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FOR THE FAMILY

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THE FAMILY IN THE
PASTORAL ACTIVITY
OF THE CHURCH



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**SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE WORK
AND ON THE CONCLUSIONS
OF THE 4TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE
COMMITTEE FOR THE FAMILY**

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THEOLOGICAL COMMITTEE
OF THE CHURCH

THE FAMILY IN THE PASTORAL ACTIVITY OF THE CHURCH

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SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE THEME OF THE 4TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE COMMITTEE FOR THE FAMILY

November 10-11-12, 1977

The fourth General Assembly of the Committee for the Family was held in Rome on the 10, 11 and 12 November 1977.

The mission of the Committee had been confirmed in the *Motu Proprio Apostolatus Peragendi* in December 1976. At the same time new members, consultants and consultants¹ were appointed. In the light of this, it was decided to devote the General Assembly to the consideration of two major topics:

— delineate the specific character and the areas of competence of the Committee for the Family;

— reflect on the position of family pastoral activity in the different continents, noting the positive and negative aspects, the possibilities and the challenges.

At the conclusion of a wide exchange of viewpoints, it was hoped to be able to set out a program for the Committee for the coming year and to be able to determine some areas of priority.

The General Assembly met only a few days after the conclusion of the 1977 Synod of Bishops which had dealt with the theme *Catechesis in our time*. His Eminence, Cardinal Opilio Rossi, President of the Committee, in his opening address, reported on what had been said during the Synod on the role of the family in catechesis.

Very many of the Synodal Fathers had wished to underline the importance of the family for the transmission of the faith and of the Christian life to future generations.

Others had pointed to the difficulties which existed in the relation-

¹ The *consultants* are the representatives of the various departments of the Roman Curia designated for liaison with the Committee for the Family.



ships between the family and the other focal points of education. Three suggestions were made in this regard:

- develop greater collaboration between all those agencies which are involved in the transmission of the faith;
- assist parents to assume their full role in the apostolic life of the Church;
- insist on the fact that there exists a grave obligation for all Christians to take their faith seriously, to continually deepen that faith, and to help families, as units, to deepen their religious convictions.

The Synod also touched on some particular questions which concern the family or the family apostolate: pre-matrimonial catechesis, education to Christian sexual morality and its significance for the family, the formation of adult Christians, the responsibility of communities in catechesis, the family as the basic cell of the community, the family as a school and community of prayer.

The coming years will be marked by the task of putting the decisions of the Synod into practice within the Church. The Committee for the Family will make its contribution, particularly by providing some clear notions concerning the role and the importance of the family in the overall pastoral task of the Church.

THE SPECIFIC NATURE AND THE AREAS OF COMPETENCE OF THE COMMITTEE FOR THE FAMILY

The first description of the Committee for the Family can be found in the press release which announced the formation of the Committee in January 1973. It reads: "In the face of the generalization of the problems and the diversity of the situations there is lacking in the Church an ecclesial institution of universal character, charged with the task of gathering, promoting and coordinating, within an overall pastoral vision, the efforts that are being made within the area of the family."

When the Holy Father received the Committee in 1974, he asked that it should move from the area of reflection to that of action. Specifically he suggested that the Committee should devote itself to the inspiration and promotion of, and the creation of an awareness for, centers of reflection, action and witness to the Christian understanding of family relations.

In 1975 the Committee studied the theme "The Sacrament of Marriage, the response of the Church to the appeals of the Family." The Holy Father wished to be kept informed of the problems that emerged during the course of this study.

In 1976 the *Motu Proprio Apostolatus Peragendi* refers briefly to the Committee for the Family. The Committee is to carry out its mission in close collaboration with the Pontifical Council for the Laity, while maintaining its own form and characteristics.

In the audience which the Holy Father granted, in November 1977, to the Committee for the Family, together with the Pontifical Council for the Laity and the Pontifical Council "Cor Unum," the Holy Father said that he saw the role of the Committee essentially in two functions: Vigilance and animation. Vigilance, the Holy Father said, means the protection of that which God himself has placed in the hearts of men: love in its most noble significance. This requires that one must observe situations not in a pessimistic way, but full of hope. Animation must be linked with support and education of the family. This must be carried out in close union with the various departments of the Roman Curia, the Episcopal Conferences and the apostolic movements.

In both these functions the Holy Father insisted on the positive attitude to be adopted. Only in this way will those obstacles be overcome which prevent one from seeing the action of God in the hearts of men. This requires some specific qualities on the part of those involved in the family apostolate: competence, a sense of good organization, the desire for collaboration, but above all a permanent effort to live the faith, hope and charity which the Spirit communicates to us.

An examination of the tasks that have been assigned to it by the Holy See is even more helpful in trying to delineate the areas of competence of the Committee for the Family.

In the year after its foundation, the Committee was charged with the preparation of the Holy See's participation in the Year and the Conference of the United Nations on Population (Bucharest 1974).

In the following years the Committee was called upon to collaborate in the work of the Delegations of the Holy See at the United Nations Conferences on Women (Mexico, 1975) and "Habitat" (Vancouver 1976).

At the request of the Secretariat of State, study groups were formed to consider a number of specific problems, such as: abortion, sexual education in the schools, various questions involved in International Conferences on the rights of the family.

At present, a study group is examining the position and the rights of the elderly, and is seeking to define the role which the family can play in the initiatives that are being carried out in this area. Another group is studying the preparatory documentation concerning the International Year of the Child and the project to renew the Charter of the rights of the child, in the light of the doctrine of the Church.

The question of conjugal education to responsible parenthood is entrusted in a specific way to the Committee for the Family. The Committee follows the research that is being carried out currently with regard to the regulation of human fertility. It stimulates and encourages the work of organizations which dedicate themselves to family and conjugal education in this domain.

In short, the Committee for the Family is asked to be present, in an understanding and helpful way, in all that is being achieved in the promotion of the family throughout the world.

A GLANCE AT THE SITUATION OF THE FAMILY APOSTOLATE IN THE VARIOUS PARTS OF THE WORLD

On the level of the Episcopal Conferences

The pastoral concern of the bishops for the family is more than evident. The family is seen as the first place of evangelization, as the first school of life, as one of the major forces in the expansion of the Gospel and the implanting of the mission of the Church.

In the past four years one has witnessed the setting up in many parts of the world of National Episcopal Commissions for the Family at the level of the Episcopal Conferences.

The family has also been chosen as the theme for special assemblies of National or Continental Episcopal Conferences. The Symposium of the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar in July 1978 will be devoted to the family. CELAM has also recently established a Secretariat for the Family.

Many important pastoral documents have been prepared by the world episcopate: Directories for the Family Apostolate, Pastoral Letters on Marriage and on the responsibilities of the family, documents on current questions, such as: abortion, population, habitat. Some Episcopal Conferences have prepared programs covering an entire year on family questions; others have organized weeks or months of the family.

The concrete situations in which families find themselves and the evolution that is taking place in this regard have been the object of particular attention on the part of the bishops. The studies which they encourage are carried out in collaboration with family groups, educators and other experts, in order to arrive at a clearer understanding of the real position, the hopes and the needs of the families of today. Reflections of this kind help to mature doctrinal and pastoral initiatives aimed at the development and the promotion of the family.

On the theological level one encounters the need for a serious deepening of the theology of the Sacrament of Marriage, in order to bring out more fully its biblical, social and ecclesial dimensions, and thus to appreciate its value in the faith and the life of individuals and communities, and in order to allow the Sacrament fully to achieve its role in evangelization and in the missionary vitality of the Church.

Almost everywhere one can note deficiencies with regard to the preparation for marriage, despite many renewed efforts in this area. The importance of the Sacrament of Marriage in the catechesis of children, adolescents and adults has not been attributed its true value. The Episcopal Conferences wish to give special priority to the presentation of the value which the riches of this Sacrament provide for the everyday lives of spouses and families, as well as for the life of society and of the Church.

On the pastoral level: the Episcopal Conferences in Africa are particularly attentive in trying to safeguard and restore the spiritual and cultural values contained in the rich family tradition of that continent. The bishops hope to insert these values into the life of the Church itself: in catechesis, liturgy and apostolic activity.

The Episcopal Conferences of Latin America request that particular attention be given to the values contained in family life on all levels, and particularly among the poorest families. Christian family movements are called to share this preoccupation and to develop their action in favor of the underprivileged sectors of society. One participant at the Assembly noted that a great number of the families in Latin America were "incomplete," living in irregular situations both on the religious and on the civil plane.

In Asia one finds that the problems of development and population are at the center of the pastoral concern of the bishops. Certain situations (compulsory legislation in India, in Korea and in Pakistan, etc.) provided occasions for the bishops to restress the role of the family and its inalienable rights in this area. They make present to the

Governments of their countries the active contribution that the Church intends to make in the search for a solution to such problems as development and population.

The problems that one meets with in the West, that is to say in Europe and North America, are quite different. It would be wrong to think that the problems of these countries were to be found generally around the world. The crisis which gravely affects the family in these countries arises directly from the development of a mentality which stresses material success, individualism, efficiency, technology that is becoming more and more refined, and the development of a life-style that stresses money, action and power. More and more, the authentic values of family life: love as gift of self, the generous acceptance of life, fidelity, permanence in married life, the spirit of sacrifice, are being regarded as less important and are being relegated to a secondary level. The stress placed on individual fulfillment, the strong pressures placed by the mass-media on public opinion have weakened the impact of the teaching of the Church. The bishops of the West are aware of and sensitive to these situations which threaten and disorientate the family. They are aware of the Christian courage of many good families. They accept the hopes and desires of young people who react against and question the society of adults. Many of the Episcopal Conferences witness by their active and creative presence and their direct involvement with families threatened by the introduction of laws which contribute to the gradual destruction of the family by facilitating contraception, abortion, the removal of all restraints to sexual liberty, divorce, pornography, etc.

In some countries with a strong Christian tradition like Ireland, the bishops express their fear that an abusive secularization in society will lead to a lowering of the spiritual life of the family. The awareness of the presence of God and the experience of joy in sharing the faith within the family seem to be weakened.

Almost all the Episcopal Conferences note that some effort must be made to prepare families to take their place in a society which is in a state of change and which tends to ignore the family. Pastoral work, more individual-orientated, has not always helped families to face up to their problems nor to search for solutions themselves.

It is in this context that many Episcopal Conferences see their duty to address themselves more directly and more clearly to Christian families by recalling to them their specific Christian vocation. The peace and harmony of society and, to a certain extent, the future of the Church rests on Christian families.

Because of the specific character of the Sacrament of Marriage, pastoral planning should ensure that appeal is made to families not only to carry out decisions that have already been made, but that they may also be in a position to make their own contribution in the elaboration of decisions in the area of evangelization.

One final point that is stressed by the Episcopal Conferences is the fact that all share in the responsibility for the promotion of the family.

The bishops realize that a serious preparation should be given to priests and religious as educators of the family. In various countries the bishops are aware of the difficulties encountered by priests in presenting and promoting the objectives and the evangelical ideals of marriage and family life. One comes to realise that if families do not always know what course of action to follow, it is because they are often left in uncertainty by their spiritual guides. The crisis that is being experienced in the priesthood can be linked with the crisis known by many families: a renewed priesthood will save the family, and vice-versa.

It is essential to satisfy the need that is felt for a deeper education to love, to the concept of self-giving, to demanding self-sacrifice, and to the ascetical and supernatural means of growth in and through marriage. The bishops of India stress that, in the midst of all their great pastoral difficulties, they must reveal to the world that it is never necessary to sacrifice spiritual values or to abandon God's laws, in order to respond to the problems of development and population today.

The bishops of the West regard as an essential commitment the development of theological research into the link between faith and the sacraments, and into sexuality. The home is one of the places in which the future of humanity is being shaped. The willingness of the bishops of the West to promote the values of marriage coincides clearly with that of the overall desire of all the Episcopal Conferences of the world.

ON THE LEVEL OF MOVEMENTS, ORGANISMS AND CENTERS WHICH ASSIST IN THE PROMOTION OF THE FAMILY

The participants at the General Assembly also contributed their own reflection on the initiatives that are in progress in various countries, and on those situations which require deeper doctrinal reflection and a pastoral response.

The following are some examples of the objects and the aims of the programs that were presented:

— Education to conjugal and family life, particularly in the area of responsible parenthood and the Christian meaning of sexuality.

— Preparation for marriage, according to the desires expressed by, and with the support of, the Episcopal Conferences.

Attention to young people who are considering marriage, as well as to engaged couples, within the context of other families, in order to provide something of the actual experience of this way of life.

— Services provided for the renewal and the putting into practice of the Sacrament of Marriage in everyday life. Support for families to assist them place the wealth of this sacrament at the services of the mission of the Church.

— Development of family spiritual life and of family prayer, as well as of on-going religious experiences associated with the liturgical life of the Church.

— Family catechetical programs which indicate the pastoral possibilities offered to the family within the Church. Closer collaboration between family, school, parish and apostolic movements.

— Interventions on the part of parents to direct, or to give the correct orientation to, sexual education in the schools, where this has become obligatory.

— The creation of Catholic conjugal and family counselling services, especially in the great urban centers, where the family particularly suffers from isolation and from lack of support and formation to help it confront its problems.

— The promotion of the child, not as someone who is becoming an adult, but as someone who can contribute and renew the lives of parents and family, society and the Church. Such programs should promote the self-expression of the child, and work to see how society and the Church can better take note of the value of this expression and of the wealth it can contribute to the world of adults.

— Education to respect for, and the defense of, life, through programs, campaigns and various movements.

— Appeals directed to the respect of the rights and the capacities of parents in the formulation and the implementation of political structures, both private and public, which take into account the role of families and family life.

— Interventions with public authorities drawing attention to the priority rights of the family and demanding appropriate legislation.

— Support of handicapped children within their families; assistance of incomplete families, as well as that of orphaned or abandoned children.

— Attention to the question of the elderly within the context of the family, and to that which the family can give to or receive from the elderly.

Certain situations are seen as demanding doctrinal reflection and a pastoral response on the part of the Church. The task of constructing the family, of assigning it its true value and of placing it in the context of its true mission has to face new problems. Some of these phenomena appear more clearly in the Western world. But they also extend themselves on an international level. This is especially true with regard to new concepts of marriage and of sexuality, and new family models. In this area one can think especially of:

— the increasing number of divorces, facilitated by a divorce legislation that is becoming still more liberal.

— Pre-matrimonial relations and the increase of pregnancies among young people.

— Consensual unions outside all institutional bonds.

— Single parent families.

The General Assembly also heard mention of the studies being carried out in the United States concerning the effects of working mothers on family life.

Reflection on all these phenomena leads one to ask: "Do they share some common factor?" In fact, one can notice in all of them an excessive stress on individualism and on individual rights. One is passing almost unnoticed from a society which was based on the common good (and, as its counterpart, the responsibility of society to care for the support of the family unit) to a concept which attributes the primary position to the individual and his sovereign rights, thus justifying the situations just mentioned.

It is important here to recall the discussions during the World Population Conference at Bucharest concerning the right to have or not to have children. This right has been recognized up to now as being the right of the couple. But now it is gradually becoming considered as an individual right. This is an offense against the natural right of the child to have a father and a mother, and not to be left to the caprices of individualism.

It is striking, in this context, to note that Catholics in the West are so little prepared to fight the civil battles in favor of the family. One can see this by looking at the type of legislation that has been introduced over the past ten years even in countries of long Christian tradition: divorce, contraception, abortion, sterilization, euthanasia, etc.

Another factor merits attention in this context. One daily hears reference to the family as a "cell," but one no longer hears reference to the family as a "society." This is a vital difference. The cell forms part of the tissue, but it is not in itself a social perfection. The family is, however, a society: it contains within itself its own complementarity. The family can live a certain part of its life for itself. This is not something that can be overlooked. This is particularly so when the nuclear family has become so general. The nuclear family tends to weaken the idea of the complementarity that exists within the family itself. One speaks a great deal about the relationship between parents and their children, and this is good. But one must not overlook the fact that the relationship between brothers and sisters is also an essential, and not an accidental, element, and that they form part of the family. The same applies in regard to the relations between the generations.

The Assembly also devoted some reflection to the formation of priests for family pastoral activity. One notes overall an awareness of the need to prepare priests in a serious manner for this pastoral ministry in the service of the family. Too often priests are formed in seminaries for a ministry to individuals, independently of their social milieu. It is necessary to help priests to be more attentive to the family as a social unit, and to the place of each of its members in the evangelical renewal of the family as the first milieu of life.

Ecumenical questions

There are various situations in different countries which involve ecumenical considerations.

In the first place, there is the question of mixed-marriages, and all that they imply in the area of the preparation for marriage, the liturgical celebration of the sacrament, family catechesis, the pastoral support of the couples in the exercise of their Christian mission.

Another area of ecumenical interest is that of the family movements which wish to operate on an ecumenical basis. One can notice a tendency on the part of some movements to abandon the Catholic orientation which they had at an earlier stage, believing thus to open themselves to that ecumenical dimension that was requested by Vatican II. But many of the couples who belong to such groups begin to lose

touch with the reality of the teaching and the life of the Catholic Church. While it is true that every Christian project must have an ecumenical dimension, this is not to be achieved to the detriment of the Catholic faith and, in the case here in question, of the Catholic conception of marriage and the family.

These situations require a closer collaboration between the Committee for the Family and the Secretariat for Christian Unity. The movements which wish to be more ecumenical should be able to benefit from the experience of the Secretariat for Christian Unity in order to be able to discern whether their initiatives are in conformity with the doctrine of Vatican II and are faithful to the pastoral orientations of that Council.

Responsible parenthood

One can notice a general ignorance concerning, on the one hand, the Christian vision of responsible parenthood and its exercise, and, on the other hand, the scientific research in the area of the regulation of fertility. This ignorance is to be found in all sectors: among couples, among medical and health personnel, among young people, and among educators, be they priests, religious or laity.

The systematic program of information, already begun in some countries, should be further developed. The Episcopal Conferences should stimulate centers of conjugal and family counselling and should ensure that they are solid both on the professional level and as regards their Catholic orientation.

But over and above ignorance, a great deal of confusion exists in the pastoral area. One cannot have a pastoral approach that is dissociated from doctrine. Both aspects must remain rigorously united. The position of the Church must be presented in all its clarity; all critical situations must be explained in the light of the doctrine; pastoral work should never abandon the effort of conversion and of support which is demanded by faith in Christ.

WORKING PRIORITIES OF THE COMMITTEE FOR THE FAMILY

At the conclusion of this wide exchange of view on the areas of competence of the Committee for the Family, the participants in the General Assembly presented a series of suggestions regarding the concrete tasks that could be dealt with in the future.

These can be summed up in three categories:

- The vocation and the mission of the family.
- Pastoral activity aimed at the growth of couples.
- Care for some particular situations.

Vocation and mission of the family

- Reflect on what constitutes the family, and on what are its essential elements. Reflection on the value of conjugal love, the Christian vision of sexuality, the holiness of the family.
- Deepen the social and ecclesial dimensions of the Sacrament of Marriage. Reflect on the links between Marriage and the other sacraments: the family is the only human reality that has been raised to the dignity of a sacrament.
- Promote the co-responsibility of the family in the pastoral mission of the Church, never simply as a right, but also as a duty. Assist the exercise of this responsibility, especially with regard to catechesis and liturgical life.
- Set out clearly the rights of parents and help prepare them to be able to implement these rights in all areas which affect the family: education, habitat, health, the organization of work and leisure, social communications, legislation.
- Stimulate reflection on the proper place of children and the elderly within the family and also in society and in the Church. Assist them in making their own specific and original contribution and stimulate ways which will lead to the acceptance of this contribution by society.
- Underline the values of marriage and the family in various cultures and social milieux. Promote openness and dialogue in this regard.
- Reflect on the place of women in the family and in society, and devote special attention to the value of motherhood.

Pastoral activity aimed at the growth of couples

At the basis of the pastoral problems in the area of conjugal and family life, one finds, very often, ignorance and lack of education to family life itself and to the responsibilities which it entails, especially in the area of procreation. Attention to this factor is important if couples are to be given a valid orientation.

The participants at the General Assembly indicated certain factors in the construction and growth of family life.

In order that the couples themselves should become involved in knowing and understanding the teaching of the Church in this domain, some explanation must be given of those aids by which the sacrament contributes to the healthy growth of true love in marriage.

An adequate formation should be given in the seminaries. This should include the theological, scriptural, liturgical and canonical aspects, but also scientific, psychological and juridical factors. This formation should include information on the biological research in the area of human fertility, its regulation and its application in the domain of the natural means of family planning. Such formation should include information regarding the progressive and patient education of couples to the control of fertility and to family life.

The results of this formation can be placed at the disposal of priests, religious, educators and counsellors of young people and families:

- Sustain and develop the creation of centers dedicated to conjugal and family counselling, and assure them a solid professional and doctrinal basis.
- Reflect again on the subject of marriage preparation, through a catechesis of the sacrament which should begin right from childhood, and through a sacramental education which should proceed for the duration of family life.

Care for some particular problems

- Devote attention to the question of mixed marriages and to the larger question of ecumenism and the family.
- Attention to certain family situations which are particularly difficult, such as those of incomplete families, single parent families, the families of the "fourth world," the families of the handicapped, of emigrants, broken homes.
- Attention to those trends which today deeply affect the family and its mission in society: especially those socio-economic factors which lead to the disintegration of the family and which render it impossible for the family to exercise its responsibilities. A further area is that of genetic engineering and its repercussions for the couple and the family. Finally there are the problems raised by legislation concerning the rights of the family. All these factors require a sustained attention in the context of the pastoral care of the family.

The priorities expressed here do not pretend to cover all the aspects of the pastoral apostolate for the promotion of the family. They help to

delineate the working lines for the years to come. Above all they invite those who will read this publication to make known to the Committee their own experiences in one or other of the domains presented, and thus to place their experience at the service of the universal Church.

Pastoral concern for marriage and the family has become one of the most essential aspects of the apostolate today. That which occurs in the family has a primary effect on the life of the Church in the world.

This is the time to present the family as the center of the pastoral reflection of the Church. It is all the more so in that the various forms of renewal proclaim that they have great need of the family in order to be able to pass to the level of action. If the Church evangelizes and sanctifies the family, the family will, in its turn, construct and sanctify the Church.

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