

The Family in Secularized Society

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Dear Dean Tothova and Emeritus Dean, Prof. Velemínský, Faculty of the *of Health and Social Studies* of the *University of South Bohemia České Budějovice*, thank you for your gracious words of welcome and your kind invitation to this workshop on *“The Family in Secularized Society”*.

My salutations also to His Excellency, Mr. Pavel Vošalík, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of the Czech Republic to the Holy See, to the Civil Dignitaries of this Historic Town of Třeboň, and to all distinguished Professors and Scholars, Students, Ladies and Gentlemen.

To begin, I feel it is important to define the difference between authentic secularism and false secularism. What I mean by authentic secularism is a synonymous of secularity that is, a healthy independence of the earthly realities from other realities, without the existence of a necessary contraposition and/or negation regarding such realities.

Inauthentic Secularism instead entails the omni-comprehensive vision of reality in a form that excludes other realities which are not deemed proper to the historical moment (century). Its synonym would thus be secularism versus secularity, and it is within the former understanding of secularism that I wish to speak about the title of our workshop: *“The Family in Secularized Society”*, wherein inauthentic secularism imposes its multiple nuances of mandatory exclusion upon society.

“Is this an appropriate title for our workshop?” I believe it is. On the one hand we have the term family, and on the other, the institution of the family now finds itself within a historical cultural context where, to a greater or lesser extent, attempts are made to abdicate all that, of its nature (*traditio*) belongs to the family, and limiting oneself almost to the articulation of the word. In effect, western societies to a greater or lesser extent, attempt to refashion its members and institutions, by applying to these absolute and autonomous categories contrary to tradition and religion.

A few years ago, Habermas explored in an article entitled: “Creer y saber”¹ (*To believe and to know*) the process of secularization in our societies, which he defines as “post-secular”. With this term the German author refers to the pluralistic societies as entities which define themselves as Neutral States *vis à vis* the various cosmovisions of its subjects. Given the fact that such cosmovisions affirm a sociological relevance regarding religion, it then becomes necessary to clarify the way in which believing and non-believing citizens should coexist and cooperate. If

¹ Habermas, Jürgen, “Creer y saber”, in *El futuro de la naturaleza humana*. Barcelona: Paidós, 2002.

we are not able to resolve this problem within western societies, where the process of secularization has now been taking place during several centuries, it will be very difficult to resolve the grave problems which today affect entire regions of our world, where the modernization of social communication and interaction move forward with ever increasing speed.

The key, according to Habermas, is to be found were the Liberal State were to adopt a neutral cosmovision to each of its actions. Contrarily, every day and at diverse levels (for example in legislation) this neutrality in fact is not applied at all. Consequently, those who profess a religious faith are the only ones that the Liberal State has imposed upon the obligation of “dividing” their own identity into that which is public and that which is private. They are, in effect, the only ones who are forced to translate their convictions into secularized vocabulary, in order to make themselves heard within the sphere of public debate and thus be accepted by political majorities.² Habermas insists that lay citizens must seek to understand and respect the religious perspective by helping translate the normative content of religious traditions into a language understandable to all. For this reason, secularization must be understood as a translation, for only in this way will there be authentic equality between the various political interrelationships, enabling societies to export – though not in a colonial way – their own harmonious lifestyle to countries undergoing the dramatic tensions of distorted modernization.

² Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “Creer y saber”, in *El futuro de la naturaleza humana*, op. cit., page 136.

According to Habermas, secularization should be understood as a process of reciprocal learning between the lay thinking (a consequence of the Enlightenment) and Christianity.

At the moment, a profound social change which began decades ago is taking place, which refuses to acknowledge Judaeo-Christian contribution as largely responsible for forging western and particularly European society.

This is indeed a fundamental failure to honour the truth. The objective fact is that it is within the framework of western civilization forged by Christianity that realities such as democracy, human rights, social justice, parliamentary systems, international institutions, etc. have all been born. The question is “where does all this begin?”

It is imperative that we go back to the origin of such realities. To begin I would like to call to mind the story of creation as presented in Genesis. To be precise, the account of the creation of man and woman. In this way, we may appreciate the original experience of the sexual union between man and woman and their openness to life (family). Similarly, we may evaluate too the concept of freedom.

Creation and freedom are correlated synonyms. Starting with objective data, that is to say the truth, regarding the asymmetry between God and the human person,

allows us to see why the human being owes its existence to an act of creation, and not to natural necessity. In this way, the human person can be viewed as free and hence, the need to respect the unity between creation and freedom so as not to put into risk the proper understanding of the origin of each created person. If life is not understood a God's gratuitous and creative act which takes place within an existential framework of conjugal love (rather than the framework of human life as determined by technical means for the sake of satisfying self-serving preferences), it would be damaging to the liberty and dignity of the person. Therefore, when justly seeking to defend the equality of all its members, why should secularized society ignore the moral wisdom provided by Christianity?"

The Christian faith, which is based upon reason and hence, accounts for the universality of its language, affirms that the human person is a social individual. In addition, Christianity holds that from the start, the human being is also a family-individual. Indeed, these truths are realities which, of themselves, are both good and agreeable to the human person.

For decades now, J. Ratzinger has tried to highlight the role that reason has within the Christian religion. Cardinal Ratzinger, pointed out that Christianity had previously been viewed as an enlightened religion in harmony with Greek philosophy. In choosing to explain the mystery of God with philosophical concepts, Christianity sought to be part of the demystifying efforts pertaining to rational

thought. Christianity from its very beginnings did not wish to be understood as a myth, but as the truth that saves.

The early Christian author Tertullian expresses it succinctly, “Christ surnamed Himself Truth, not custom.” Some centuries before, another second century Christian author, Saint Justin called Christianity the “true philosophy”, and described it as the philosophy which reveals that which is so much sought after: Truth. This universality of reason is intimately coherent with the missionary strength intrinsic to Christianity. Ratzinger has always insisted in his writings that the synthesis of reason and faith is consubstantial with a Christianity that does not wish to fall into fideism.

The future of Christianity is founded upon the presentation of the gospel as something believable. In fact, this future depends upon Christianity’s fidelity to its authentic vocation, that is, to propose itself as Truth accessible by reason.

However, it is precisely reason itself which is notably threatened within the West. In fact, within western societies there appears to be a fundamental distrust for reason, disregarding its innate ability to seek and discover that which is true.

In our day relativism extends itself throughout all the levels of society. The idea of Christianity as the truth is deemed excessive and pretentious. In addition to relativism, Technoscience (which interprets the cognitive capacity of the human

person as a mechanism to adapt to the environment) reduces to a level of production and materials the very essence of human activity. Faced with such secularised expressions, Christianity Creationism insists that meaning is prior to non-meaning, to chance or evolutionary determinism. To the extent that the human person, image of God, participates in God, in his being and his work, it is to this extent that the human person is capable of knowing the truth and being guided by its light. The Pope states that the revindication of the dignity of human reason pertains to the essence of Christianity, and for this reason dialogue with disbelieving reason is a profound call proper to Christianity.

The relational aspect of the human person is typically given and seen **in marriage and the family**. It is true that a proper empirical and sociological analysis shows us that through the centuries there have been diverse forms of interrelating. But only one of these adequately and fully corresponds to the “*mode of being*” of the human person. The mode of being of the person is that which speaks specifically to his or her being, that which some would call nature. Yes, that mode of being, that natural being of the person makes of the person a being who is innately open to relationships, to give himself or herself to the other, to relentlessly seek and serve the other, because only in this exchange and in this self-giving, can the human person find true fulfilment and happiness.

A priori and subjectivist models obscure the objectivity that the real data offers to the conscientious observer. We cannot afford to explain here the genesis of the historical cultural process that has brought about the consolidation of a situation defined as “globalized”. It is enough to say that obviously the family as the paradigm of relational encounter of the person is going to be affected: the man-woman relationship, the parent-child relationship, and the relation between siblings are all affected.

Other categories in the relational framework seem to totally dominate, categories which impede authenticity and gratitude –such as utility, pleasure, emotion, irrationality, dominion, etc. – and attempt via means of social power and organization, to reinterpret interpersonal relationships and hence that marriage and the family.

Today’s trend illustrate that as a consequence of the process of secularization, relationships between couples are often viewed as both precarious and sporadic. Marriage, fertility, parental responsibility and responsibility towards society, no longer appear to be viewed as important issues for the relationship of couples. The only important issues now appears to be sexual gratification, as well as the levels of sentimentality and affectivity which the individual will get within relationship. This situation turns the individual into a stranger, who is furthermore, reduced to the mere

satisfaction of the other's desires. There is therefore, little reciprocal commitment, but mainly the question regarding the advantages that the one can get from the other.

The relationship between parents and children

Within the contemporary social context, the exercise of the parental role is very difficult indeed. The relationship between parents and children is very often reduced to an emotional care of the child. There is often little awareness of the task to educate the child and to pass on the moral values. Instead, parents invest much on the emotional aspects concerning the few children which they have had, and they do this principally because they seek a high affective gratification without little concern for social commitment and benefits. The child is thus understood as a product and continuation of the parents, instead of a project of the couple for the service of the wider community, as well as for the family.

However, from our point of view, it is imperative that society be concerned and committed to the family, from the perspective of the authentic expression of the human person and as proposed today by the light of the faith. In reality, a family founded in monogamous matrimony, that is both indissoluble and open to life, is not only the most important instrument of evangelization in the third millennium, but is also a singular, enriching and irreplaceable source for society.

We would like to call attention here to the fact that, rather than illustrating the Church's conviction regarding the family as a social benefit, it is of far greater importance to demonstrate, propose, and transmit the fact that the family, as this is understood within the Christian faith, is truly both a treasure and a resource without which the future cannot be constructed. A future worthy of the human person necessarily passes through the family.³

2. Present Day Situation

As Benedict XVI has affirmed, the family is under siege and in a storm. It seems as if all of the current social changes are going in the direction of a growing disintegration and weakening of the family. A certain part of the public opinion, fed by the media, easily believes in the idea that the family is a thing of the past and that it is therefore not necessary to support it. Often, within official governments speeches, the family is described as the “fundamental cell of society” (in harmony with the *United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights*), and as such should be considered in legislation and social policies. Despite this and in fact, the family is frequently neglected and even abandoned. Secularization sustains that the family is

³ “It is thus becoming a social and even economic necessity once more to hold up to future generations the beauty of marriage and the family, and the fact that these institutions correspond to the deepest needs and dignity of the person. In view of this, States are called to *enact policies promoting the centrality and the integrity of the family* founded on marriage between a man and a woman, the primary vital cell of society, and to assume responsibility for its economic and fiscal needs, while respecting its essentially relational character.” Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, n. 44.

increasingly irrelevant within social life. We think however, that the family – as it is lived in the daily concrete life – must be considered as a fundamental resource for the present and future of the society. The principal arguments set forth refer to allegations that the family hinders the human development of persons. Furthermore, the family is accused of being a source of social injustices and discriminations between the two sexes and the various generations. In short, the family is denied recognition of its positive social and public role. However, passing recognition is given to the family as the sphere *par excellence* for “private” affection, always and if these forms of affections are deprived of their social and public relevance. It is said that marriage (and for that reason too, the family) “closes” people within particular and binding relationships which do not favour social solidarity and the pro-social comportment. It would seem now that the family does not generate virtues, neither private nor public, but contrarily only social problems. From whence the flow of practical consequences concerning social, economic, and cultural policies according to which the family is to be treated the same level as any other form of free union, in which what is important is the rights of individual as such.

How do we respond to these cultural tendencies?

If its true that in modern society we see a great loss of social virtues, both in the private sphere as the public. This tendency must not be imputed to the family as

such. Instead it must be connected to the processes of secularization that has deviated the meaning and social function of the family, to the process which has privatized the family and eroded or erased its role as a social subject. It is necessary to *re-acknowledge* that which the family “is” and that which the family “does”. If we can come to see the negative effects – the social disintegration – that the privatization of family relationships brings with it, we should also acknowledge the positive and virtuous influences which every day authentic families do to alleviate the pain and harm cause by social pathologies. The Pontifical Council for the Family is convinced that this truth must be proclaimed. The central argument is that the family, defined as a relationship which is fully and stably reciprocal between both sexes (matrimony) and between the various generations (transmission of the acquired patrimony of civilization), is the greatest social resource that society can have, at least in the personal aspirations of people. It is thus important to identify and understand what are the greatest obstacles impeding the realization of the aspirations to form a family according to its proper relational essence.

The family is a resource for society in a variety of aspects and dimensions. To understand the full meaning of this, we need to bear in mind the social virtues which belong to the family. That is to say, those virtues of living in a habitual manner according to the moral good and which express themselves in the relationship with “the other”. They are the various forms of relating with others. Social virtues work towards public contentment. Personal happiness cannot ignore public happiness, that which is applied to non-family relationships. Being that the family cannot exist as an

island, personal happiness can only be fully enjoyed in a context of relational happiness, and *vice versa*. Family relationships are virtuous when they distinguish between authentic love and inauthentic love. Authentic love is oblation and open to the mystery; inauthentic love is possessive and egoistic. The family is the first school of authentic love as it is the primary place (the paradigm) of gift, beginning with the gift of life. The child observes and chooses his or her mode of life, learning, not only from that which the parents teach with words, but most of all from the reciprocal relationship of his or her parents. In situations of this type we can appreciate that the family which educates *is* a relationship and not only an aggregate of relationships. The family in effect, is and continues to be, the only place in society in which the person is considered in his or her totality. For this reason, as the family embraces all the dimensions of human life, it is the place where all the virtues – be it personal or social, private and public - are formed or where such virtues suffer from lack of want. It is incumbent upon political institutions to act in a manner that would favour those qualities of the family that tend towards the common good and serving as a recourse for society.

A concrete example can be seen between the cohabitation of persons and unity of the family: those who simply cohabit hold to reciprocal “reservations” and do not commit themselves fully with regards to the future. In these non-traditional family forms of common life, or decidedly non-family forms, the element of supra-functionality is lacking in the interpersonal relationships, as the latter limit

themselves to the level of individual gratification, without a true and proper social responsibility.

Clearly, the family is a resource for the society because its generates social virtues, and this is realized when the family lives according to the ethics of gift.

To speak of the virtues that the family generates, we can go beyond those more commonly known, in order to mention here the virtues of both *empowerment* and *resilience*. The virtue of empowerment consists. It is about growing in the awareness of oneself and of one's ability of organizing and determining when acting as a support group to people in need. The virtue of resilience is that spiritual and practical strength which often allows the family in difficulty to grow in strength and motivation amidst the many challenges which it faces. It helps the family transform a negative event, which in theoretically paralysing, into an occasion for generating compelling and decisive energies that go well beyond the family confines into the realm of society at large. Accordingly, the family in difficulty offers, from these virtues, certain social benefits to society in as much as it seeks to rehabilitate and include the person who is in difficulty within all levels of society, such as school and work, implying therefore, for those who are the most weak and marginalized, to grow in the possibility of social recovery.⁴

⁴ Cf. The International Center for Family Studies, *Rapporto, Ri-conoscere la famiglia: quale valore aggiunto per la persona la società?* A cura di P.P. Donati, Ed. S. Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo, 2007; Cf. P.P. Donati, *Perché la famiglia? Le riposte della sociologia relazionale*, ed. Cantagalli, Siena 2008; Cf. P.R. Amato, A. Booth, D.R. Johnson, S.J. Rogers, *Alone Together. How Marriage in America is Changing*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass., 2007.

A just, peaceful, fraternal and subsidiary society necessarily stems from the human and social treasures that the family offers.⁵ The family has the ability to integrate the human person into society in both an adequate and humane manner. Whereas the individual person does not always integrate himself or herself within society.

We can thus say: “**Society - it is of your interest to know and to develop an understanding of what the family should be**”; it is of your interest to know and aid the family open to life; it is in your interest to promote the authentic happiness of people, for they would constitute a more human society.

This year we are celebrating the 30th anniversary of *Familiaris Consortio*, the *Magna Carta* of the family, written by the soon to be Blessed Pope John Paul II.

In this Apostolic Exhortation the Pope places special emphasis upon the role that the family plays in the social arena and thus invited the family to participate in the development of society. In this line of thought we could ask whether there has been since then “progress” or “regress” concerning the paradigmatic relationships of the human person, such as conjugal relationships, openness to life, parent-child relationships, and fraternity.

⁵ “Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of ‘all of us’, made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society.” Ibid, n.7.

The invitation and the mission for the family to become the fundamental vital cell of society necessarily imply a social and political commitment. This is fundamental to its proper nature and action. John Paul II, the Pope of the family, as he liked to be called, also said in this Exhortation: “family, become what you are!”⁶ because it is upon the family’s constant effort to be what it is that the future of humanity depends.

It is commonplace nowadays to say that the family is in crisis. However, before labelling the situation of the family in secularized society as in crisis, we should say that what is truly in crisis is our present day reductionist, unilateral and despotic cosmovision which threatens the person, in his or her identity, relations, public and private dimensions, as well as centrality and reference to this present time. The concept of the person as such is in great crisis. This crisis of the person can be overcome precisely when the family can develop into and be that which it is. In fullness and stability, it is only within the family where the person is adequately loved, welcomed, sought after, rightly placed, and protected. It is there that one uniquely learns the singular role of each individual person in the construction of society.

⁶ *Familiaris Consortio*, n. 17.

It is only within the family, and through the proper and irreplaceable education of parents, that the mystery of the human person (in action and being) is adequately revealed to the individual both in time and pace. Only in the family can we be given an affective and effective union with the past. Similarly, only within the family do we look ahead to the future with a sense of fresh purpose,, enabled, as we are, to make our own the responsibilities and tasks awaiting each of us, while at the same time, always being reconciled to the past, present and future, seen and experienced as a harmonious continuum that traces the path of our development, our happiness and our common good.

Neither progress, or happiness, nor goodness originate in the main from the public or private spheres. They are, above all, realities which are forged and joined to each other, within the nucleus of the family. For this reason, any society that is markedly secularized and dialectical, can only but receive from the natural movement of family-interrelationships (rather than human confrontation or separation) the benefits of authentic progress, happiness and good. Persuaded by this fact, we therefore heartily propose the family as an institution which allows and encourages the integral development of the human person and renders the individual also best enabled to face the challenges of life and of our contemporary society.

Thank you very much.