



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 1 December 1999

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. In order to be properly prepared for the Great Jubilee, the Christian community should be seriously committed to rediscovering the value of the family and marriage (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 51). This is all the more urgent since today this value is questioned at many levels of culture and society.

Not only are certain models of family life being challenged, which change under the pressure of social transformations and new working conditions. It is the concept itself of the family, as a community founded on marriage between a man and a woman, that is attacked in the name of ethical relativism, which is spreading in wide areas of public opinion and in civil legislation itself.

The crisis of the family becomes, in turn, a cause of the crisis in society. Many pathological phenomena - from loneliness to violence and drugs - are also due to the fact that families have lost their identity and purpose. Wherever the family falls apart, society loses its connective tissue with disastrous consequences that affect individuals, especially the weakest: from children to adolescents, to the handicapped, the sick and the elderly, etc.

2. It is therefore necessary to encourage a reflection that will help not only believers, but all people of good will to rediscover the value of marriage and the family. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we read: "The family is the *original cell of social life*. It is the natural society in which husband and wife are called to give themselves in love and in the gift of life. Authority, stability and a life of relationships within the family constitute the foundations for freedom, security and fraternity within society" (n. 2207).

Reason itself can rediscover the family by listening to the moral law inscribed in the human heart. As a community "which is founded and given life by love" (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, n. 18), the family draws its strength from the definitive covenant of love by which a man and a woman give themselves to each other, becoming together God's collaborators in the gift of life.

On the basis of this fundamental relationship of love, the relationships that are established with and among the other family members must also be inspired by love and marked by affection and mutual support. Far from closing the family in on itself, genuine love opens it to all society, since the little domestic family and the great family of all human beings are not in opposition, but in a close and primordial relationship. At the root of all this is the very mystery of God, which the family evokes in a special way. Indeed, as I wrote a few years ago in my *Letter to Families*, "in the light of the New Testament it is possible to discern how the primordial model of the family is to be sought in God himself, in the Trinitarian mystery of his life. The divine 'We' is the eternal pattern of the human 'we', especially of that 'we' formed by the man and the woman created in the divine image and likeness" (n. 6).

3. God's fatherhood is the transcendent source of all human fatherhood and motherhood. As we lovingly contemplate it, we feel impelled to rediscover that wealth of communion, procreation and life that characterize marriage and the family.

In families, interpersonal relations develop in which each member is entrusted with a specific task, although without rigid patterns. I do not intend to refer here to those social and functional roles which are expressions of specific historical and cultural contexts. I am thinking, rather, of the importance, in the mutual conjugal relationship and the shared parental commitment, of man and woman as they are called to realize their natural characteristics in the context of a deep, enriching and respectful communion. "To this 'unity of the two' God has entrusted not only the work of procreation and family life, but the creation of history itself" (*Letter to women*, n. 8).

4. Children, then, must be seen as the greatest expression of the communion between man and woman, or rather of their reciprocal receiving/giving which is fulfilled and transcended in a "third", in the child himself. A child is a blessing from God. He transforms husband and wife into father and mother (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, n. 21). Both "come out of themselves" and express themselves in a person, which, although the fruit of their love, goes beyond them.

The ideal expressed in the priestly prayer of Jesus, in which he asks that his unity with the Father be extended to the disciples (cf. Jn 17: 11) and to those who believe through their word (cf. Jn 17: 20-21), applies to the family in a special way. Christian families, "domestic churches" (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 11), are especially called to achieve this ideal of perfect communion.

5. Therefore, as we reach the end of this year dedicated to meditation on God the Father, let us rediscover the family in the light of the divine fatherhood. Our contemplation of God the Father

prompts an urgent concern which is particularly in keeping with the challenges of this moment in history.

Looking at God the Father means understanding the family as a place where life is welcomed and nurtured, a workshop of brotherhood where, with the help of Christ's Spirit, "a new fraternity and solidarity, a true reflection of the mystery of mutual self-giving and receiving proper to the Most Holy Trinity" (*Evangelium vitae*, n. 76) is created among men.

From the experience of renewed Christian families, the Church herself can learn how to foster among all the members of the community a more family-like dimension, by accepting and encouraging a more human and fraternal style of relationship (cf. *Familiaris consortio*, n. 64).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

I warmly welcome the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience. I pray that you will be strengthened in faith, hope and love during this season of Advent, so that you may celebrate Christmas and enter the Jubilee Year with renewed hearts and minds. Upon all present I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.
