

## **Building a catholic family: an anthropological and spiritual challenge**

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Eċċellenzi u ħbieb, Insellmilkom,  
Grazzi tal-preżenza tagħkom  
Mhux ser nitkellem bil-Malti, but in English !

I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude to you for this initiative in bringing us together tonight in regard to such themes which are each one at the heart of the preoccupations of the Church and with which we have to deal with as pastors, teachers guides and parents. The theme with which I have been entrusted concerns the institution of the family which encounters difficulties and challenges such that could not have been foreseen only 30 or 40 years ago. There are many ways in which the question of the family may be considered, a specifically Christian way considers and concentrates on the mystery of conjugal and familial love, when it is imbued with the love of God through the means of the sacraments. This has always been the traditional approach of the Church up to *Gaudium et Spes*.

In speaking to its baptized children, the Church necessarily speaks of an economy of grace rooted in baptism and poured out through sacramental marriage. If we had the curiosity to consider the debates in the Church relative to marriage before the 1960's, we would see the conglomeration of questions related to the unity of marriage, fidelity, fecundity, Christian education of children, with the call to the classic means of sanctification: prayer and sacraments, and in particular the Sunday Eucharist. Of course, a certain innovation had already appeared with Pius XI when he spoke, in *Casti Connubi*, of the sanctification of the spouses, thus directing the

attention to the two people entering into the sacrament, and not anymore only to the sacrament in itself. In all of this, however, we recognize that marriage did not interest the theologian and the moralist except in so far as it had canonical consequences. No one could have ever imagined that what was accepted in the great majority of cultures regarding the definition of marriage would soon be the object of a radical reconsideration. From the natural law viewpoint, foundation of roman law in as much as common law, marriage designated for societies a stable union, freely consented to, by one man and one woman, so as to found a family. The sharing by the spouses of their two existences supposed a certain number of accepted realities: a readiness to welcome, raise, and meet the needs of their children. In the countries where there existed a religious marriage side by side with a civil marriage, this disparity did not implicate any difficulty : despite their differences, there was a reciprocal engagement to a common life, for all of life.

The first blow inflicted upon this vision was without a doubt the introduction into the law of the authorization of civil divorce which fostered the mentality that in certain extreme cases such a decision could be taken to end the common life. In spite of the antiquity of this law which goes back to the French Revolution, which then being extended to virtually all of the national legislations in the world, divorce for more than two centuries was still considered as an anomaly, a failure. The proof is that regarding the law, it was always pronounced on the basis of a fault or a grave incapacity imputable to one of the two spouses. We know now that after little time it is like this not anymore. Divorce can be pronounced by “mutual consent”: this is to say that there is a tranquil alternative to a stable conjugal life. To emphasize this, I would say that today, from only the view of civil laws, one could say that one has the choice between marrying without imagining that the marriage could end, or just as well marry in saying to oneself that if problems arise, there will always be the possibility to escape through divorce. It seems to me that we have not yet integrated the importance of this fact in the psychology of youth today who with good faith desire to marry. We will return to this question later.

Unfortunately the question of divorce is not the only one posed. We could describe the last century as the one which in starting the sexual revolution has conducted us toward an ideology today that is still more grave, even if it itself is just a fruit, that which is the ideology of gender. It seems to me useful to delineate some milestone points within this evolution, as this will help us to better understand how we have arrived to the contemporary situation. *Sexual Revolution* refers to all the changes which occurred in western societies and spreading out today there-from, of the vision of sexuality and its exercise, such that there is a sort of moral emancipation. This revolution is of a philosophical, anthropological, moral, and social nature. I have no time to develop this.

To conclude this introductory overview, the characteristics of the present day gender ideology should be noted.

What exactly is *gender*? It is an ideology that attempts to affirm that the differences between man and woman, above and beyond their anatomical particularities, do not correspond to a fixed nature, but are essentially the products of the culture of a particular epoch or determined place. The difference between the sexes is considered as a social convention: everyone can attribute to oneself the sex that they choose. At the level of behavior, everyone can choose heterosexuality, masculine or feminine homosexuality, and bisexuality. It becomes possible to change sexes. The legislations of different countries and international organizations attempt to establish and impose the recognition of new rights: *gender rights*. Permit me to refer to the *United Nations Declaration on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity* which was presented to the general assembly of the United Nations on the 18<sup>th</sup> of December of 2008. The declaration, which was to be adopted as a “resolution”, sparked a declaration of opposition from the part of the Arab League. For the record, 68 countries supported the declaration with 57 countries opposing it, with the two declarations remaining open for new signatures, as neither of the texts were officially adopted by the General Assembly.

The disassociation of sex and gender opens a divide between *nature* and *culture*. It contributes thus to reduce the human being to mere individuality. In this sense, gender takes the logic of the absolutization of individual liberty to the extreme. Let us note that it does this through a negation of nature's most fundamental determinisms. We do not have the time to philosophize regarding the negative metaphysical content of this ideology. It is enough now, to conclude this introduction, to cite Shulamith Firestone: *“Thus the 'natural' is not necessarily a 'human' value. Humanity has begun to transcend Nature: we can no longer justify the maintenance of a discriminatory sex class system on grounds of its origins in nature. Indeed, for pragmatic reasons alone it is beginning to look as if we must get rid of it.”* (Shulamith Firestone, *The dialect of Sex*, Bantam Books, New York, 1970, 10).

As one can already guess, the gender ideology operates to radically put in question the status of the institution of the family and all that it can mean for the common good of society.

### **1. The Nature of the Problem : Anthropological Aspects and Moral Implications**

In all the elements that we have indicated regarding the deconstruction of the family one can discern an ideological intention, aiming to totally change the terms themselves of the conjugal and familial contract. Such an enterprise which seems to be increasingly accelerating manifests an immense deficiency in understanding what human nature is. Before being a moral question, the problem concerns the conception of the nature of man and woman, and thus of human love, which the desired changes reveal. That which characterizes all the ideologies of the world is the abstract character of considering the problems. In what which concerns conjugal and familial love, the formidable gender ideology simply forgets that the family is not merely an idea but on the contrary a practical experience.

a. *The Concrete Experience of the Family*

The family experience teaches us something about love between a man and a woman, but it also raises the deepest questions at the heart of each of us. John Paul II was accustomed to talking about fundamental human experiences, what he sometimes referred to as elementary experiences: among them, he mentioned the deepest inspiration of the human heart: the desire to love and be loved, to which other experiences are tied, such as suffering, fear of death, mourning, the desire for children, the desire to leave something of oneself to one's loved ones, the desire to be useful, and other desires.

The term "experience" should be clarified. In short we can say that the human experience includes both the concrete physical and emotional reality and the intellectual ability to understand and express this reality. It means an experience lived.

Every authentic human experience (i.e. not without intelligibility) ensures the growth of that person through the objective relationship he or she maintains with someone other than him-or herself.

What is true of every human experience, applies particularly to the fundamental experience of love. The being other than oneself can be contemplated in what reveals him or her specifically to the other: his or her body. We recall that it is this fact that John Paul II used as the basis for developing his thoughts on the original experience of the body, in the first part of his catechesis on human love. According to him, love is accompanied by the discovery of the nuptial dimension of the body, perceptible in what is called the "ethos of gift".

Love personalizes all the dynamics at play within a person and unifies them. Eros, far from being an obstacle to the retention of personal mystery, is part of the process of personalization. C. S. Lewis wrote that *Eros makes a man really want, not a woman, but one particular woman [...] the lover desires the Beloved herself [...]*

*Eros thus wonderfully transforms what is par excellence a Need-pleasure into the most Appreciative of all pleasures. (C.S. Lewis, The Four Loves, p. 90).*

Notice how, at all levels of the experience of love, the presence of a truth and goodness is revealed. We are familiar with the theological aspect of this truth of love. John Paul the second believed it to be rooted in God's design for human love, taking inspiration from the conversation, in Matthew 19, between Jesus and the Pharisees on the indissolubility of marriage: to those who referred to the certificate granted by Moses to dismiss their wives, Jesus argued that at the beginning (apo arche) when God made man and woman, it was not so. The beginning here is the principle of love.

It is interesting to see how John Paul II's successor expresses this intrinsic link between love and truth: after having proclaimed, with a certain boldness, the existence of a divine *eros*, Benedict XVI sees the truth of love in a balance between *eros* and *agape*, and not in the separation of these two aspects: *Eros and agape – ascending love and descending love – can never be completely separated. The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized. (Benedict XVI, Deus Caritas Est, 4-9).*

In order to understand the true nature of family, there are two transitions that must be made: from love to marriage, and from marriage to family: the fact of marrying lends the experience of love its social aspect. It takes it beyond the boundaries of interpersonal intimacy and enriches it by equipping it with a new significance. The very existence of the conjugal union (civil or religious) means that society retains an interest in what happens between spouses and considers their relationship to be a good; it will, therefore, by the authority it holds (the authority of the civil society or the church), grant it the means of stability. Society incorporates as a new piece of information the fact that, within it, this particular man and this particular woman have been joined in a unique way that not only commits them for the future but also requires society to take note of this union, to demonstrate its interest and esteem, to help it establish itself or grow stronger, and to view as an

enrichment the possibility that it might expand to become a family. From the point of view of the individuals in question, taking steps publicly that will commit them in the future lends their own union maturity and objectivity. Is there, in fact, better evidence of a person's love than to promise his or her beloved not only the present, but also the future? And is there a better gauge of this desire than to have God as one's witness (religious ceremony) or, in any case, human society?

The second transition is from marriage to family. Let us examine the experience of somebody gradually discovering that he or she is a member of a family. It was the experience of the vast majority of people until a few decades ago: an experience of which we are aware from early childhood. How can we not think at this point of John Paul II's famous *Letter to Families (Gratissimam sane)*, in which he referred, on the subject of the conception and birth of a child, to the genealogy of the person: *Bound up with the family is the genealogy of every individual: the genealogy of the person.* The personal aspect of the event found in its full meaning, in his eyes, in the fact that every person is created in the image and resemblance of God: *When a new person is born of the conjugal union of the two, he brings with him into the world a particular image and likeness of God himself: the genealogy of person is inscribed in the very biology of generation.*(*Gratissimam sane* 9).

From the point of view of the spouses: the coming into existence of one or more children changes the nature of what they have experienced thus far: not only does the child introduce one to the new experience of fatherhood and the other to the new experience of motherhood, but they discover themselves to be father and mother through each other; so it is that their love takes on a new, far broader dimension, taking them well beyond their limits as a couple, to a family unit that transcend their relationship. The transition from marriage to family is therefore a transformation of the spouses' love, not a replacement of that love with something else that would essentially bring with it burdens and restrictions on their previous freedom.

Finally, let us consider the society's point of view. Up until the last few decades, it was commonly accepted in all legislations that the family was founded on

a public commitment between a man and a woman. The recent extension of the terms family and marriage to other forms of social reality: reconstructed families, free unions (with no other basis than the will of the partners) and, in some countries' legislation, unions between people of the same sex, has undoubtedly weakened perception of the structural and founding tie between marriage and the family. Nevertheless, the rights granted to a family founded on the conjugal union have always suggested recognition of the fact that the family unit is a good for society: that a unit of this kind aids the gradual socialization of future adult citizens through their upbringing; that the support given to children and adolescents by their parents helps to ensure the stability of social ties.

To underestimate the family institution is to weaken an essential foundation of life as a society. This is achieved by the absolute privatization of the family, which becomes the realm of privacy, in which people find instant gratification for their emotional desires.

Certainly, at the beginning of this millennium, the family institution retains a presence in a number of societies that it binds and unifies. It is, however, suffering dangerously at the hands of Western Countries that are constantly attempting to impose and export their social and cultural models. Instead of any specifically ethical consideration of the matter, it is with an anthropological model that we are now confronted: one that consists of thinking about people solely in an individualistic manner, as an isolated entity with absolute freedom, ignoring their original social aspect and no longer viewing marriage and the family as a natural society rooted, specifically, in the natural sociality of men and women. The risk socially is the political disregard for safeguarding the conjugal and family institution, which, in the eyes of governments, would no longer be strongly linked to the common good and therefore worthy of being defended and championed. We should also consider here what the disappearance of stability could mean in terms of population and the replacement of generations.



The encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, which has in mind the very future of human society, calls on legislation to honor and encourage the family for reasons that are not only ethical but, above all, concern the very survival of social ties: *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*'(44). *It is within the culture of the family that society will find the means to ensure cohesion and to develop fundamental relationships of solidarity, as well as reasons to place hope in the future.*

Another aspect to deepen is the personal difficulty of an enduring engagement: From the point of view of young candidates to marriage, one observes a growing difficulty to assume an enduring engagement. The existence in the large number of legal systems of the possibility to divorce has contributed to the loss of the sense of indissolubility and beauty of marriage. This loss arises when marriage candidates fail to understand the difference between a marriage forever, i.e. until the death of one of the two, and a marriage that lasts as long as possible. It rests on the thought that if things go wrong, then you can do the same as many others and get a divorce. Obviously the engaged couple do not express themselves so candidly, but from the conversation with the priest or another couple it emerges how necessary it is to clarify this point.

There is often the idea that indissolubility is a requirement imposed solely by the Church. Very few engaged couples (and very few providing guidance) understand that the character of indissolubility belongs to the very essence of love between a man and a woman united in matrimony. It is an intrinsic quality of this love. This has been the belief of the overwhelming majority of civilizations throughout history. Both in countries that apply Roman Law and in those where Common Law is traditional, such a conviction has inspired the laws of most countries until only a few

decades ago. There are various ways to understand indissolubility. On a rational level it is the nature of a gift that cannot be taken back. Moreover, the intimate union of two spouses creates between them a reality which introduces a new situation: the existence of a couple recognized by everyone and then of an established family. The eventual existence of children teaches something about the reality of marriage that transcends the individual subjectivity of the spouses.

During their preparation time one has to tell the engaged couple explicitly that the indissolubility of marriage requires a genuine commitment on their part for all of their life: this commitment is the *sine qua non* condition for the validity of the sacrament. When they ask the Church for its sacrament they must be helped to understand that their intention to do right places their conscience before God.

*b. Openness to Life: Expectations of the Spouses and God's Plan.*

It is essential to consider the attitude of the engaged couple towards human life. Marriage blessed by the Church is completed with the transmission of life. It is only right and proper that their intentions in this regard be clear to whom has the mission to help them to prepare. Openness to life is the point at which converge, on the one hand, the expectation of the spouses and, on the other, the plan of God the Creator. Engaged couples should be helped to understand that when planning to have a child and performing the acts for transmitting life, they do so as partners of the Creator. The Bible considers having a child a special blessing. The desire to have a child is not only a natural yearning held deep in the heart of every man and woman, but it is also an act of recognition of the freedom of God the Creator who alone has the power to call to life a new human being from the union of the two spouses. It is desirable to help marriage candidates to devote some time to ponder the greatness of the act of making oneself available to achieve such a deed, becoming God's partners through a dignified, free and unselfish procreation.

Sometimes the following questions arise: How many children shall we have? When can you have your first child? How do you know when procreation is responsible or not? For all such questions the assistance of married mentor couples can be of great benefit to the priest, provided that they can offer a credible example of the generous love of life, in full adherence with the Church's teaching.

A key element when the issue of birth control comes up is to confirm clearly and tactfully the teaching of the Magisterium of the Church. The engaged couple must be made aware that contraceptive practices, also used with the best of intentions, seriously alter the physical expression of their love and that is why they are contrary to God's will.

One difficulty in this area comes from the lack of clarity of many educators, priests or married mentor couples about the moral implications of the teachings of the Magisterium of the Church on human love.

Since the preparation time is reduced, it is not always possible to give sufficient ethical information on non-natural means for the transmission of human life (artificial insemination). It may occur that a question arises in this regard and that those who are assisting in the preparation must be able to respond with clarity and sobriety about the needs of the Church's moral teaching in this area.

When the issue of the transmission of life is treated with care and simplicity, it is possible to show the beauty of the conjugal act through the richness of its dual meaning: unitive and procreative. If you talk with respect and conviction it becomes easier to stress that the two dimensions of the conjugal act cannot be separated deliberately without affecting the authentic beauty of the marriage union.

## **II- The Catholic Response**

### **1) The essential principles**

*a- The first demand is that of mutual consent.*

The reciprocity of the gift is an objective verification of love and certainly is a condition for the happiness of the spouses. This liberty does not cause a problem for secularized society, but one often forgets that the public character of the exchange of consent, adopted by civil laws and which offers a certain guarantee that the marriage has been freely contracted, finds its origin within the proper laws of the Church (*Tametsi* Decree). This canonical disposition, which aimed to combat clandestine marriages, has contributed to protecting women from possible abuses.

*b- The second demand is that of the irrevocable character of the conjugal covenant.*

Even there, one imagines a distortion that the indissolubility of the bond is a particularity of the Catholic Church: It arises from the sacramental nature of marriage. If it is true that the sacrament reinforces and consolidates indissolubility, it does not bring it into existence: Indissolubility is born of the interior demand of a covenant between the spouses. It is not an exterior addition, but rather on the contrary a permanent quality proper to a marriage validly contracted. Why? Because marriage is a personal gift in which the spouses commit themselves totally to each other. This totality does not reduce the psychophysical global nature of their persons: It necessarily includes temporality. It commits for the future, and it commits for always. Today, in the measure to which we have two divergent approaches, one Christian that presumes the irrevocable character of marriage, the other secular that accepts by means of divorce the legal possibility of new engagements, it befits us to accept that it is in the first approach that one today may contemplate the naturally integral beauty of conjugal love. Fidelity is a natural dimension of love: It gives love the capacity to overcome the challenge of time.

*c- The third demand is the opening of this union to the transmission of life*

Within the design of the Creator, the stable and irrevocable union of a man and a woman is oriented not only toward the personal good of the spouses, but also to the service of life. The transmission of life does not depend always upon the will of the spouses, but opening to the transmission of life -- in order to take up again the terms used in the encyclical *Humanae vitae* -- is an interior attitude that is always accessible: It is about the loving availability to present acts of which the possible consequence is the coming into existence of a new human being. It befits us to remember that it is a mission, in the Biblical sense, that is to say a benediction: *Be fruitful and multiply* is not a categorical imperative, but rather is primarily a benediction that, when it is welcomed, opens the heart of the spouses to the joy of the gift (the gift of life), and to the joy of participating in the act of the Creator (procreation).

According to John Paul II, the opening of a conjugal act to the eventual gift of life gives human love its fullness of beauty. He called the inseparability of the two unitive and procreative dimensions of spousal union the *ontological truth* of the conjugal act. Far from being only a moral condition for the proper exercise of the sexual faculty, it connotated, according to the pope, the beauty of human sexuality that permits man and woman to unite themselves to the divine action of the Creator. The fact that this act of procreation may be, in its authentic form, an act of love contributes within Christian thought to associating Creation and Love in God. God created by love. He creates because He loves. The divine act of Creation is the superabundant expression of an infinite, transcendent, and personal Love. It is suitable that to this love of God corresponds an act that also may be, on the part of the spouses, an authentic love expressed within all of the dimensions of their humanity.

There is a fourth demand that concerns the Christian education to be given to the children. We cannot develop this fundamental point here. It is an essential condition for the family to grow in sanctification.

## **2- The sanctification of the Family**

I would like to mention different elements that should be deepened:

- discovering of the sacramentality of marriage;
- sacramental life: Eucharist and Sacrament of the Reconciliation;
- prayer in the family;
- education of the children;
- transmission of the Christian Faith.

Christian marriage has as its particular vocation to express a little of the mystery that unites Christ the Spouse to His Church. The capacity to signify and to actualize the union of Christ and the Church belongs in essence to this community of life and of love between man and woman that is marriage. In order to comprehend it, it befits us to mention again the notion of this primordial union: It is defined also as a community of life and love; it transforms by means of a transmission of divine goods by Christ, by means of a communication of eternal life and eternal love. Communicated life and love, by reason of their origin and their divine nature, seal a union that is necessarily definitive. Between Christ and the Church, we have an eternal union: It is for eternity that Christ unites Himself with those who are incorporated to Him. The union of Christ and the Church must be contemplated within the concrete humanity of the Person of Jesus Christ and within the effective gift of His life on the Cross. We find there at that time the gift that the Word makes of Himself to humanity (mystery of the Incarnation) and the gift that Jesus, in his human nature, seals at Calvary by the blood and the water gushing from his side. One often compares the birth of the Church from the Side of Christ with the birth of Eve from the side of Adam. The new Eve springs forth from the side of the New Adam. The relationship between the gift of Christ and the gift that the spouses make of their life is not only symbolic: The one and the other are two mysteries of love and of the transmission of life. The Sacrifice transforms into a definitive victory over death, and thus into a victory over all of the infidelities of sin. We are in the presence

of divine fidelity, but expressed concretely in human nature. The irrevocable, indissoluble, and indestructible Covenant of Calvary has rendered human nature capable of such an irrevocable, indissoluble, and indestructible union.

The Church is in real terms united with her Spouse: Impregnated by the Gift of the Holy Spirit, she is that place in the world where Christ abides and gives Himself to be encountered and loved.

This primordial mystery enlightens us concerning the truth of the sacramentality of marriage, the origin of which must be found indissolubly in Christ and in the Church. The sacrament of marriage that the Church has the charge of celebrating is an act of Christ. The totality of norms that condition its validity is faithful testimony of this love of Christ who, according to the terms of Vatican Council II, *comes to the encounter of Christian spouses and abides with them so that the spouses, by their mutual help, might love each other with a perpetual fidelity, as He Himself has loved the Church and has delivered Himself over for her.*

The Love of Christ for His Church is, by nature, a love that pardons. His fidelity expresses itself by the incessant purification that fills Her by His offering, constantly rendered present and communicated. The Eucharistic sacrifice is the place where this union between Christ and the Church is reactualized.

It is necessary that the love of the spouses be sacramentally invigorated by this divine source in order to become a love that always is more capable of pardoning. Forgiveness is not only an act by which a grave offense is remitted. It is also a disposition of love that embraces the weaknesses, the sins, and the insufficiencies of the conjoined spouse. In this sense, it is an expression of the conjugal *fides*. Forgiveness is a mode of existing of the *communio personarum*; it reactualizes the initial alliance of the spouses. To say *I forgive you* is to say *I make a covenant again with you*. The insistence of the Church on the necessity for the spouses and the members of the families to forgive each other and to offer them the true means of reconciliation (the sacrament of penance) is an expression of her prudential pastoral care.

For these motives, pardon is inscribed within the logic of love because it is a gift. It renders perfect the expression of love in the measure to which it expands the limits of it. All love is destined one day or another to come up against the injury of offense. Love's capacity to offer eventual forgiveness attests to its authenticity and in so doing verifies its origin. A love that excludes pardon is by definition destined to die. Ever since the original fall of man, it is always through a pardon offered that the love of God has been transmitted to men. God constantly remakes again His covenant, primarily with His People, and then with each one of His sons. He ceaselessly reintroduces them into His friendship. When the spouses are brought to pardon each other, they bring about the sublime testimony that love is stronger than death, and they carry within it, for this reason, the assurance of eternal life.