



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO A GROUP OF BISHOPS FROM THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
ON THEIR «AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM» VISIT**

Saturday, 24 September 1983

Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

1. It is a real joy for me to welcome you to this collegial gathering in which we come together in the name of Christ, who is “the chief Shepherd” (1 *Petr.* 5, 4) of the Church and the Lord and Saviour of us all. And as we assemble here on the occasion of your “ad Limina” visit, I wish to reflect with you on one of the most important areas of our common pastoral responsibility: *Christian marriage and family life*.

In the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, the Bishops of the Second Vatican Council stated that “the well-being of the individual person and of human and Christian society is intimately linked with the healthy condition of the community set up by marriage and the family” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 47). We are all aware of *certain contemporary trends* that seem to threaten the stability, if not the very existence, of the family: a shift of emphasis toward the comfort of the individual over the well-being of the family as society’s basic social unit, increasing divorce rates, attitudes of sexual permissiveness, and the suggestion that other types of relationships can replace marriage and the family.

In the face of these attitudes we have *the important mission of proclaiming Christ’s Good News about Christian married love*, the identity and worth of the family, and the importance of its mission in the Church and in the world. Accordingly, in *Familiaris Consortio*, I noted that the Bishops should exercise particular solicitude for the family, “devoting to it personal interest, care, time, personnel and resources, but above all personal support for the families and for all those who, in the various diocesan structures, assist him in the pastoral care of the family” (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II *Familiaris Consortio*, 73).

2. This pastoral responsibility is based on the fact that *Christian family life is founded on the sacrament of marriage*, which is “the specific source and original means of sanctification for Christian couples and families” (*Ibid.* 56). It is up to us, together with our priests, to offer to the faithful the richness of the Church’s teaching on the sacrament of marriage. This teaching, when explained well, is so very powerful, presenting as it does the covenant of God’s relationship with his people and of *Christ’s relationship with the Church*. It is of extreme importance for Christian couples to be aware of the divine truth that, in their human love elevated and sanctified by sacramental marriage, they actually “signify and partake in that fruitful love between Christ and his Church” (*Lumen Gentium*, 11).

Because Christian marriage expresses the relationship of Christ and the Church, it possesses the qualities of *unity, permanence or indissolubility, fidelity and fruitfulness*. In the words of the Second Vatican Council we proclaim: “The intimate partnership of married life and love has been established by the Creator and qualified by his laws, and is rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent. Hence by that human act whereby spouses mutually bestow and accept each other, a relationship arises which by divine will and in the eyes of society too is a lasting one” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 48).

3. *The primary responsibilities* of married couples are described in both *Gaudium et Spes* and *Humanae Vitae* in terms of *developing conjugal love and pursuing responsible parenthood*. Basic to the marriage relationship is that special interpersonal love which the spouses give to one another. The Church proclaims this conjugal love as eminently human, involving the good of the whole person and enriching and ennobling both husband and wife in their Christian life. This love creates a special unity between a man and a woman, resembling the unity between Christ and his Church. *Gaudium et Spes* assures us that married love is caught up in God’s love and is affected by Christ’s redemptive power and the saving activity of the Church. As a result, the spouses are led to God and assisted and strengthened in the sublime role of being a father or a mother (Cfr. *ibid.*).

Marriage is also directed toward building a family. The spouses share with God in the continuing work of creation. Conjugal love is rooted in divine love, and is meant to be creative and life-sustaining. It is through spiritual union and the union of their bodies that the couple fulfill their procreative role by *giving life*, love and a sense of security to their children.

Giving life and helping their children to reach maturity through *education* are among *the primary privileges and responsibilities* of married couples. We know that married couples usually look forward to parenthood, but are sometimes impeded from achieving their hopes and desires by social conditions, by personal circumstances or even by inability to beget new life. But the Church encourages couples to be generous and hopeful, to realize that parenthood is a privilege and that each child bears witness to the couple’s own love for each other, to their generosity and to their openness to God. They must be encouraged to see the child as an enrichment of their marriage

and a gift of God to themselves and to their other children.

4. Couples should thoughtfully and prayerfully make their decisions regarding the spacing of births and the size of their family. In pursuing these decisions they need to be attentive to the teaching of the Church regarding *the inherent connection between the unitive and procreative dimensions of the marriage act* (Cfr. PAULI VI [*Humanae Vitae*](#), 12). Couples must be urged to avoid any action that threatens a life already conceived, that denies or frustrates their procreative power, or violates the integrity of the marriage act.

5. As Bishops, together with your priests and others in the family apostolate, you are called upon to help couples know and understand the reasons for *the Church's teaching on human sexuality*. This teaching can only be understood in the light of God's plan for human love and marriage as they relate to creation and Redemption. Let us often present to our people the uplifting and exhilarating affirmation of human love, telling them that "God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion. Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being" (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II [*Familiaris Consortio*](#), 11).

Thus, in order to avoid any trivialization or desecration of sexuality, we must teach that sexuality transcends the purely biological sphere and concerns the innermost being of the human persons as such. Sexual love is truly human only if it is an integral part of the love by which a man and a woman commit themselves totally to one another until death. *This full self-giving is possible only in marriage.*

It is this teaching, based on the Church's understanding of the dignity of the human person and the fact that *sex is a gift of God*, that must be communicated to both married and engaged couples, and indeed to the whole Church. This teaching must be at the basis of all education in sexuality and chastity. It must be communicated to parents, who have the primary responsibility for the education of their children, and also to pastors and religious teachers who collaborate with parents in the fulfillment of their responsibility.

6. A special and important part of your ministry to families has to do with *natural family planning*. The number of couples successfully using the natural methods is constantly growing. But much more concerted effort is needed. As stated in [*Familiaris Consortio*](#): "the ecclesial community at the present time must take on the task of instilling conviction and offering practical help to those who wish to live out their parenthood in a truly responsible way . . . This implies a broader, more decisive and more systematic effort to make the natural methods of regulating fertility known, respected and applied" (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II [*Familiaris Consortio*](#), 35).

Those couples who choose the natural methods perceive the profound difference - both anthropological and moral - between contraception and natural family planning. Yet they may

experience difficulties; indeed they often go through a certain conversion in becoming committed to the use of the natural methods, and they stand in need of competent instruction, encouragement and pastoral counselling and support. We must be sensitive to their struggles and have a feeling for the needs that they experience. We must encourage them to continue their efforts with generosity, confidence and hope. As Bishops we have the charism and the pastoral responsibility to make our people aware of *the unique influence that the grace of the sacrament of marriage has on every aspect of married life, including sexuality* (Cfr. *ibid.* 33). The teaching of Christ's Church is not only light and strength for God's people, but it uplifts their hearts in gladness and hope.

Your Episcopal Conference has established a special program to expand and coordinate efforts in the various dioceses. But the success of such an effort requires the abiding pastoral interest and support of each Bishop in his own diocese, and I am deeply grateful to you for what you do in this important apostolate.

7. The family is rightly described as *the domestic Church*. As such, it transmits the faith and the Christian value system from one generation to the next. Parents are called to be involved in the education of their children, precisely as young Christians. The family is also the center of sacramental catechesis. Increasingly, parents are called upon to take an active role in preparing their children for Baptism, First Confession and First Communion. Married couples are also active in programs of marriage preparation. All of this touches *the role of the family in sharing, in the life and mission of the Church*. With all our hearts we should encourage family prayer and a family sacramental life, centered around the Eucharist. For the vitality of the Christian family derives from its union with Christ in the life of grace, which is nourished by the liturgy and by family prayer.

8. The Christian family also has a responsibility to participate in *the development of society*. As Bishops in the United States you have *a long history of devoted service to families with special needs*, particularly through your Catholic social service agencies. Your diocesan agencies have also shown a special concern for the poor, for racial, ethnic and cultural minorities, as well as for the disadvantaged. But as the 1980 Synod of Bishops urged, and as was pointed out in *Familiaris Consortio*, "the social role of families is called upon to find expression also in the form of *political intervention*: families should be the first to take steps to see that the laws and institutions of the State not only do not offend but support and positively defend the rights and duties of the family" (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II *Familiaris Consortio*, 44). Your Episcopal Conference has been diligent in fostering this role through its pro-life activity, and especially the annual "Respect Life Program", which begins next week for the current year.

9. The pastoral challenge is great, and it requires your personal and constant leadership, the collaboration of priests and religious, and the generous and dedicated efforts of the Catholic laity, especially families. In a country as vast as yours, the task is very complex. But again I commend to you the recommendation of *Familiaris Consortio*, that is, that the Episcopal Conferences should

formulate a *Directory for the Pastoral Care for the Family*, which will include the content of the preparation for marriage, and that priests and seminarians will be given special preparation for pastoral work with families. Specifically for this reason a special Institute has been established for the study of marriage and family life at the Pontifical Lateran University.

I am aware of your many other pastoral responsibilities and concerns, but from my pastoral journeys I am very much convinced of the vitality of Christian family life even in the face of so many tensions and pressures. I urge you to show the family special love and concern, to collaborate with others in supporting family life, and to proclaim constantly to your people that “the future of humanity passes by way of the family” (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II *Familiaris Consortio*, 86).

10. We simply cannot accept the contemporary pursuit of exaggerated convenience and comfort, for as Christians we must heed the vigorous exhortation of Saint Paul: “Do not conform yourselves to this age” (*Rom.* 12, 2). We must realize that in our struggles to overcome the negative influences of modern society we are identified with Christ the Lord, who by his suffering and death has redeemed the world. Thus we can better impart to our people the message of the Second Vatican Council that in following Christ, who is the principle of life, “by the sacrifices and joys of their vocation and through their faithful love, married people will become witnesses of the mystery of love which the Lord revealed to the world by his death and Resurrection” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 52). Yes, dear Brothers, *marriage and the family are closely linked to the Paschal Mystery* of the Lord Jesus. And human conjugal love remains for ever a great sacramental expression of the fact that “Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her” (*Eph.* 5, 25). In the power of the Holy Spirit let us communicate this gift of God’s truth to the world.

The proclamation of this truth is our contribution to married couples; it is the proof of our pastoral love for families; and it will be the source of immense vitality for the Church of God in this generation and for generations yet to come. With determination, confidence and hope let us proclaim Christ’s Good News for married love and family life. And may Mary, the Mother of Jesus, be with us in this apostolic task.

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