

## **The Work of Pro-Family Associations in View of the Cultural and Sociological Challenges of Our Day**

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### **Greetings**

Thank you for the invitation to take part in the Fifth World Congress of Families. My special thanks go to Dr. Allan Carlson and Mr. Larry Jacobs. I think this initiative is successful which began several years ago and periodically convenes many very different associations with a common objective: **promotion of the “natural family”**. We could say that we are gathered together here like a large family that goes beyond the necessary material organization. What is natural to the family is reflected here: relationship, communication, sharing and communion.

On behalf of Cardinal Ennio Antonelli, the President of the Pontifical Council for the Family, I thank the organizers for this very praiseworthy work which is extended to all the family organizations and associations that are called at this particular historical moment to show the world the beauty of the family institution, the only one that fully manifests the mystery of man. In fact, the human person is a relationship called to improve precisely through relationships. And it is here that your presence, work and testimony are vital and cannot be postponed: they are vital because if the family does not build relations it will disappear, and they cannot be postponed because the cultural challenges are of such great importance that they make your presence current and necessary.

### **Introduction**

I have read the objectives of this Congress carefully and the common denominator that could link them together is the joyful and beautiful wager on the natural family. Only the family is in a position to ensure a social shock absorber or cushion in the present world economic crisis because at heart it is a source of social solidarity and civil progress. Only the family is in a position to ensure an authentic education to human values because it ensures the altruism and temporal continuity essential in education, which is something quite different from simple instruction. Only the vocation to fatherhood and motherhood can transmit a responsible education in responsible procreation which will incarnate the necessary union between personal and social ethics

through an existential harmony that only the family can offer.<sup>1</sup> Only the family, the gift to humanity par excellence, can in turn be the gift that generously welcomes life because a gift calls for a gift. A gift has nothing to do with mere pragmatic or contextual interests. It has another kind of preliminary coordinate: to combine love and life as a twofold unity presided by love. Only the family, life and love which share in the mystery of the gift are in a position to transmit and spread happiness among the people of this earth.

Limiting myself to the theme assigned to me, **The Work of Pro-Family Associations in View of the Cultural and Sociological Challenges** of our day, I will proceed in the following way: 1) I will base the existence of family associationism on something natural, essential and urgent at the current time as a wealth for society and a wealth for ecclesial life. 2) Next, I will briefly point out the cultural and sociological challenges of our day, and 3) I will conclude by identifying the solutions and urgent needs for which help is asked from the family associations at the present time.

## **1. Foundations of Family Associationism**

The common denominator of the family and your praiseworthy initiatives is **relationship**. As different family associations from all over the world, in a certain sense you represent every human being's innermost vocation to be united, to associate and to share life and the future. Being here one is filled with optimism knowing that man is not lost because he continues to live in relationships and make possible the miracle of his daily integral enrichment. He continues to not be resigned to what is already known or experienced but, in union with others, tries to live what he is in a better way and share the treasure of his existence with others. Therefore, nothing is more up-to-date than your essence and mission at this time because the question of man is at stake. In fact, the current crisis is a full-fledged crisis of the concept and term of the person, a family being par excellence. Today the lethal danger is indifferentism with regard to truth. It is truth that makes us free. It is truth, that is, the adjustment of reality to the subject, which makes our human fullness possible. Of course, this truth is discovered progressively and arduously only through dialogue. But dialogue is not mere tolerance; it is more; it is not tolerance. It is first and foremost love of truth. Truth is not indifferent; it has a commitment to reality. A paradigm of what I am saying would be the grave question of the foundation of law. Rights should not be based exclusively on desires because deep down this gravely ignores the reality of things and persons. Democracy is called to base the political and social order by taking into consideration the human person's complex reality where public and private are inter-related in a unique way. The person, a

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, No. 15, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2009.

family being, should surely be the natural center of all of society's activity and public service.

There is no adverse reality or insurmountable challenge than cannot be overcome through the intelligence of people who associate with one another, as demonstrated throughout history. Therefore, your existence is indispensable.

At present, family associationism would have, as it were, two different work fronts: an internal front called to present clearly every human person's family identity and vocation, and another external front to personalize society.

. The internal or identity front: family associationism is in a position to show that the family is a social and not merely a biological or psychological relationship endowed with unique, irreplaceable characteristics. As a relationship it is invisible and transcends circumstantial needs. Its reality is made up by a whole series of objective and subjective elements that go beyond the particular moment. In its essence, the family is a solution to the deepest needs of the person and society.

The family is surely a problem when the meaning of the constitutive relationship disappears. When public language, sometimes with an intention to manipulate reality, defines the traditional family in opposition to other forms of the family, justice is not being done. For the traditional family does not merely indicate a historic model but a natural society founded through the union of a man and a woman which is stable and foreseeable and whose interactions and the suitable framework for upbringing and procreating children are protected by society.

Society in the twenty-first century launches a challenge to the family that has never been seen until now: namely, to contemplate the possibility that this relationship could cease to exist. Some schools of thought, which try to transform society by re-shaping it, advocate the idea that all progress coincides with an individuation of persons, whereas the stability of social ties represents a regression. This goes against the reality of things because man is not like that. For every sphere of his existence, whether private or public, he needs relationships, association, cooperation and communion.

It is foreseeable that many of the so-called new family forms will be the product of the fragmentation and simplification of the family form known until now. But it will have to be seen whether or not these family forms can last.

When does a real family exist? When there is a fully family relationship. The identity card of a family is made up of four, inter-united elements: **gift, reciprocity, generation, and sexuality as conjugal love.** These

elements constitute the reality of the family and are interconnected by the dynamics of love. Therefore, love is the reality that connects both the interiority of the family and the family's relation with society.<sup>2</sup>

Gift, reciprocity, sexuality and generation combined in a certain agapic way are the elements that ought to constitute every family. **This is the identity which the family associations are in a position to transmit and this constitutes a task which the associations can and must carry out in this historic moment.** Because it is surely in the family where people's natural needs are satisfied in an appropriate way since they find a favorable relational context in the family. For this reason, the family associations are called to strengthen the family's identity.

The self only becomes authentic when it is before a you. Hence the horizon is marked by a deepening of every person's dialoguing and communal character, categories which allow him to achieve the fullness which the gift contains.

The possibility of giving is a specifically human quality that lets the giver's gratuitousness be seen and calls on the receiver's ability to recognize and receive the gift. In the family this interchange becomes paradigmatic. The family is the place where the dialogue which animates the gift finds its full expression. The family is the place where affections grow and the experience is learned of a gratuitous relationship with others.<sup>3</sup>

Support, dialogue and reciprocity characterize gratifying family relations which nourish the growth of each member of the family. For this reason, the foundation of the relationship is so important because it enables all the rest to exist. In fact, man is an eminently social being with a desire and profound need for interaction and interchange (reciprocity).<sup>4</sup> More and more the human sciences highlight the interpersonal dimension of development. Philosophical, psychological and theological theories abound which converge regarding this situation of the human condition.

(The I-you relationship is the main ingredient of subjectivity and the center of psychic development. A boy is transformed into a man and a girl into a woman through relationships. For this reason, a man and a woman do not achieve the fullness and maturity in which to achieve their potentialities without the encounter, interchange and dialogue. For example, the language and thought proper to our species cannot be learned in solitude. In the family, and more concretely in the family relationship, two fundamental elements for self-realization take place: the experience of being welcomed and accepted in one's subjectivity, and the cognitive, emotional and social relationship with another, with

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<sup>2</sup> P.P. Donati, Perché la "famiglia"? Le rispose della sociologia relazionale, *Anthropotes* 07/XXIII/1, pp. 11-34, 22.

<sup>3</sup> E. Scabini, R. Iafrate, *Psicologia dei legami familiari*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2003.

<sup>4</sup> M. Buber, *Io e Tu* (translation from German). S. Paolo, Milan 1993, p. 79.

the you. This acceptance and understanding are achieved in a unique way in the family and favor self-esteem and inner enrichment. On the other hand, without interchange and dialogue subjectivity atrophies and man remains isolated and impoverished from every viewpoint.)

It is for this reason that the role of the family as a prototypical relationship is so important and irreplaceable. In fact, in the family the dialogue that is needed for an in-depth encounter is made possible. Such dialogue is not only listening, understanding and respect but also recognition, appreciation and confirmation of the unrepeatable uniqueness attributed to each member of the family. There is an interchange where need, desires, ideas, emotions and so on have their unique value in each one. The family is the natural place of acceptance rich in affectivity in which the relationships are experienced and grow that will build the lives of its members in the future. It is the place where one learns to be accepted, protected, understood and loved. This is only possible through the relationship/s that take place within the very essence of the family. Therefore, for every man, conscientiously or not, the family is a place which offers a certain base for the personality, a place where affective and emotional harmony is found that is essential to move with autonomy and maturity in the world. To give and receive, talk and listen, ask, seek, err, ask for forgiveness, be forgiven, etc., are gratifying relational interchanges that forge the personality. This is the context where children can learn the adventure of life in the family micro cosmos. This is the privileged context where the gift and duty are mutually exchanged in order to offer and accept not only what one has,<sup>5</sup> but above all what one is.

. On the external level, the family associations claim another kind of typical and fundamental relationship for families which is education, with its obvious expression in the public sphere.

The family that educates to an integral project in life through human values builds the central elements of the process of personal maturity and feeds a virtuous circle that goes from the private individual to the social policies in all their complexity.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This point alone would be very important to bear in mind in the current need to justify the natural family as a resource and wealth for society. In this sense, various sociological surveys show how the family is the institution which handles justice and inter-generational solidarity in an admirable way, as recognized by more than 78.20% of those polled in Spain (April 2009). Family aid is estimated very positively among 91.20% of the population. 28.90% state that in this period of economic crisis they receive material aid from their parents. Aid from grandparents to children and grandchildren rises to 47.02%, as assessed from data regarding savings because in most cases the seniors' pensions are not high. But this is not all because aid to families extends to the care of grandchildren and housework as well as to aid in turn from children to the elderly who are handicapped or in difficulty of about 49.23%. This data supplied by the "Mensajeros de la Paz-Edad Dorada Association" can be found at [www.religiondigital.com](http://www.religiondigital.com), July 21, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> L. Dilani, *Fragilità, Resilienza familiare e adolescenti: tra normalità e devianza*, *La famiglia*, No. 247, 33-55, 33. Brescia 2009.

Family and the educational project as the place for building the personality.

(In a very clear-sighted analysis, P. Paolo Donati, following N. Luhmann, states that modernity has posed a lethal challenge to the family in the sense of the place for the humanization of the person. In this regard he points out at least three factors: a) the privatization of the family which makes it a closed system in which family education is seriously impoverished; b) the weakness of family relations which have lost their peculiarity in favor of increasingly widespread forms of cohabitation with no real personal involvement; c) the regression of family relations to primitive relations marked by violence, sexual behavior without rules and the satisfaction of the most primitive desires which respond solely to free will where the connection between freedom-truth and responsibility is out of bounds.<sup>7</sup>)

To educate in values means to ask oneself what to choose through one's actions, how to get oriented in life: in brief, how to live. And what is more difficult: How to educate others to choose to orient themselves in the life they are about to live? Deep down, this is a question that remains open throughout a person's life.

On the other hand, family associationism is a privileged way of developing more and more each day all the contents referred to in the *Charter of the Rights of the Family*.<sup>8</sup> This is addressed mainly to governments which in turn ought to be attentive to the good of the family because it is a unique, indispensable institution.<sup>9</sup> This spirit of social cooperation and making the contents of this Charter of the Rights of the Family a reality is one of the work guidelines that can be deepened more and more each day. The family cannot be equated with the individual or the State. The family becomes indispensable because it personalizes society and socializes the person.

The family associations are called to spread the importance on all levels of building a new concept, **“the citizenship of the family”**, a whole set of rights and duties that pertain to the natural society which can in a certain sense make a person's future more human.<sup>10</sup>

With the principles/virtues of justice, solidarity and subsidiarity, civil society is built in a human and harmonious way. The application, teaching and spread of these values and principles is another urgent task of the family associations which will benefit the family internally and on the social level because these values are part of both spheres of

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<sup>7</sup> P.P. Donati, *La famiglia nel horizonte del XXI secolo: quale empowerment?*, in P. Mialni (ed.), *Manuale di educazione familiare. Ricerca, intervento, formazione*, pp. 53-54.

<sup>8</sup> Articles 8, 9 and 10.

<sup>9</sup> Address of the Holy Father Benedict XVI to the Forum of Family Associations and the European Federation of the Catholic Family Associations (FAFCE), May 16, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> P.P. Donati, *Perché la “famiglia”?* Le risposte della sociologia relazionale, *Anthropotes* 07/XXIII/1, pp. 11-34, 19.

action. They are virtues that have to overcome the disadvantages of the cultural challenges, especially the gender ideology.<sup>11</sup> However, the gender ideology will not have the last word if the family associations put forth and live justice, solidarity and subsidiarity because this simply corresponds to truth. Truth shows us what is good and thus enables us to live with dignity; a good that demands to be respected and thus a right that demands to be protected. Rights protect goods and they should not be the result of the mere subjective desire of majorities or influential minorities. They should protect what makes possible, increases and supports the common good. Here the work of the associations becomes urgent, decisive and irreplaceable because no one like them can make a legal system grow from the base that is in harmony with the nature of things and persons founded on service to the common good and the integral progress of all men. It is necessary for legislation to reflect life and defend the truth of the family founded on monogamous, indissoluble marriage, the only worthy place for the gift of life to take place. Only great amounts of generosity can build authentic citizens who will transmit what they have learned in the family to social, labor, etc. relations. It would be logical for the States to be interested in strengthening the family because sooner or later the States themselves will receive the benefits which mature citizens bring. And this is so because man is a social being who sooner or later will reflect his virtues or vices in public relations. Therefore, sound families will bring a unique capital to society, whereas unhealthy families will bring grave difficulties. The family associations are called to reflect the truth of the personal structure in a total, natural and necessary way: total because family associationism is made up by families; natural because it does none other than order the family relations with a determined natural end, and necessary because today, unfortunately, the obvious facts of reality are put up for discussion.

## **2) Socio-cultural challenges**

The challenge in the external sphere could be summed up in bringing the family mark to society. This is not utopian, as you are well aware, because gratuitousness and sincere self-giving are the decisive element in accelerating a more just, solidarity-based and peaceful world, urgent priorities in the current global situation. Our activity will clash with everything that conceives of created reality, thought, the person and the world as isolated, monadic, autonomic and non-family. But in addition to not being supported theoretically, history has shown the fundamental errors of this consideration on various occasions. We have to make a historic effort to transmit with appropriate and simple words

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<sup>11</sup> Privatization of the same family relationships mentioned above, a void and anthropological pessimism marked by reductive materialistic relativism, a lack of relational identity as a fruit of the silent gender ideology which subtly intends to remake a new man and thus new human action too. It is an approach full of theoretical prejudices that ignore what is real and presume to build a social engineering by reformulating the facts of nature.

the falsehood of various ideologies and projects that fail in the base and frequently avoid real dialogue. The effort is urgent because the future of the world as we know it at present is at stake. We know through revelation that there are some realities that will never disappear. On the other hand, there are others that run a high risk, including the societies as they have existed until now. Therefore, a vocation to service and aid must be present in our sometimes misunderstood and patient work, knowing that truth is the great ally of the human heart.

Relativism, subjectivism, individualism, utilitarianism, consumerism, identity crisis, the crisis of the educational mission, social injustice, and violence against the poorest and most vulnerable: these are the challenges, among others, which the family must face today.

Today the cultural panorama, in addition to the nihilistic rejection of truth, is expressed in one contagious practical concretion: the reduction of reality. This sapiential reduction has been and is characterized by a reduction of the person, a constant temptation in the history of the dualist approach, with the objective of controlling the personal being and action.<sup>12</sup> This falsely rational and empirical control is simply the result of some falsely natural prejudices which impede man from developing the potentiality of his being. The current characteristic note of this formulation is its socialization and its aggressive, imposing and all-embracing character. One paradigm of this is the gender ideology, the center of the new global ethics.

Solution: the truth about man, the truth about the family and the truth about marriage.

Marriage and the family are the area and the school of values that can make society a humanly habitable and a non-aggressive or deleterious place for the weakest. The family alone is the most complete agent of justice, solidarity and peace<sup>13</sup> because it builds the common good by bringing love, which is the ultimate code for understanding the person and society, to the life stream of society. The family is a special, small society called in turn to transmit to society in a family way the values that procure integral happiness for people. Happiness alone is the force that will make this world progress, take it out of its limitations and forms of poverty, and transmit a meaning of life to everyone. The family, as the basis of any society, is the key to finding part of what has been stated above. The family not only gives or brings things but it gives itself and such self-giving is the motor of justice, solidarity and peace. These are the urgent needs which I believe are the greatest priorities for the family associations at the beginning of this Third Millennium

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<sup>12</sup> C. Simon Vazquez, *Estudio historico-critico del concepto y termino de Planificacion Familiar*, Fundacion Universitaria San Antonio, Murcia 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Benedict XVI, *Message for the World Day of Peace 2007*, No. 1.



From the Pontifical Council for the Family, all that is left for me to do is to give thanks for all the great good that has been done by the family associations and update our commitment to cooperate and support all the associations that seek to strengthen the authentic identity of the family and have the vocation of universal service to society.

Thank you very much.