELATIONSHIP: MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

99. All our relationships as individuals have significance for our Christian life. We have already considered how Christians live together as a worshipping community: how the life of that community seeks expression in an effective desire for Christian unity and for restored relationships; and how the redeemed Christian relates to those in the world who need to have the gospel preached to them. But personal relationships are essential to human living and growth. They shape and develop each individual. They are crucial for individual happiness and fulfilment. Through them individuals express love and concern for one another. People find Christ incarnate in their relationships with others.

100. The family is the basic community in society. In its varied forms it is the universal experience of humanity and is a profound influence on spiritual and emotional growth. For the vast majority of people the most important human relationship they have is marriage. It is a complex relationship which develops from first love, through absorption in young children, concern for jobs and careers, the stresses of the adolescent independence of a growing family, and on perhaps to retirement and the greater isolation of a couple in old age. In marriage a couple grow together. A true understanding of marriage must take account of all these factors. Children should be able to learn within the family how to love and to be loved, how to handle feelings, conflicts, growth and loss. It is in the family that the individual can learn how to be human and how to achieve self-knowledge and an awareness of dependence.

101. We affirm the immense importance and value of marriage and the family as the setting within which most people are called to holiness of life. We recognise also that in a unique way the family carries forward the mission of the Church into the everyday world and, as we have suggested earlier, is in some sense a model of the Church itself in its mission to evangelise society.

102. The Congress showed a sensitive appreciation of the importance and meaning of marriage for Christian life and mission. Delegates urged that the teaching Church should find ways of listening attentively to the experience of married Christians and particularly to their insights into the meaning and consequences of a life-long sexual relationship. It was in reality a plea that committed Catholic laity should be able to contribute to the continuing development of the Church's teaching on marriage. They expressed a need for “a renewed positive theology of marriage as covenant, covering all aspects of the marriage relationship”. The foundations of such teaching were laid down clearly at the Second Vatican Council in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*, nn.47-52). There has already been a major development throughout this century in the Church's understanding of married love and sexuality, reflecting advances in the human sciences. It is evidenced in the Church's current teaching on responsible parenthood and in its maturing awareness of the real balance in marriage between fruitfulness and love. It would be unrealistic to claim that the Church has finally achieved a definitive understanding of all that the gospel can reveal to us about Christian marriage. The Council taught that for Christians marriage is “an image and a sharing in the partnership of love between Christ and the Church” and that the Christian family can show forth to all men “Christ's living presence in the world and the authentic nature of the Church” (*Gaudium et Spes*, n.48). Marriage partakes of the mystery of the Church and will continually yield up new treasures. An enriched theology of marriage will have to take into account the growth of human relationships, the need for true communication within marriage, and the understanding of sexual intercourse both as a life-giving act and as

a communication of love and self to one's partner. It will have to see even more profoundly that sexual love in marriage is a relationship in which a couple affirm each other's identity, by which they heal and sustain each other and through which they make Christ sacramentally present to each other.

103. Within this context of concern for the comprehensive development of the Church's teaching on marriage, the Congress sector on the Family added further reflections on responsible parenthood and on the moral problems which contraception poses for the Catholic conscience. The sector delegates were careful in their formulation in asking for a fundamental re-examination of the Church's teaching on marriage, sexuality and contraception. The mind of this sector of our Congress should be taken in a constructive sense. It is related to the general concern also expressed that the Church's teaching on every aspect of marriage should be developed positively. Development carries with it the idea of organic growth. It involves clearer insight and a deeper understanding of the meaning and implications of truths already possessed and continually meditated upon in the light of fresh knowledge or of changing circumstances. As we have explained, marriage and the family are central to our Christian calling and life, and today both need to be built up, strengthened and better understood and appreciated. Christian marriage - like the mystery of the Church itself with which it is so closely linked - has always to be seen afresh with the eyes of faith nourished by experience and has to be enriched by continuing reflection.

104. The Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* is the authentic teaching of the Church. It has to be read in the light of the Vatican Council's teaching already referred to. Conjugal love consists in the gift of one person to another, a gift which embraces the human being as a whole, body and soul, and such conjugal love is most completely fulfilled by parenthood. It is in this context of the emphasis to be placed on the value of love that the rejection of the use of artificial contraception is situated. The truth which the Church invites us to reflect upon is that its teaching on responsible parenthood is to be understood within the true meaning of marriage as a total, mutual self-giving, which the Council has expressed in terms of covenant (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* n.48).

105. We must also recognise the unique nature of child-bearing and its place in our human existence. We all need to think more profoundly about the immeasurable value of the individual person. A human being is more than a population statistic. An individual is in a limited and created way an unrepeatable expression of what God himself is. Each person is an image of the infinite God. So human life has an absolute value, each individual a unique worth. Human life is the summit of God's creation. And that is the profoundly Christian insight behind the use of the word "procreation". When husband and wife have a child, they share in God's continuing creation. As our Bishops' Conference stated in 1968, there is in procreation "a triple partnership of husband, wife and God". We know this insight does not put an end to moral dilemmas, but it is quite definitely a reminder that at this point we touch the mystery of the origin of all life and that we must accordingly develop our thoughts and attitudes with wonder and reverence for life and for God, its author.

106. We are convinced that the Church's mind on the full meaning of marriage and the human relationship within marriage needs continual examination and greater explanation to enable it to be better understood and lived. Any further development on the subject will of course be made in complete fidelity to the Church's magisterium. We remind our people that the Synod of Bishops later this autumn will be reflecting on the subject of the family and with the help of our prayers will contribute to a deeper understanding of the subject.

107. We also recommend for local implementation in our dioceses the positive ideas put forward at the Congress for better preparation of people for marriage and more effective support for marriages and families. There must be long-term and continuing education for marriage. Family life can be developed through the setting up of adult groups for discussion and formation, reflecting in faith on life-experience and providing broad education and skills. Local communities should be able to call on married couples, schools and parish-based courses to create programmes of education for marriage. Bishops and dioceses will no doubt tackle in their own way provision for the preparation of engaged couples for marriage. Valuable suggestions were made at the Congress about the appointment of diocesan coordinators to develop all aspects of ministry to marriage and the family and about deanery teams for providing comprehensive preparation for marriage. We propose to consider further the recommendation that engaged couples be asked to give the local parish a period of several months' notice of their intention to marry and of their willingness to undertake preparation for marriage.

108. We ask parish clergy to work out with their lay people how to give continuing and effective support to

families and how to meet the needs of families at every stage of their growth. We have already recommended how such concern should be expressed in the liturgy. Married couples will themselves be an obvious source of practical help, and, where possible, other small groups, childless couples, and those who are not married should also be involved. As we have pointed out, the needs experienced by families will change in nature and urgency at different stages of their relationship. Parish support must take account of this and be forthcoming especially in the early years of any family's existence. Parishes should also consider how they can introduce or develop lay organisations which can involve whole families in their membership or at least enable husbands and wives to work together. In brief, the Church in England and Wales must give the utmost priority to establishing ways and means of providing at diocesan level education and support for marriages and family life.

109. Marital breakdown throughout Britain has reached alarming proportions. We cannot shut our eyes to the pastoral problems this creates for parents and children. Parishes should try to be alert to the needs of single parents and their children and to offer sensitive practical help and support. There can be no doubt that our Church in England and Wales faces here a growing and complex problem which it may not ignore. We admit that there is a need for us all to grow in our pastoral understanding of individuals whose marriages have broken down and whose family unity has been lost. While the problem of divorce is daunting enough, the questions posed by Catholics who enter a second irregular marriage are even more searching. Can they ever be admitted again to Holy Communion? May they ever have their second marriage blessed by the Church?

110. We welcome this opportunity — and we shall seek others - to reaffirm the unchanging teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that a Christian marriage, freely and properly entered into and consummated, is for ever indissoluble. No human power can dissolve the bond so created between husband and wife, the commitment so total and irrevocable that it represents for us a symbol of that union of love and mutual giving which binds together Christ and his Church. We have to accept, however, that there is widespread confusion amongst many Catholics and in society at large about the Church's teaching and practice on marriages which have, from the time of the wedding, lacked one or more elements necessary to make them true Christian unions. We recognise the need to explain this teaching on nullity more clearly to the Catholic community and to the public who mistakenly regard it as "Catholic divorce". We also recognise the urgent need of showing understanding for divorced Catholics who have remarried. They should be encouraged to play as full a part as possible in the life of the local parish, and helped in their continuing baptismal responsibility to bring up their families in the Catholic faith. They should always seek from specially delegated or well-qualified priests individual help and advice about their present state; it could be that the Church's matrimonial courts would accept that the previous marriage was not valid, with the possibility of their sharing again in the full sacramental life of the Church.

111. There are, however, other situations in which there may be moral certainty that the previous marriage was not valid even although this cannot be adequately established in the matrimonial courts, or in which a first valid marriage has broken down irretrievably but a second union is stable. The question of reception of the Sacraments in such cases is one which the Bishop's Conference has been considering for some time. We have a most serious responsibility to witness to the life-long and exclusive commitment of a Christian marriage. Yet as pastors and loving servants of our brothers and sisters in the local Churches of England and Wales, we take to heart the sympathy and the compassion expressed by Congress delegates as we continue our deliberations on this very sensitive doctrinal and pastoral issue.