

THE GREAT

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The greatness of widowhood

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His Holiness Pope Pius XII

V/F

Pius XII, Pope

SAINT MARY'S COLLEGE



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**WE** very willingly receive the members of the International Family Days Congress, organized by the International World Union of Family Organizations. During the past years you have studied a great number of economic, social and educational problems pertaining to family life. We sincerely congratulate you for the results you have achieved and the improvements you have succeeded in obtaining in a field so dear to Our heart.

You are dealing this year with a subject which most certainly is worthy of the strongest diligence and of the active sympathy of all: that of families deprived of a father. It is a subject which until now has not been given sufficient attention, partly because of the helplessness of these families on the plane of social action. It is therefore the duty of such organizations as yours to undertake a systematic examination of the conditions of life, always difficult and sometimes crushing, which burden widows and orphans.

After having gathered in a preliminary inquiry the statistical information on the number and situation of these families, you have sought to draw a picture of their juridic condition. On the basis of this data, you have then dealt with the economic, professional, psychological and educational problems related to them.

We hope that the results of this research and these discussions will not be long in being made manifest, and we hope that they will constitute, for all those who are striving to improve the conditions of the most severely tried families, the starting point for a serious and prolonged action aimed at bringing a remedy, in the greatest measure possible, to so much actual suffering.

Without dealing specifically with the questions you are studying, We intend to say a few words here on the spiritual and religious problem of widowhood, and to underline the interior attitudes and dispositions that befit a Christian widow and govern the orientation of her life. We think especially, with paternal concern, of those who are still young and have a family to raise, and who are therefore the most heavily stricken by the loss of their husbands.

ONE often notices that the word "widow" itself evokes for those who hear it an impression of sadness and even a kind of repugnance. Some widows therefore refuse to bear this name and seek every means to make people forget their condition under the pretext that it humiliates them, gives rise to pity and places them in a position of inferiority from which they wish to escape and wish even to erase the memory of it.

This is a normal reaction in the eyes of many but—let Us say it quite clearly—it is a poor Christian reaction. Doubtless it contains a more or less instinctive feeling of apprehension in the face of suffering, but it also betrays ignorance of profound realities.

When death strikes the head of a family in his prime and takes him away from his home, it also plants a very heavy cross and an indelible pain in the heart of his wife. It is the pain of one from whom has been torn the better part of herself, the loved one who was the center of her affection, the ideal of her life, the quiet and gentle strength on which she leaned with such trust, the comforter who would understand all sorrows and soften them.

All of a sudden, the woman finds herself horribly alone, abandoned, bending under the burden of her sorrow and the responsibilities she must face: how can she provide sustenance for herself and her children? How can she solve the cruel dilemma: how can she leave her dear ones or leave home to earn her daily bread? How can she preserve her rightful independence in spite of the necessary appeals for help to close relatives or even other families? It is enough to call to mind these questions to understand to what degree the widow feels dejected and sometimes rebels when faced with the immense bitterness which heaps itself upon her, and of the anguish which surrounds her like an unscalable wall.

Some widows therefore abandon themselves to a kind of passive resignation, lose interest in life, refuse to come out of their sufferings. Others, on the contrary, seek to forget and create excuses for themselves which dispense them from facing their real responsibilities in a loyal and courageous manner.

**D**URING the early centuries of the Church's existence, the organization of Christian communities assigned a particular role to widows. In His mortal life, Christ showed them particular kindness and the apostles after Him recommended them to the affection of Christians and gave them rules of life and perfection. St. Paul described the widow as "she who . . . has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day" (*1 Tim. 5,5*).

Although the Church does not condemn remarriage, she shows her predilection for souls who wish to remain faithful to their spouse and to the perfect symbolism of the sacrament of marriage. She rejoices when she sees the spiritual riches which are proper to this state being cultivated. The first of these, it seems to Us, is the actual conviction that, far from destroying the bonds of human and supernatural love contracted in marriage, death can perfect them and strengthen them.

On the purely juridic plane, and on the plane of perceptible realities, the matrimonial institution undoubtedly does not exist any more. But that which constituted its soul, gave it strength and beauty, conjugal love with all its splendor and its eternal vows, lives on just as the spiritual and free beings live on who have pledged themselves to each other.

When one of the spouses, freed from his mortal remains, enters into the divine intimacy, God frees him from every weakness and all the dregs of selfishness. He also invites the one who is left on earth to enter into a more pure and more spiritual state of mind.

Since one of the spouses has consummated his sacrifice, is it not necessary that the other should be willing to detach herself from the world more and renounce the intense but fleeting joys of perceptible and carnal affection which bound the husband to the home and monopolized her heart and energies?

**B**Y accepting the cross of separation, and by renouncing the presence of a dear one, another presence, more intimate, more profound and stronger is gained. It is a presence which will also be more purifying, for he who sees God face to face will not tolerate that those whom he loved

most while on earth should retire within themselves, become discouraged or display unfounded attachments.

If the sacrament of marriage, symbol of Christ's redeeming love for the Church, applies to the husband and wife the reality of this love, transfigures them, renders them similar, one to Christ who delivers Himself to save mankind, the other to the redeemed Church which accepts its part in the sacrifice of Christ, then widowhood in some manner becomes the (natural) outcome of this mutual consecration. It represents the present life of the Church Militant, which is deprived of the vision of its heavenly spouse, but with whom it nevertheless remains unfailingly united, walking with Him in faith and hope, living on that love which sustains it in all its trials and eagerly awaiting the final fulfillment of the promises that were made in the beginning.

Such is the greatness of widowhood, when it is lived as the prolongation of the graces of matrimony and as the preparation for their flowering in the light of God. What poor human consolation could ever equal this marvelous prospect? But one must also be worthy of penetrating their meaning and import, and ask for that understanding through humble and attentive prayer and the courageous acceptance of the Lord's will.

It is relatively easy for a woman, who lives her Christianity intensely and whose marriage has never known any grave crisis, to elevate herself to this plane.

But some, during their married life, have gone through distressing periods because of the lack of understanding or misconduct of their husbands. Others have heroically borne their sufferings so as not to desert a home which only brought them disappointments, humiliations and physical and moral exhaustion. The death of the husband in such cases can appear to be a providential liberation from a yoke that had become too heavy.

**Y**ET, when faced with the mystery of death and the divine judgment, remembering the promises of mercy and resurrection in Christian revelation, the unhappy and guiltless wife may not harbor feelings any different than

those of Christ Himself for sinful men: feelings of willing forgiveness and of generous intercessory prayer.

Past wounds and saddening memories then become an effective means of redemption. Offered to God for the soul of the deceased, who died in the love of Christ, they expiate his sins and hasten for him the advent of the beatific vision. Is such an attitude, inspired by a deep sense of the conjugal union and its redemptive value, not the only true Christian solution, capable of healing still bleeding wounds, of erasing bitterness and vain regrets, and of restoring that which seemed irremediably lost?

How wrong it would be, on the other hand, to take advantage of widowhood to free oneself from the reserve and prudence that befits women without husbands, and to abandon oneself to the vanities of an easy and superficial life. This would be to ignore the weakness of the human heart, which is too eager to fill an unpleasant solitude. It would likewise ignore the dangers of apparently harmless frequentations, too often followed by unfortunate falls.

We therefore strongly hope that the efforts that have been undertaken to make known an appreciation of the greatness of Christian widowhood will be pursued with perseverance. We know that a great number of widows, thanks to the directives of competent spiritual guides and the help of their associations, have opened their hearts to the sublime teachings of the faith.

May each one of those, whose companion has been called back to God, be convinced of the compelling necessity of cultivating her spiritual life, if she wishes to preserve her interior peace and face all her tasks unflinchingly. May she not let a single day go by without devoting some time to meditation, a few privileged moments when she will feel closer to the Lord and to him who continues to watch over her and her home. May she also set aside every year a few days dedicated more exclusively to reflection and prayer, far from the noise and oppression of her daily cares. She will thus find a security beyond words that will enlighten all her decisions and will allow her to firmly assume her responsibilities as the head of the family. This prayer will be accompanied, naturally, by the practice of the sacraments, participation in the liturgy and the use of other

means of sanctification which will help her defend herself against insidious temptations, particularly those of the heart and of the senses.

**I**N HER home the widow will continue to practice the giving over of herself which she promised on her wedding day. Her children expect everything from her since she is also taking the father's place. The widow, for her part, turns all the love she bore her husband to her children. She becomes tenderly attached to them and yet, in this also, she must remain faithful to her mission.

She must suppress the too insistent appeals of a heart which has become so sensitive, so that she might insure a virile and strong formation, open to society, for her children and leave them that freedom to which they have a right, especially in the choice of a state in life.

It would be fatal if she consumed herself with vain regrets, to pleasure in weakening memories or, in the other extreme, allowed herself to be terrified by the somber prospects of the future. The widow will undoubtedly consecrate herself to her duty as educator with all the delicacy and tactfulness of a mother, but will remain united in spirit to her husband, who will suggest to her in God the attitudes she must take, and will give her authority and discernment.

The memory of the deceased one, instead of preventing or hindering the generous impulse and application to the necessary tasks, should inspire courage to accomplish them fully.

In social relations the widow cannot renounce the place that belongs to her. Undoubtedly she will appear outwardly to have an air of more pronounced reserve, for she participates more strongly in the mystery of the cross and the seriousness of her bearing betrays God's imprint on her life.

**B**UT precisely for this reason she has a message for those in her environment. It is she who lives more on faith, who through her sorrow has won access to a more serene and supernatural world. She does not seek support from



the abundance of temporal goods, but from her confidence in God. She will disclose purification, necessary detachment and the unwavering fidelity that it requires to those homes that are too closed or withdrawn into themselves and have not yet discovered the full meaning of conjugal love.

In regard to other widows in particular, she will feel herself bound in a special way to help them fulfill their sacrifice and understand its significance, raising herself above mere human outlooks to see its eternal prolongation.

For all, she will be the one whose silent and tactful charity hastens to render a service with a word, a gesture, wherever a more pressing need or a greater sorrow shows itself. In her family or professional relations, or with her friends, she will bring the distinctive note which characterizes her apostolate: the testimony of her faithfulness to a beloved memory, and that of having found in this faithfulness and the renunciations it involves a more profound, more stable, more luminous happiness than that which she had to renounce.

In the more austere moments and in temptations to discouragement she will recall the chaste heroine Judith, who did not hesitate to run the greatest risks to save her people from ruin and who placed all her trust in God. She will think especially of the Virgin Mary, also a widow, who after the death of her Son, remained in the primitive Church—she, whose prayer, whose interior life and hidden dedication constantly drew heaven's blessings on the community.

**W**HEN the widow feels even more the decline of her physical strength, her poverty, her inability to work a lot or to take part in the activities of charity or of the apostolate, may she remember Christ's words when He saw the rich men place their offerings in the treasury, and after them, a poor widow who put two little coins in it: "Truly I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all" (*Luke 21, 2-3*). What the Lord said about this modest offering also applies to the smallest services a widow can render if they spring from a heart belonging more to God, for a heart that has grown through trial, is also closer to those it loves and

is capable of spreading around it the purest reflections of the love which possesses it.

As a token of the divine favors which We call upon you, your families and all those who are dear to you, as well as upon all those who throughout the whole world are discovering in widowhood a road leading toward the full discovery of divine love, We heartily grant you Our apostolic benediction.

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