



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE MEMBERS OF THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE FAMILY

Friday, 4 June 1999

Your Eminences,

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,

Distinguished Members of the Pontifical Council for the Family,

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

1. It is a great joy for me to receive you on the occasion of the 14th plenary assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Family and the Meeting for reflection on the theme "*The Paternity of God and Paternity in the Family*", which has such great theological and pastoral importance. I greet you all affectionately, especially those who are taking part for the first time in a meeting organized by your dicastery. I thank the President, Cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo, for his kind words in the name of you all.

The theme of fatherhood, which you have chosen for this plenary meeting, refers to the third year of preparation for the Great Jubilee, dedicated precisely to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is worthwhile reflecting on this theme, since in today's family the father figure is in danger of becoming more and more hidden or even absent. In the light of the paternity of God "from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named" (Eph 3:15), human fatherhood and motherhood acquire all their meaning, dignity and greatness. "Human fatherhood and motherhood, while remaining biologically similar to that of other living beings in nature, contain in an essential and unique way a 'likeness' to God which is the basis of the family as a community of human life, as a community of persons united in love (*communio personarum*)" (*Gratissimam sane*, n. 6).

2. We can still hear the vivid echo of the recent celebration of Pentecost, which moves us to proclaim with hope St Paul's affirmation: "All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (Rom 8:14). Just as the Holy Spirit is the life of the Church (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 7), he must also be the life of the family, the *little domestic church*. For every family he must be the inner principle of vitality and energy, which keeps the flame of conjugal love ever burning in the spouses'

reciprocal gift of self.

It is the Holy Spirit who leads us to the heavenly Father and enables the trusting, jubilant prayer "*Abba, Father!*" (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6) to rise from our hearts. The Christian family is called to be distinguished for its atmosphere of shared prayer, in which God is addressed with the freedom of children and called by the affectionate name of "our Father"! May the Holy Spirit help us discover the Father's face as a perfect model of fatherhood in the family.

For some time now the family institution has been under repeated attack. These attacks are all the more dangerous and insidious since they ignore the irreplaceable value of the family based on marriage. They have reached the point of proposing false alternatives to the family and of calling for legislative recognition of them. But when laws, which should be at the service of the family, a fundamental good for society, turn against it, they acquire alarming destructive power.

Thus, in some countries there is a desire to impose on society so-called "*de facto unions*", reinforced by a series of legal effects which erode the very meaning of the family institution. "De facto unions" are marked by instability and the lack of the irrevocable commitment which gives rise to rights and duties and respects the dignity of the man and woman. Instead, there is a desire to give juridical value to a will that is far removed from any form of definitive bond. With these premises how can we hope for truly responsible procreation which is not limited to giving life, but also includes that training and education which only the family can guarantee in all its dimensions? Arrangements of this sort ultimately put the meaning of human fatherhood, of fatherhood in the family, seriously at risk. This happens in various ways when families are not well established.

3. When the Church explains the truth about marriage and the family, she does not do so only on the basis of the data of Revelation, but also by taking into account the demands of the natural law, which are at the foundation of the true good of society and its members. In fact, it is important for children to be born and raised in a home where parents are united in a faithful covenant.

It is quite possible to imagine other forms of relationship and cohabitation between the sexes, but none of these, despite some people's contrary opinion, offers a real juridical alternative to matrimony, but rather a weakening of it. In the so-called "*de facto unions*", we see a more or less serious lack of mutual commitment, a paradoxical desire to maintain the autonomy of one's will within a relationship which should in fact be relational. What is missing in non-marital cohabitation is trusting openness to a future life together, which love must create and build and which it is the law's specific task to guarantee. In other words, it is precisely the law which is lacking, not in its extrinsic dimension as a mere set of norms, but in its most genuine anthropological dimension as a guarantee of human coexistence and its dignity.

Moreover, when "*de facto unions*" claim the right to adopt, they clearly show their disregard for the child's welfare and the minimum conditions he is owed for proper upbringing. Lastly, "*de facto*

unions" between homosexuals are a deplorable distortion of what should be a communion of love and life between a man and a woman in a reciprocal gift open to life.

4. Today, especially in wealthier nations, there is a widespread fear of being parents coupled with a disregard for the right of children to be conceived within the context of total human selfgiving, which is an indispensable prerequisite for their peaceful and harmonious growth.

Thus, an alleged right to fatherhood or motherhood at any cost is asserted, and its exercise is sought through technical means involving a series of morally illicit manipulations.

Another feature of the cultural context in which we live is the tendency of many parents to renounce their role in order to be merely friends to their children, refraining from warning and correcting them even when this is necessary for teaching them the truth, albeit with every affection and tenderness. It therefore should be stressed that the education of children is a sacred duty and a shared task of the parents, both father and mother: it requires warmth, closeness, dialogue and example. In the home parents are called to represent the good Father in heaven, the one perfect model to inspire them.

Fatherhood and motherhood, by the will of God himself, intimately share in his creative power and consequently have an intrinsic reciprocal relationship. On this subject I wrote in the *Letter to Families*: "Motherhood necessarily implies fatherhood, and in turn, fatherhood necessarily implies motherhood. This is the result of the duality bestowed by the Creator upon human beings 'from the beginning'" (*Gratissimam sane*, n. 7).

This is another reason why the relationship between man and woman is the cornerstone of social relationships: while it is the source of new human beings, it closely binds husband and wife, who have become one flesh, to each other and, through them, their respective families.

5. Dear brothers and sisters, as I thank you for your dedication to defending the family and its rights, I assure you of a constant remembrance in my prayer. May God make fruitful the efforts of all those who, in every part of the world, are devoted to this cause. May he help the family, the bulwark and defence of humanity itself, to withstand every attack.

With these sentiments, I am pleased now to renew my warm invitation to families to participate in the Third World Meeting of Families, which will be held in Rome during the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. I also extend this invitation to the associations and movements, especially those that are *pro-life* and *pro-family*. In the light of the mystery of Nazareth, we will reflect on fatherhood and motherhood from the standpoint of the theme I have chosen for the occasion: "*Children, the springtime of the family and of society*". The mission of parents, called through an act of love to cooperate with the heavenly Father in the birth of new human beings, God's children, is a great and noble one.

May Our Lady, Mother of Life and Queen of the Family, make every home a place of peace and love in the image of the Family of Nazareth.

May you also be comforted by my blessing, which I willingly impart to all of you here and to all throughout the world who have the family's destiny at heart.