



“The Heart of the Deepest Truth”

World Bishops' Message to Families

Rome, 25 October 1980

I. Introduction

1. We have come to the end of the Synod. For the past month we bishops all over the world have met here in Rome in union with the Holy Father and under his leadership. Before returning to our own countries, we wish to address these few words to you. It is not our intention to give answers to all the complex questions raised in our day about marriage and the family. We only want to share with you the love, confidence, and hope which we feel. As your bishops and pastors, who are also your brothers in the faith, we have been united with you during these weeks; nor have we forgotten that we, too, grew up in families, with all their joys and sorrows. To you and to our own families we are deeply grateful.

II. The situation of families today

2. In our discussions of family life today we have found joys and consolations, sorrows and difficulties. We must look first for the good things and seek to build on them and make them perfect, confident always that God is present everywhere in his creatures and that we can discern his will in the signs of our times. We are encouraged by the many good and positive things that we see. We rejoice that so many families, even in the face of great pressure to do otherwise, do fulfill the God-given mission entrusted to them. Their goodness and fidelity in responding to God's grace and shaping their lives by his teaching give us a great hope. The number of families who consciously want to live the life of the Gospel. Giving witness to the fruits of the Spirit, continues to grow in all our lands.

3. During this past month we have learned much about the many and varied cultural conditions in which Christian families live. The Church must accept and foster this rich diversity, while at the same time encouraging Christian families to give effective witness to God's plan within their own cultures. But all cultural elements must be evaluated in light of the Gospel, to ensure that they are consistent with the divine plan for marriage and the family. This duty - of acceptance and evaluation - is part of the same task of discernment.

4. A more serious problem than that of culture is the condition of those families who live in need in a world of such great wealth. In many parts of the globe, as well as within individual countries, poverty is increasing as a result of social, economic, and political structures which foster injustice, oppression, and dependence. Conditions in many places are such as to prevent many young men and women from exercising their right to marry and lead decent lives. In the more developed countries, on the other hand, one finds another kind of deprivation: a spiritual emptiness in the midst of abundance, a misery of mind and spirit which makes it difficult for people to understand God's will for human life and causes them to be anxious about the present and fearful of the future. Many find it difficult to enter into and live up to the permanent commitment of marriage. Their hands are full, but their wounded hearts are waiting for a Good Samaritan who will bind up their wounds, pouring on them the wine and oil of health and gladness.

5. Often certain governments and some international organisations do violence to families. The integrity of the home is violated. Family rights in regard to religious liberty, responsible parenthood and education are not respected. Families regard themselves as wards and victims rather than as human beings responsible for their own affairs. Families are compelled - and this we oppose vehemently - to use such immoral means for the solution of social, economic, and demographic problems as contraception or, even worse, sterilisation, abortion, and euthanasia. The synod therefore strongly urges a charter of family rights to safeguard these rights everywhere.

6. Underlying many of the problems confronting families and indeed the world at large is the fact that many people seem to reject their fundamental vocation to participate in God's life and love. They are obsessed with the desire to possess, the will for power, the quest for pleasure. Instead of looking upon their fellow human beings as brothers and sisters, members of the human family, they regard them as obstacles and adversaries. Where people lose their sense of God, the heavenly father, they also lose their sense of the human family. How can human beings see one another as brothers and sisters if they have lost their consciousness of having a common Father? The fatherhood of God is the only basis, the unity of the human family.

III. God's plan for marriage and the family

7. God's eternal plan (cf. Eph I, 3ff.) is that all men and women should participate and share in the divine life and being (cf. 1 Jn 1:3; 2 Pt 1:4). The Father summons people to realise this plan, in union with their fellow human beings, thus forming the People of God (cf. Lumen Gentium, 9).

8. In a special way the family is called to carry out this divine plan. It is, as it were, the first cell of the Church, helping its members to become agents of the history of salvation and living signs of God's loving plan for the world. God created us in his own image (cf. Gn 1, 26) and he gave us the mission to increase and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it (cf. Gn 1, 28). To carry out this plan man and woman are joined in an intimate union of love for the service of life. God calls spouses to participate in his creative power by handing on the gift of life. In the fullness of time, the Son of Man, born of woman (Gal 4, 4) enriched marriage with his saving grace, elevating it to the level of a sacrament and causing it to share in the covenant of his redemptive love, sealed with his blood. Christ's love and gift to the Church and those of the Church become the model of the mutual love and self-giving of man and woman (cf. Eph 5, 22-32). The sacramental grace of matrimony is a source of joy and strength to the spouses. As ministers of this sacrament, they truly act in the person of Christ himself and bring about their mutual sanctification. Spouses must be conscious of this grace and of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Each day, dear brothers and sisters, you must hear Christ saying to you: "If only you recognised God's gift" (cf. Jn 4, 10).

9. This divine plan shows us why the Church believes and teaches that the covenant of love and self-giving between two people joined in sacramental marriage must be permanent and indissoluble. It is a covenant of love and life. The transmission of life is inseparable from the conjugal union. The conjugal act itself, as the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (9 and 11) tells us, must be fully human, total, exclusive and open to new life.

10. God's plan for marriage and the family can only be fully understood, accepted and lived by persons who have experienced conversion of heart, that radical turning of the self to God by which one puts off the "old" self and puts on the "new". All are called to conversion and sanctity. We must all come to the knowledge and love of the Lord and experience him in our lives, rejoicing in his love and mercy, his patience, compassion, and forgiveness, and loving one another as he loves us. Husbands and wives, parents and children, are instruments and ministers of Christ's fidelity and love in their mutual relationships. It is this which makes Christian marriage and family life authentic signs of God's love for us and of Christ's love for the Church.

11. But the pain of the cross, as well as the joy of the resurrection, is part of the life of one who seeks as a pilgrim to follow Christ. Only those who are fully open to the Paschal Mystery can accept the difficult but loving demands which Jesus Christ makes of us. If because of human weakness one does not live up to these demands, there is no reason for discouragement. "Let them not be discouraged, but rather have recourse with humble perseverance to the mercy of God" (HV 25).

IV. The family's response to God's plan

12. Just as we are doing, you also are seeking to learn what your duties are in today's world. In looking at the world, we see facing you certain important tasks of education. You have the tasks of forming free persons with a keen moral sense and a discerning conscience, together with a perception of their duty to work for the betterment of the human condition and the sanctification of the world. Another task for the family is to form persons in love and also to practise love in all its relationships, so that it does not live closed in on itself but remains open to the community, moved by a sense of justice and concern for others as well as by a consciousness of its responsibility toward the whole of society. It is your duty to form persons in the faith - in knowledge and love of God and eagerness to do his will in all things. It is also your task to hand on sound human and Christian values and to form persons in such a way that they can integrate new values into their lives. The more Christian the family becomes, the more human it becomes.

13. In fulfilling these tasks the family will be, as it were a “domestic church,” a community of faith living in hope and love, serving God and the entire human family. Shared prayer and the liturgy are sources of grace for families. In fulfilling its tasks the family must nourish itself on God’s word and participate in the life of the sacraments, especially reconciliation and the Eucharist. Traditional and contemporary devotions, particularly those associated with the Blessed Virgin, are rich sources of growth in piety and grace.

14. Evangelisation and catechesis begin in the family. Formation in faith, chastity, and the other Christian virtues, as well as education in human sexuality, must start in the home. Yet the outlook of the Christian family should not be narrow and confined only to the parish; it should embrace the whole human family. Within the larger community it has a duty to give witness to Christian values. It should foster social justice and relief of the poor and oppressed. Family organizations should be encouraged to protect their rights by opposing unjust social structures and public and private policies which harm the family. Such organisations should also exercise a healthy influence on the communications media and build up social solidarity. Special praise is due to those family organisations whose purpose is to help other married couples and families appreciate God’s plan and live by it. This like-to-like ministry should be encouraged as part of comprehensive family ministry.

15. Out of a sense of fidelity to the Gospel, the family should be prepared to welcome new life, to share its goods and resources with the poor, to be open and hospitable to others. Today the family is sometimes obliged to choose a way of life that goes contrary to modern culture in such matters as sexuality, individual autonomy, and material wealth. In the face of sin and failure, it gives witness to an authentically Christian spirit, sensitive in its life and in the lives of others there to the values of penance and forgiveness, reconciliation and hope. It gives evidence of the fruits of the Holy Spirit and the Beatitudes. It practices a simple style of life and pursues a truly evangelical apostolate toward others.

V. The Church and the family

16. During the Synod we have grown in awareness of the Church’s duty to encourage and support couples and families. We have deepened our commitment in this regard.

17. Family ministry is of very special interest to the Church. By this we mean efforts made by the whole People of God through local communities, especially through the help of pastors and lay people devoted to pastoral work for families. They work with individuals, couples, and families to help them live out their conjugal vocation as fully as possible. This ministry includes preparation for marriage; help given to married couples at all stages of married life; catechetical and liturgical programmes directed to the family; help given to childless couples, single-parent families, the widowed, the separated and divorced, and, in particular, to families and couples labouring under burdens like poverty, emotional and psychological tensions, physical and mental handicaps, alcohol and drug abuse, and the problems associated with migration and other circumstances which strain family stability.

18. The priest has a special place in family ministry. It is his duty to bring the nourishment and consolation of the word of God, the sacraments, and other spiritual aids to the family, encouraging it and in a human and patient way, strengthening it in charity so that families which are truly outstanding can be formed (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 52). One precious fruit of this ministry, along with others, ought to be the flourishing of priestly and religious vocations.

19. In speaking of God’s plan, the Church has many things to say to men and women about the essential equality and complementarity of the sexes, as well as about the different charisms and duties of spouses within marriage. Husband and wife are certainly different, but they are also equal. The difference should be respected but never used to justify the domination of one by the other. In collaboration with society, the Church must effectively affirm and defend the dignity and rights of women.

VI. Conclusion

20. As we reach the end of our message, we wish to say to you, brothers and sisters, that we are fully aware of the frailty of our common human condition. In no way do we ignore the very difficult and trying situation of the many Christian couples who, although they sincerely want to observe the moral norms taught by the Church, find themselves unequal to the task because of weakness in the face of difficulties. All of us need to grow

in appreciation of the importance of Christ's teachings and his grace and to live by them. Accompanied and assisted by the whole Church, those couples continue along the difficult way toward a more complete fidelity to the commands of the Lord.

"The journey of married couples, like the whole journey of human life, meets with delays and difficult and burdensome times. But it must be clearly stated that anxiety or fear should never be found in the souls of people of goodwill. For is not the Gospel also good news for family life? For all the demands it makes, is it not a profoundly liberating message? The awareness that one has not achieved his full interior liberty and is still at the mercy of his tendencies and finds himself unable to obey the moral law in an area so basic causes deep distress. But this is the moment in which the Christian, rather than giving way to sterile and destructive panic, humbly opens up his soul before God as a sinner before the saving love of Christ" (Pope Paul VI, Address to the Equipes de Notre Dame, 4 May, 1970).

21. Everything we have said about marriage and the family can be summed up in two words: love and life. As we come to the end of this Synod, we pray that you, our brothers and sisters, may grow in the love and life of God. In turn we humbly and gratefully beg your prayers that we may do the same. We make St Paul's words to the Colossians our final words to you: "Over all these virtues put on love, which binds the rest together and makes them perfect. Christ's peace must reign in your hearts, since as members of the one body you have been called to that peace. Dedicate yourselves to thankfulness." (Col 3, 14-15).