



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
AT THE PRAYER VIGIL OF FAMILIES
IN ST. PETER'S SQUARE**

Saturday 20 October 2001

1. *Dear families* of this beloved nation who have gathered in Rome to strengthen your faith and your vocation, I greet you one by one, clasping you in a great embrace. I greet the guest families from Eastern Europe whom I have met. I extend my greeting to Cardinal Camillo Ruini, President of the Italian Bishops' Conference and to the other Cardinals and Bishops present, as well as to the political and civil authorities.

I welcome you with affection to this square, the heart of the universal Church. This evening it has been transformed, thanks to the festive presence of so many Christian families, into *a great domestic Church*. I thank you for your warm greeting and for the joy you give me by your heartfelt welcome.

This meeting is *a new stage* of the journey that saw us gathered here in St Peter's Square last year, with many of you and with many other families from across the world, to celebrate the Great Jubilee. We are here to confirm your journey and to keep our gaze fixed on Jesus Christ, the One who is our "Light, and who calls you to shed the light of your witness on humanity's way along the paths of the new millennium!" (John Paul II, *Address to the Third World Meeting of Families*, 14 October 2000, n. 9; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 18 October 2000, p. 3).

2. For this meeting you have chosen the theme: "*Believing in the Family is Building the Future*". This demanding theme invites us to reflect on *the truth about the family* and, at the same time, on its *role for the future of humanity*. *Certain questions* can guide us in this reflection: "Why believe in the family?", and further, "what family should we believe in?", and lastly, "who should believe in the family?". To answer the *first question*, we must start from an original and fundamental truth: "*God firmly believes in the family*". From the very first, from the "beginning", by creating the human being

in his image and likeness, male and female, his intention was to *centre his plan* on the reality of the love between man and woman (cf. Gn 1,27). The whole story of salvation is an impassioned dialogue between *the faithful God*, whom the prophets often describe as the betrothed or the bridegroom, and the *chosen community*, the bride, often tempted by infidelity but always awaited, sought out and reclaimed by her Lord (cf. Is 62,4-5; Hos 1-3). So great and strong is the Father's confidence in the family that with the family in mind, he also sent his Son, the Bridegroom, who came to redeem his Bride, the Church and in her, every human person and every family (cf. *Letter to families*, n. 18).

Yes, dear families, "the Bridegroom is with you!". From His presence, welcomed and responded to, flows that special extraordinary sacramental power that makes your intimate union of life an *effective sign of love between Christ and the Church* and makes you as it were *responsible subjects and leaders* of ecclesial and social life.

3. The fact that God established the family as the foundation of human coexistence and the paradigm of ecclesial life, calls forth from you *a determined and convinced response*. In *Familiaris consortio*, written 20 years ago this month, I said: "Family, become what you are" (cf. n. 17). Today I add, "Believe in what you are"; believe in your vocation to be a luminous sign of God's love.

This meeting enables us to thank God for the gifts he has lavished upon his Church and upon families, which in recent years have cherished the teachings of the Council and those of *Familiaris consortio*. We must also be grateful to the Church in Italy and to her pastors for having made a crucial contribution to the reflection on marriage and the family, with important documents such as *Evangelization and the Sacrament of Marriage* which, since 1975, has been a real turning point in family ministry, and especially, the *Directory of the Family Apostolate*, published in July 1993.

4. *The second question* leads us to reflect on a very timely aspect, because today *such different opinions* on the concept of family are being professed that one can be misled into believing that there is no longer any criterion to qualify or define it. As well as a religious dimension, the family also has *a social dimension*. The family's value and role are equally obvious from the social point of view. Today, unfortunately, we are witnessing the spread of *distorted and particularly dangerous visions of the family*, put forth by relativistic ideologies and universally peddled by the media. In fact, for the good of the State and of society, it is fundamentally important *to safeguard the family founded on marriage*, accepted as an act that seals the reciprocal commitment, expressed and supervised publicly, the full assumption of responsibility towards the other and to the children with its entitlement to rights and duties, as the primary social nucleus on which the nation founds its life.

If we lose the conviction that *the family founded on marriage* cannot in any way be equated with other forms of emotional relationship, we undermine the very structure of society and its juridical

foundation. The harmonious development and progress of a people depend to a large extent on its *ability to invest in the family*, by guaranteeing at the legislative, social and cultural level the full and effective realization of its functions and duties.

Dear families, in a democratic system, it becomes fundamentally necessary to formulate the reasons that motivate the defence of the family based on marriage. *It is the principal source of hope for the future of humanity*, as is expressed well in the second part of the theme chosen for this meeting. Thus we hope that individuals, communities and social entities *increasingly believe in the family founded on marriage*, a place of love and authentic solidarity.

5. In fact, if we are to look to the future with confidence, it is indispensable that *everyone believe in the family*, by embracing the responsibilities that correspond to his own role. Thus we responded to the *third question* with which we started: "who should believe in the family?". First of all I would like to stress that the *first to guarantee* the good of the family are *the spouses themselves*, either by living responsibly their daily commitments, joys and efforts or by adding their voice, together with associations or groups and cultural initiatives, to social and legislative petitions capable of sustaining family life. Everyone knows and appreciates the work done in these years by the Forum of Family Associations. I express my appreciation of all they have done and also of the initiative called *Family for family*, which intends to build up relations of solidarity between Italian families and families in the countries of Eastern Europe.

Politicians and government leaders have a special responsibility. They have to put into effect the norm of the Constitution and seriously consider the solid requests of the people, the majority of whom have families whose union is founded on the bond of matrimony. It is therefore right to anticipate legislation that focuses on the dignity of the human person and on the proper application of the principle of subsidiarity between the State and families, legislation that can lead to the solution of questions that are important and in many ways crucial for the country's future.

6. It is particularly important and urgent to arrange for *a scholastic and educational system* that has at heart the family and its freedom to choose. This does not mean, as some people erroneously think, taking from the State schools to give to private schools, but rather it means to overcome an obvious injustice that penalizes all families by preventing their effective freedom of initiative and choice. Thus there are additional burdens for those who desire to exercise their fundamental right to control the educational approach for their children by choosing schools that are carrying out a public service, even if they are not State schools.

A major improvement in the quality of *social policy programmes* would also be desirable because they should increasingly consider the centrality of the family, to sympathize with its needs for choices in the area of residential planning, the organization of work, the determining of salaries and criteria for taxation. Special attention should be paid to the legitimate concern of the many families that report *an increasing deterioration in the media* which, as a vehicle for violence,

vulgarity and pornography, are proving less and less attentive to the presence of minors and their rights. Institutions and social forces cannot leave families unaided in their efforts to guarantee their children a healthy, positive environment that is rich in human and religious values.

7. Dear families, as you face these great challenges, do not despair and *do not feel alone*: The Lord believes in you; the Church walks with you; people of good will are looking with confidence to you!

You are called to be the moving spirits of the future of humanity, to shape the vision of the new millennium. In this task may the Blessed Virgin Mary, our Mother, guide and assist you; she is present in our midst in one of her more venerated images. As I invoke her heavenly protection, I entrust your every hope to Our Lady of Loreto, Queen of the Family, who, with her husband Joseph, in the home of Nazareth, experienced the joys and fatigues of family life. Dear husbands and wives, may the Lord strengthen you in the faithfulness you promised with your marriage vows on your wedding day. The Pope and the Church pray for you. I warmly bless you, together with your children!