

THE VOCATION AND MISSION OF THE FAMILY IN THE CHURCH AND IN TODAY’S WORLD

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A Missionary Church

Thank you very much for your invitation to participate in this international conference. I was happy to accept because for today and for the future “life” is one of the most crucial realities in the Church and in society. I’m happy to greet all of you and I thank you for the commitment with which you support and defend life.

We have just concluded the Synod of Bishops, and its final document is rich in its treatment of family and life. Soon we will welcome the vision of family and life that Pope Francis will offer us in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation. Already, however, we have guidelines that can point the way in our reflections and our pastoral activity. They come from the missionary commitment to which Pope Francis has called the whole Church, particularly in his programmatic message *Evangelii Gaudium*, the *Joy of the Gospel*. The Pope invites the Church—and all believers—to a real “pastoral conversion,” to spread the Gospel of the Family and of Life with new energy and new passion.

Now, it is necessary to “go out”—the Pope writes—to reach those

who are “outsiders,” geographically or in their life circumstances, and to present the Gospel to them in a way that is not only understandable but also attractive. It’s clear that we can’t just keep on as we have done in the past. A simple updating of method just won’t be enough. We have to make our own the style that Jesus used in the Gospels. Jesus is the model to keep before our eyes, and we have to follow Him with joy—that is the heart of *Evangelii Gaudium*.

I want my message today to help you communicate the Gospel of the Family and of Life to the women and men of today’s Asia. It is necessary to find a new language, understandable to which we must communicate the content of the faith. Moreover the testimony is essential.

Coming from Rome, I bring with me the message that Saint Ignatius of Antioch gave to the Romans when he was brought to Rome in chains to die as a martyr: “In times of trial, it is not subtle arguments that produce Christians, it is Christianity’s call to heroism”—the heroism of witness, the heroism of love, the heroism of holiness.

You already know the key documents of the Magisterium that deal with life—I’m thinking in particular of the Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* written by Saint John Paul II twenty years ago—but I would like to call you attention to others, written this year: The Final Document of the Synod and the Catecheses that the Holy Father has been giving at his

Wednesday General Audiences.

The Synod document has three parts. The first is a wise and thoughtful description of today's family realities on the several continents. It is useful because an understanding of the current situation is indispensable for an effective communication of the Gospel. The second part is an invitation to look toward Jesus and join with his sentiments in order to gain a deeper understanding of the vocation of the Christian family and the power of the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony. The third part presents an outline of the mission of the Christian family in today's society. The third part is perhaps the most innovative because it urges families to be active participants in evangelization and to be direct and credible witnesses to the beauty of the Gospel of the Family and the Gospel of Life.

The Pope's Wednesday Catecheses have great importance as well. In them the Pope presents a great treasure of spiritual and pastoral wisdom. He describes the daily life of families, outlines the responsibilities of the individual members and at the same time offers a vision of a new evangelizing alliance between the family and the Christian community. These are two very valuable documentary resources. They will help bring on a new Spring for Christian families. And who more than Christian families can communicate the beauty of the Gospel of the Family and the Gospel of Life? The success of the

Synod is in their hands.

A Paradox

A first point that I would like to address concerns the situation in which families find themselves in the world today. I consider it a real paradox. On the one hand great value is attributed to family ties, to the point of considering them the key to happiness. Statistics show that most people in every nation consider the family a place of security, refuge and protection, especially for life itself. Marital stability continues to be an important value and a deeply felt inspiration even if the determination to remain together “till death do us part” has lost respect in popular culture or is even considered not possible.

On the other hand, many weaknesses surface in the family: bonds are broken, separations are more frequent, with the result that a father or a mother is gone. Families dissolve, fail, recompose. There are those who say that family breakdowns are the greatest problem in society today. One factor that is ever more relevant is the multiplication of different kinds of “family.” It has become acceptable to think that individuals can “be a family” in the most varied of ways. Just about any form of “living together” can be called a “family” as long as there is love. In this optic, the idea of “family” as we know it is not done away with, it is simply considered one of many possible life styles, all of

which are seemingly compatible with the family but in reality empty it of its unique identity. Statistics here too hint of a loss of incentives to create a family. In many places the number of persons who choose to live alone is growing, and it is clear where this situation is heading—a non-family society, or at least a low rate of family formation.

“Individualization” of Society and Culture of Death

The weakening of the family finds one of its causes in a culture that more and more promotes extreme individualism. The strengthening of individual freedoms—something that of course we can be proud of—becomes a negative if it has no limits, because with no boundaries it is very difficult to create strong and lasting relationships, and society itself becomes just a collection of individuals. In this context, the French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky speaks of a “second individualist revolution” where extreme consumerism in society produces a cult of hedonism, privatization of life and a dangerous self-referentiality, all of which leads to that drying up of human relationships that unfortunately we see all around us. Individuals structure their existence to exalt the ego, the cult of the ego, the perfection of the ego—an approach that is both a way of life and a value that is promoted. “I” becomes more important than “We”; solitude more important than communion; and individual rights more important than those of the family. For the first

time in history, the connection between “marriage, family and life” is broken—a connection that has always and rightly been considered the engine of human society. With that connection destroyed, each individual, in a frenzy of omnipotence, reconstructs it as he or she pleases.

In an individualist world, one contradiction becomes clearer and clearer. Both the individual and the culture of death have become gods! The Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* pointed out that fact twenty years ago saying: “On the one hand, the various declarations of human rights and the many initiatives inspired by these declarations show that at the global level there is a growing moral sensitivity, more alert to acknowledging the value and dignity of every individual as a human being, without any distinction of race, nationality, religion, political opinion or social class. On the other hand, these noble proclamations are unfortunately contradicted by a tragic repudiation of them in practice. This denial is still more distressing, indeed more scandalous, precisely because it is occurring in a society which makes the affirmation and protection of human rights its primary objective and its boast.” (18)

And further: “How can these repeated affirmations of principle be reconciled with the continual increase and widespread justification of attacks on human life? How can we reconcile these declarations with the

refusal to accept those who are weak and needy, or elderly, or those who have just been conceived? These attacks go directly against respect for life and they represent a *direct threat to the entire culture of human rights*. It is a threat capable, in the end, of jeopardizing the very meaning of democratic coexistence: *rather than societies of "people living together", our cities risk becoming societies of people who are rejected, marginalized, uprooted and oppressed*. If we then look at the wider worldwide perspective, how can we fail to think that the very affirmation of the rights of individuals and peoples made in distinguished international assemblies is a merely futile exercise of rhetoric, if we fail to unmask the selfishness of the rich countries which exclude poorer countries from access to development or make such access dependent on arbitrary prohibitions against procreation, setting up an opposition between development and man himself? Should we not question the very economic models often adopted by States which, also as a result of international pressures and forms of conditioning, cause and aggravate situations of injustice and violence in which the life of whole peoples is degraded and trampled upon?" (18)

You know these quotes well and it is not necessary at this point to offer you others, but it is clear that we are witnessing a conflict between two cultures—the culture of life and the culture of death. The family is at the heart of this conflict, and for this reason we cannot separate “the

family” and “life.” That was the meaning of the announcement of Pope Francis during the Synod when he told the Fathers of his intention to create a new dicastery dealing with “laity,” “family” and “life.” I won’t go into this point further because today it will serve us better to speak specifically about the family.

Faced with the cultural climate I spoke of, we must understand how important it is to restore cultural dignity and social centrality to the family. Really, the family is the only path toward a solid future for our society. The delicate historical circumstances in which we find ourselves is a kind of anthropological watershed. Briefly put, on the one hand we have the biblical affirmation: “It is not good for man to be alone”—which is the origin of the family—and on the other its exact opposite, “It’s good for the individual to be alone”— and free from every tie. That kind of individualism is incompatible with a strong family structure.

Nevertheless, we have to point out that in spite of all the attacks it suffers, the family holds firm, so great are its roots in the depths of the human heart. It is society’s basic resource. No other form of relationship offers such great human and social possibilities. The family has undergone many changes over the centuries, but it has always represented what is most humanizing in society. That’s why I believe that the time of crisis we are experiencing can, if we are wise and

determined, become an opportunity for strengthening our dedication to the family and to life. Certainly, we have to find a renewed model for the family—one more respectful of its relationship with the environment, more concerned for the quality of the relationship among its members, more interested in, and able to live with, other families. In summary, we live in a time when we need “more family.”

The Vocation and the Mission of the Family

This was the approach that the Synod took—the need for “more family” in the Church and in Society. Pope Francis, and the Synod, ask us to return to a consideration of the “mystery at the beginning.” Jesus himself based his preaching on humanity’s founding realities when he was asked whether divorce was allowable: “In the beginning, it was not that way” He said. (Mt. 19:9) The very first pages of the Bible disclose the vocation and the mission of the family. At the beginning of human history God entrusted to Adam and Eve (who represented the “human family” and each individual family) the task of caring for creation and the duty of carrying on humanity: “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the Earth and make it yours.” (Gn. 1:28) That is the essence of the vocation and mission that God entrusted to the human family, the families of yesterday and the families of today. We haven’t been created to close

ourselves up within ourselves, but rather to make the “common home” that God has given us into a welcoming place for all.

This is the light in which to understand the Pope’s challenge to newlyweds: dream big dreams, see the family as the place from which to make a more just, more beautiful world. The family is not just a romantic dream of “our blue heaven.” Rather, the family is the ideal path to full humanization for those who are born into life, the path that avoids the inhuman fate that results from an over-technologizing and over-individualizing of society. The family—thanks perhaps to its defects and limits—remains the place of life, the place of the mystery of being, the place of experience and of history. Its unique nature makes the family a “patrimony of humanity” for which there is no substitute.

In the family God entrusts the miracle of life to the fruitful love between man and woman. Marriage is a call (a vocation) to passing on life. The union between individuals who are the same cannot produce life (at most such a union satisfies a need). Only in the union of a radical difference (man-woman) can humans fulfill their commandment (their vocation) to generate and welcome life. For this reason it is in the family that the first page of the sacred story of life is written; it is from the love between man and woman that new generations are welcomed and cared for, that the responsible gift of life comes forth. The generative nature of a couple’s love makes it able to welcome every life,

even lives that are otherwise rejected. Adoption, foster care, family care for the handicapped—all are the fruit and the task of love between man and woman. In that same context, responsible fatherhood and motherhood are something to be taken very seriously, as the Synodal document emphasizes when it discusses the earlier documents of the Magisterium. I know that in the days to come you will give serious thought to all of this.

The Defense of and Care for Life at Every Age.

For my part—among the many observations that could be made—I would like to emphasize one important point. The framework into which the question of “life” best fits is the family because it is from the family that life springs, grows and reaches its fullness. The notion of “family” is what weaves together all discourse about life, from conception till its natural end.

Human life is to be followed from its first home in its mother’s womb, which is and remains the first school of the relation between two persons, a school of listening and of contact, physical and intense, a contact that nourishes itself on the beating of a mother’s heart. Here I think it is important to emphasize in the strongest terms the role of mothers. The Pope’s message on the 48th World Communications Day

about the family as the place where communication is first learned is full of meaning for us. It is in a mother's womb that communication—listening and physical contact—begins. Archbishop Romero, the Blessed Martyr of El Salvador, had much to say about motherhood at the funeral of one of his priests murdered by a death squad: “Not all of us will have the honor of shedding our blood for the faith, but God asks all who believe in Him to have the spirit of martyrdom...Giving one's life doesn't just mean being killed, giving one's life, having the spirit of martyrdom, means giving all to duty in silence, in prayer, in honestly fulfilling one's responsibilities. It means giving one's life little by little, in the silence of daily life, just as a mother does when without fear, with the simplicity of maternal martyrdom she gives birth, nurses, raises and lovingly cares for her child.” What a splendid example of the way to proclaim the beauty of motherhood!

The second stage of life is childhood, which simply must take place in a family. It is during these years that we learn, in a kind of outline, every aspect of life. That is why toddlers and youngsters really need the full attention of the family, of the Church and of society. Jesus teaches this clearly with his own example. To redeem us from sin He became a child Himself, in a family like so many others. When this doesn't happen, because there is no family or because the father or mother is absent, there can be serious negative consequences for a child.

Pope Francis has said that this stage of life deserves special attention, but that all too often babies, toddlers and youngsters are neglected, abandoned, forgotten.

Then comes adolescence. Here too the example of Jesus teaches us. His obedient relationship with His mother and father is clear, but at the same time He shows a teenager's ability to recognize and answer God's call. At this stage of life teenagers begin to take their first steps toward freedom, but they can't take those steps without having around them a supportive family environment. Still, adolescents often have serious problems if they adopt negative, sometimes devastating, adult life styles that can mark them forever.. We have to ask ourselves how we can help them grow up and how we can make sure their souls are not stolen by a society unable to offer them values that make life worth living. The phenomenon of "street gangs" in cities large and small is a sign of evil in a society that doesn't know how to raise its children.

After that, we consider young adults and middle-aged persons. Theirs is a generation that in our times is being sorely tried. High rates of unemployment, particularly among the young in poor areas, give rise to alienation and even violence, and we forget as well that theirs is a time when, as the Bible says, they should be leaving father and mother to start their own families. Among the middle-aged, the burdens of family and work are making it very difficult for them to live up to their

ideals and to pass those ideals on to their children. Unfortunately, the Church pays too little attention to this age group, and it is very common for people in this group to abandon religious practice altogether.

Finally, there is old age. With gratitude to the Lord, we see that life expectancies have increased, as has the number of the elderly, who can be a great gift to society. Unfortunately, the care and attention they require has not been provided for sufficiently, partially because the great cost of the healthcare they need, but also because their gifts are not appreciated and they are seen as a burden. The increased incidence of euthanasia in some countries is a sign of the cruelty of a culture that lengthens the years of life but makes that life seem not worth living any longer. The defense of elderly life, and support for it, are one of the themes that need increased attention, and the great traditions in Asia of respect for the elderly offer us a very valuable model in this area.

In the light of what I have spoken of, there are three areas that I would like to address in greater detail: women, the death penalty and care for all creation.

We know how much life itself is identified with women, yet it is often women who are the victims of anti-life violence. The Synod noted that still today “just being a woman gives rise to discrimination; the very gift of motherhood is penalized rather than valued....Neither should it be forgotten that women are increasingly subjected to violence within the

family itself. Exploitation of women and the physical and psychological violence they suffer are often linked to abortion and forced sterilization. Add to that the negative consequences of certain reproductive practices such as surrogate pregnancies and traffic in fertilized eggs and embryos. The emancipation of women calls for a rethinking of the tasks of spouses in the reciprocal relations in family life. The desire for children at any expense has not produced happier or more stable families and in many cases has aggravated the inequality between men and women.”

With regard to the death penalty, in recent decades there has been an increase in the belief that the death penalty is not only ineffective but is also radically unjust, even without considering the tragic mistakes sometimes made by the criminal justice system. The Church, guided by the Scriptures, must continue to witness that no one has such power over the life of another. And is highly appropriate for the Church to actively defend and care for human life even in these circumstances.

My last observation deals with the environment and a necessary consideration of the Pope’s recent Encyclical *Laudato si*. Be aware that we are not being led by a “green” Pope! The vision of Pope Francis is much broader than that and harks back to humanity’s mission given to it in Genesis, the mission of defending creation that God gave to the human family and to each individual family. Pope Francis maintains that there is a need for a true “ecological conversion.” There is a need

for a real cultural and spiritual revolution so that the “common home” entrusted to us is not irreparably damaged. Such a revolution involves political life, the economy and culture, but it also involves the behavior of individual families and their members. I want to emphasize that our position with respect to life has a valuable ally today in those who are concerned with care for the environment. This alliance reflects the very close tie between environmental ecology and human ecology.

Conclusion: Family and Christian Community for a New Missionary Commitment

By way of a conclusion I would like to emphasize the urgency of a new relationship between the Christian community (what some would call “organized religion”) and families. We well know, especially after the Synod, that it is not a question of simply updating pastoral outreach to families and updating life-oriented activities. What is necessary is making the family as such an integral part of the Church’s pastoral activity. There is an urgent need to commit much more than we do now to making the family evangelizers of the Gospel of the Family and the Gospel of Life. It is not enough to simply point out the need. These Gospels must be preached with wisdom and joy. Indispensable to that

change is overcoming the distance that we see between individual families and the Christian community. Too often today families are unchurched and closed in on themselves, while the Christian communities are not family-oriented and are too bureaucratic.

Pope Francis is encouraging us to find a closer relationship: “Today an alliance between family and parish is crucial. Over against ideological, financial and political “centers of power,” we place our hope in these “centers of love,” evangelizers, rich in human warmth, based on solidarity and sharing.” “Strengthening the bond between family and Christian community is an urgent and indispensable task.” And to families he says: “Families sometimes hang back, thinking that they are not up to a task. But nobody is worthy, nobody is up to the task, nobody has the strength. Without God’s grace, we can’t do anything. The Lord never comes into a family without giving it some miracle of Grace. Remember what He did at the wedding feast of Cana. Yes, if we put ourselves in the Lord’s hands, he’ll make us able to perform miracles.”

Families can restore a family atmosphere to parishes. And he asks the Christian communities to do their part, to “overcome attitudes of command, of mere efficiency, in favor of interpersonal dialogue, familiarity and reciprocal esteem. Families should take the initiative and feel a responsibility to bring their gifts to the whole community. We

must all be aware that Christian faith needs a level playing field of shared life. The family and the parish must perform the miracle of a more communitary life for the benefit of all society.”

These remarks of Pope Francis open onto a new and broader vision. In a world where individualism and conflicts are globalized, families and Christian communities are called on to resonate the prophecy of the Gospel of the Family. In all this, however, the family must avoid the temptation to think and work only for its own limited interests. If it widens its horizons to include all of society, it earns the right to stand at the helm of history, of culture, of politics, and of the economy. That would be a real revolution for the human community. The love that is the foundation of the family is an energy that leads to overcoming every boundary, in the family and in all of society. It can be said the love that the Christian family receives from God as a gift carries the family outside itself to recover its original vocation— to care for creation and bring new generations into the world in faith, hope and love. The Sacrament of Holy Matrimony incorporates this vocation and this original mission into the indissoluble bond between Christ and his Church.

In his robust reconsideration of the family’s mission and of the Church’s witness, Pope Francis calls for a Church that, through the tight network of family communities, becomes a leaven of fraternity among

all peoples of the Earth. It is crucial to think of the future of society, of the Church and of the family in the light of that covenant that the Lord has established between man and woman for the “guidance” of the world. This is the great mystery that is “in reference to Christ and the Church (Eph 5:32), and our families are called to be witnesses to that love that is able to warm hearts and transform the world.

Thank you very much.