

The Family: A School of Holiness

At a special audience the Holy Father addressed almost two thousand married couples — members of the “*Equipages Notre-Dame*” (teams of Our Lady) — who have united to help husbands and wives find a spirituality of marriage. Not since his encyclical “*Humanae vitae*” has Pope Paul VI examined the Sacrament of Marriage in such depth and with such profound spirituality.

Dear Sons and Daughters:

1) First of all, We thank you heartily for your words of faith, for your nightly prayer for Our intentions, and also for your dedication in the service of vocations. We wish to tell you how happy We are to welcome you this morning, and to speak to you, and beyond you, to the twenty thousand homes of the *Equipages Notre-Dame*.

You were telling Us a moment ago about its influence all over the world, and your pre-occupation to live with Christ and to weave with Him the daily thread of your conjugal love. Among Christian couples, you constitute small teams of mutual spiritual help sustained in their efforts by a priestly presence. How could We not rejoice over this?

Dear sons and daughters, the Pope heartily encourages you and invokes the blessings of God upon your work. Too often the Church has appeared, and wrongly so, to question human love. Today, we wish to tell you this clearly: no, God is not an enemy to the great human realities, and the Church in no way whatsoever under-estimates the values lived every day in millions of homes.

On the contrary, the Good News brought by Christ the Saviour, is also good news for human love, excellent in its origins — “God saw all He made, and indeed it was very good” (*Gen. 1,31*) — corrupted

by sin, but redeemed to the point of becoming a means to holiness, with the help of grace.

2) As all baptized persons, you are called to holiness, according to the teaching of the Church solemnly reaffirmed by the Council (See *Lumen Gentium*, No. 11). But you are expected to pursue your own proper path to holiness, in and by your family life. It is the Church which teaches us that: "With the help of grace, spouses can lead a holy life" (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 49), and make their family the domestic sanctuary of the Church" (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, No. 11).

These thoughts, the forgetting of which is so tragic for our times, are certainly familiar to you. We wish to meditate on these thoughts with you for a few moments in order to strengthen once again if need be, your will to live generously your Christian and human vocation in marriage (See *Gaudium et Spes*, No. I, 47-52), and collaborate together in the great design of God's love for the world, which is to form a people "whom God has taken for His own to make His glory praised" (*Eph.* 1, 14).

EARTHLY REALITY OF MATRIMONY

3) As Holy Scripture teaches you, marriage, before it becomes a Sacrament, is a great earthly reality: "God created man in the image of Himself, in the image of God He created him, male and female He them" (*Gen.* 1, 27). We must always return to this first page of the Bible if we wish to understand what a human couple, a family, is and should be.

Psychological analysis, psychoanalytic studies, sociological surveys, philosophical reflections will certainly be able to bring their enlightenment to sexuality and human love, but they would blind us were they to neglect this fundamental teaching given to us from the very beginning: the duality of sexes was willed by God so that man and woman together might be the image of God and, like Him, a source of life: "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it" (*Gen.* 1, 28).

Moreover, an attentive reading of the Prophets, the Sapiential Books, and the New Testament, shows us the significance of this fundamental reality, and teaches us not to reduce it to physical desire and

genital activity, but to discover therein the complementariness of the values of man and woman, the nobility and weaknesses of conjugal love, its creativity and openness to the mysterious design of God's love.

4) *This teaching retains its full value today, and cautions us against the temptations of a ravaging eroticism. This phenomenon of the abnormal should at least warn us against the danger of a materialistic civilization that forces itself imperceptibly in this domain, the last refuge of a sacred value.*

Shall we rescue it from the enslavement of sensuality? Confronted with an encroachment cynically pursued by greedy industries, let us at least suppress its baneful effects on young people.

Without barrier or inhibition, we must foster an education that helps the child and the adolescent to become gradually conscious of the power of the impulses that arise within them, to integrate these impulses that in the building up of their personality, to control their mounting forces so as to realize a full affective and sexual maturity and, in this way, prepare them for the gift of self by a love that will give it its true dimension, in an exclusive and definitive manner.

IRREVOCABLE INDISSOLUBILITY

5) The union of man and woman does differ radically from every other human association, and constitutes a singular reality, namely a married couple based on the mutual gift of each other "and they become one body" (*Gen. 2, 24*).

A unity whose irrevocable engagement of two free persons who "are no longer two, therefore, but one body" (*Mt. 19, 6*). One body, one couple (we could almost say one being), whose unity will take social and legal form in marriage, and will manifest itself in a community life whose carnal gift is the creative expression.

This means that, when they marry, spouses express a desire to belong to each other for life, and for this purpose contract an objective bond whose laws and requirements, far from becoming an enslavement, are a guarantee and a protection, a real support, as you yourselves experience in your daily life.

EXCLUSIVE AND CREATIVE LOVE

6) As a matter of fact, the gift is not a fusion. Each personality remains distinct, and far from dissolving in the mutual gift of each other, affirms and refines itself, continues to grow throughout conjugal life, according to this great law of love: the mutual giving of each other in order to live together.

In fact, love is the cement that gives its solidity to this community life, and the *elan* which draws it toward an ever more perfect fullness. The entire being participates, in the depth of its personal mystery, and of its affective, sensitive, carnal and spiritual constituent parts, thus constituting a more perfect image of God which the married couple has the mission to incarnate day after day, by weaving it with its joys and sorrows, so true it is that love is more than love.

There is no conjugal love which, in its exultation, is not an elan towards the infinite, and in this elan, does not wish to be total, faithful, exclusive and creative (See Humanæ vitæ, No. 9). The conjugal act, as a means of expression, knowledge and communion, maintains and strengthens love, and its creativity leads the married couple to its full flowering: it becomes a source of life, in the image of God.

The Christian knows that human love is good because of its origin, and if it is wounded and deformed by sin, as everything in man is, then it finds its salvation and redemption in Christ. Moreover, is not this the lesson of twenty centuries of Christian history? So many married couples have found the path to holiness in their conjugal love, in this community life which is the only one based on a Sacrament!

SACRAMENT OF THE NEW COVENANT

7) The work of the Holy Spirit (See *Tit.* 3, 5), the baptismal regeneration makes us new creatures (See *Gal.* 6, 15) that "we too might live a new life" (*Rom.* 6,4). In this grandiose undertaking of the renewal of all things in Christ, marriage, also purified and renewed becomes a new reality, a Sacrament of the New Covenant.

And behold at the threshold of the New Testament, as at the entrance of the Old, a married couple stands. But whereas Adam and Eve were the source of evil unleashed on the world, Joseph and Mary are the summit whence holiness spreads all over the earth. The Saviour began the work of salvation by this virginal and holy union wherein is manifested His all-powerful will to purify and sanctify the family, this sanctuary of love and this cradle of life.

CELL OF ECCLESIAL ORGANISM

8) Henceforth, everything is transformed. Two Christians wish to marry; St. Paul forewarns them: "You are not your own property" (1 Cor. 6, 19). Both of them members of Christ "in the Lord," their union, is also made "in the Lord," like that of the Church, and that is why it is a "mystery" (Eph. 5, 32), a sign which not only represents the mystery of union of Christ with the Church, but also contains and radiates it by the grace of the Holy Spirit which is its vivifying soul.

For the very love that is proper to God is the love which God communicates to us so that we might love Him and love one another with this Divine love: "Love one another just as I have loved you" (John 13, 34).

The very manifestations of the tenderness of Christian spouses are permeated with this love which they draw from the heart of God. And should the human source happen to dry up, the Divine source is as inexhaustible as the fathomless depths of the tenderness of God. This reveals to what an intimate, strong and rich communion conjugal love tends.

As an interior and spiritual reality, it transforms the community life of the spouses into what we could call, according to the authorized teaching of the Council: "the domestic Church" (*Lumen gentium*, No. 11), a veritable "cell of the Church", as John XXIII expressed to you on May 3rd, 1959 (*Addresses of Pope John XXIII*, I, Typ. Pol. Vat. p. 298), a basic cell, germinal cell, the smallest one no doubt, but also the most fundamental of the ecclesial organism.

9) Such is the mystery in which conjugal love takes root, and which enlightens all its manifestations. It is the Mystery of the Incarnation that ennobles our human virtualities, by penetrating them from within. Far from scorning them, Christian love brings them to their fullness with patience, generosity, strength and sweetness, as St. Francis de Sales liked to underline when praising the conjugal life of St. Louis (*Introduction to The Devout Life*, II, ch. 38, *Advice to Married Peoples*, Oeuvres, Bibliotheque de la Pleiade, Paris, Nrf, Gallimard, 1969, p. 237).

Also aware of carrying their treasures in earthenware jars (See II Cor. 4, 7), Christian spouses strive, with humble fervor, to translate in their conjugal life the recommendations of the Apostle St. Paul: "your bodies are members making up the body of Christ... your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit ... use your body for the glory of God" (I Cor. 13-20).

"Married in the Lord," spouses henceforth cannot be united except in the name of Christ to Whom they belong and for Whom they must work as His active members. Therefore, they cannot dispose of their body, especially in so far as it is a principle of generation, as well as in the spirit, but for the work of Christ, since they are members of Christ.

10) "Free and responsible collaborators with the Creator" (*Humanae vitae*, No. 1), Christian spouses see their carnal creativeness acquire a new nobility. The drive which prompts them to unite themselves is a bearer of life, and permits God to give Himself children.

Having become father and mother, the spouses discover, with wonder at the baptismal fonts, that their child is henceforth a child of God "born through water and the Spirit" (John 3, 5), and that he is entrusted to them so that they might watch over his physical and moral growth, yes, but also over the budding and flowering in him of the "new self" (Eph. 4, 24).

This child is no longer just what they see, but especially what they believe "an infinity of mystery and love which would dazzle us were we to see it face to face" (Emmanuel Mounier to his wife Paulette, March 20th, 1940, *Oeuvres*, t. IV, Paris, Seuil, 1963, p. 662).

Also, education becomes a real service to Christ, according to His very words: "in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of thine, you did to Me" (*Mt.* 25, 49). And if it should happen that the adolescent refuses the education of his parents, then these parents participate sorrowfully, even in their flesh, in the Passion of Christ in the face of the refusals of man.

SPOUSES COLLABORATE WITH THE CREATOR

11) Dear parents, God has not entrusted you with so important a task (See *Gravissimum Educationis*) without giving you a prodigious gift, His fatherly love. Through the love of parents for their child in Whom Christ lives, the love of the Father overflows in His well-beloved Son (See *John* 4, 7-11).

Through the authority of the parents, it is His authority that is exercised. Through the devotedness of parents, we see His providence as "Father, from Whom every family, whether spiritual or natural, takes its name" (*Eph.* 3, 15). Moreover, the baptized child, through the love of his parents, discovers the paternal love of God and, as the Council tells us: "gains his first experience of the Church" (*Gravissimum Educationis*, No. 3).

The child will become aware of this as he grows older, but Divine love already now, through the tenderness of his parents, blossoms out and develops in him his being as a son of God. This reveals the splendor of your vocation, which St. Thomas correctly compares to the priestly ministry: "For some propagate and conserve the spiritual life in a spiritual ministry only, and this belongs to the Sacrament of Orders; and some belong to the bodily and spiritual life simultaneously, which takes place in the Sacrament of Matrimony where a man and a woman come together to beget offspring and to rear them in Divine worship" (*Contra Gentes* IV, 58, trad. Dr. Charles J. O'Neil, Image Book, Garden City, N.Y., 1957, p. 250, No. 6).

12) *Homes that experience the severe trial of not having children are also called to cooperate in the growth of the People of God in*

numerous ways. We simply wish to draw your attention to hospitality, an eminent form of the home.

Is not St. Paul's recommendation to the Romans: "You should make hospitality your special care" (12, 13), addressed to homes, first of all, and in formulating it, did he not have in mind the hospitality of Aquila and Priscilla where he had been the first beneficiary, and which home was subsequently to welcome the Christian community? (See *Act* 18, 2-3; *Rom.* 16, 3-4; *I Cor.* 16, 19).

In our days, so hard on many people, what a blessing it is to be welcomed "in this little Church," according to the expression of St. John Chrysostom (*Homily* 20 on Ephesians 5, 22-24, N. 6; P.G. 62, 135-140), to enter into its warmth, to discover its maternity, to experience its mercy, so true is it that a Christian home is "the smiling and gentle face of the Church" (Description of a home of the *Equipes Notre-Dame* quoted by H. Caffarel in *L'Anneau d'Or*, No. 111-112; *Le mariage, ce grand sacrement*, Paris, Feau nouveau, 1963, p. 282).

This is an irreplaceable apostolate which you are expected to fulfill generously, an apostolate of the home for which the formation of the betrothed, assistance to newly-weds, help to homes in distress constitute privileged domains. Supporting one another, of what tasks are you not capable in the Church and in the world? With great confidence and with great hope, We invite you to this task: "The Christian family loudly proclaims both the present virtues of the Kingdom of God and the hope of a blessed life to come. Thus by its example and its witness it accuses the world of sin and enlightens those who seek the truth" (*Lumen Gentium*, No. 35).

OVERCOME TEMPTATIONS, TRIALS AND DIFFICULTIES

13) Dear sons and daughters, you are firmly convinced of this: it is by living the graces of the Sacrament of Marriage that you advance with "unwearying and generous love" (*ibid.* No. 41) towards that sanctity to which we are all called by grace (See *Mat.* 5, 48; *1 Thes.* 4, 3; *Eph.* 1, 4), and not by arbitrary demands, but out of love for a

Father Who wishes the full blossoming and complete happiness of His children.

Furthermore, to achieve this, you are not left alone, since Christ and the Holy Spirit, "these two hands of God", according to the expression of St. Irenaeus, are unceasingly working for us (See *Adversus Haereses* IV, 28, 4; P.G. 7, 1, 200).

Therefore, do not allow yourselves to be led astray by temptations, trials, and difficulties which arise along the way; and when necessary, do not fear to go against the current of what is said and thought in a world of paganized behaviour.

St. Paul warns us about this: "Do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you, but let your behaviour change, modeled by your new mind" (Rom. 12, 2). Nor should you become discouraged in times of failures: Our God is a Father full of tenderness and goodness, filled with solicitude and overflowing with love for His children who struggle along their way. And the Church is a Mother who wishes to help you live to the full this ideal of Christian marriage, of which she recalls to you all its requirements and its beauty.

PRIESTLY ASSISTANCE

14) Dear sons, chaplains of the *Equipes Notre-Dame*, by a long and rich experience you know this: your consecrated celibacy renders you particularly available to be, on behalf of families in their advance towards holiness, the active witnesses to the Lord's love in the Church.

Day after day, you help them to "live our lives in the light" (1 *John* 1, 7), to think correctly, that is to say, to appreciate their conduct in truth; to wish correctly, that is to say, to orient as responsible men their will towards the good; to act correctly, that is to say, to conform progressively their life in unison with the ideal of Christian marriage, which they pursue generously.

It is only little by little that the human being is able to order and integrate his multiple tendencies, to the point of arranging them harmoniously in this virtue of conjugal chastity, wherein the spouses find

their full human and Christian development. This work of liberation, for that is what it is, is the fruit of the true liberty of the children of God. Their conscience demands to be respected, educated and formed in an atmosphere of confidence and not of anguish.

The moral laws, far from being inhumanly cold in an abstract objectivity, are there to guide the spouses in their progress. When the spouses do strive to live in truth the profound demands of a holy love, patiently and humbly without becoming discouraged by failures, then the moral laws, present there as a reminder, are no longer rejected as a hindrance, but recognized as a powerful help.

15) The progress of the spouses, like all human life, has many stages. The difficult and sorrowful phases — you experience them year after year — also have their place. But this must be emphasized: never should anguish or fear be found in men of good will, for finally, is not the Gospel good news also for families and a message which, if it is demanding, is no less profoundly liberating?

To realize that you have not yet conquered your interior liberty, that you are still subjected to the impulses of your tendencies, that you find yourselves almost incapable of respecting, for the moment, the moral law in such a fundamental domain — all this naturally gives rise to a distressing reaction. But this is the decisive moment when the Christian, in his confusion, instead of giving way to a fruitless and destructive revolt, humbly accedes to the staggering discovery of man in the presence of God, a sinner in the presence of the love of Christ, the Saviour.

WAY TO HOLINESS

16) From this radical insight the entire progress of the moral life begins. The spouses find themselves thoroughly "evangelized," discovering "in fear and trembling" (*Phil. 2, 12*), but also with marvelous joy, that in their marriage, as in the union of Christ with the Church, the Paschal mystery of death and resurrection is being accomplished.

Within the great Church, this little church then recognizes what it really is: a weak community, at times sinful and penitent but forgiven,

making progress in holiness "in that peace of God which is so much greater than we can understand" (*Phil.* 4, 7).

Far from being secure from all failings, "the man who thinks he is safe must be careful that he does not fail" (1 *Cor.* 10, 12), nor dispensed from a persevering effort, at times in cruel conditions which can be borne only with the thought of participating in the Passion of Christ (See *Col.* 1, 24), the spouses at least know that the demands of conjugal life, of which the Church reminds them, are neither intolerable nor impractical laws, but a gift of God to help them come, through and beyond their weaknesses, to the riches of a love fully human and Christian.

Henceforth, far from harboring the distressing sentiment of being driven to an impasse and, as the cases may be, to sink perhaps into sensuality while abandoning all sacramental practice, even revolting against a Church considered as inhuman, or to be unyielding in an impossible effort at the price of harmony and balance or even of the survival of the home, the spouses will open up to hope, with all the assurance that all the resources of grace in the Church are there to help them advance towards the perfection of their love.

FAITHFUL HOMES, HOPE OF THE WORLD

17) Such are the perspectives in which the Christian families, in the midst of the world, live the good news of salvation in Christ, and make progress in holiness in and by their marriage, with the light, the strength and the joy of the Saviour.

Such are also the major orientations of the apostolate of the *Equipes Notre-Dame*, beginning with the testimony of their own life, whose persuasive force is so great.

Worried and restless, our world wavers between fear and hope. Many young people stagger along the road that opens up to them. Let this be for you a stimulus and an appeal. With the strength of Christ you can and should accomplish great things. Meditate on His word, receive His grace in prayer and in the Sacraments of Penance and the

Eucharist, comfort one another by giving testimony of your joy, simply and discreetly.

A man and a woman who love each other, the smile of a child, peace in the home: a sermon without words, but so wonderfully convincing, where every man can already glimpse, as through a transparency, the reflection of another love and its infinite call.

18) Dear sons, the Church, whose living and active cells you are, gives through your homes a sort of experimental proof of the power of saving love, and brings forth its fruits of holiness. Homes that are tried, happy homes, faithful homes, you are preparing for the Church and for the world a new springtime whose first buds already make Us thrill with joy.

While beholding you, and united in spirit with the millions of Christian homes spread all over the world, We are filled with irrepressible hope, and in the name of the Lord We say to you with confidence: "your light must shine in the sight of men, so that, seeing your good works, they may give praise to your Father in Heaven" (Mt. 5, 16).

In His name, We invoke upon you and your well-beloved children, upon all the homes of the *Equipes Notre-Dame* and their chaplains, especially dear Fr. Caffarel, an abundance of Divine graces, as a pledge for which We heartily impart to you Our Apostolic Blessing.

Before giving you this blessing, We would like to say a prayer with you, an Our Father which we shall recite together for all the intentions of your Movement:

— for all the homes of the *Equipes Notre-Dame*, as well as the widows and widowers who equally belong to it;

— for all their children, that God may protect them and stimulate vocations among them;

— for all the homes that suffer or are being severely tried;

— finally, that an ever greater number of husbands and wives discover the riches of a Christian marriage.

Our Father . . .