

THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY

by

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The beginning of 1980, marks the end of a decade which — despite undeniable blessings it has brought us — must be seen as (in many ways) a tragic decade. It suffices merely to mention some names and some events: the terrorism of extremist groups; the dramatic fall of South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos into communist hands, and the subsequent sacrificing (we are told) of millions of citizens and the flight of hundreds of thousands of refugees from Indochina; the steady escalation of energy costs and the subsequent economic crises and great hardship it has triggered in most countries, especially among the poor, etc., etc. These and other currents, have had profound effects on every aspect of human life, on religious faith and moral attitudes and practice, on the daily lives of our Christian faithful. Now we have come to the end of this turbulent decade, and ask, perhaps, what awaits us in the eighties which have already begun.

This January meeting opens then on a sober note, which invites us to much prayer and reflection.

We must not pass over, however, those events of this past year which give us ground for gratitude and rejoicing. The significant quadricentennial of the Archdiocese of Manila, with its October Synod which — once its decrees are approved, — will have — we hope — widespread influence throughout the country; The International Congress on Mission, which we trust will bear precious fruit in the years to come, especially in Asia, and (if we may look forward to the near future) the joyously expected beatification of the first Filipino beatus — a layman! — and the eagerly awaited visit of His Holiness Pope John Paul II, the second papal coming within a decade to our people and our shores.

The topic which I would like to dwell on is the theme of the forthcoming Synod of Bishops in Rome: the Christian family in the contemporary world. It is a theme of primordial moment, and I believe the Synod and its preparatory period asks us to deepen our reflection on Christian Family Life in the Philippines, and invites us to find ways of renewing, strengthening and fostering Christian family life within our dioceses and communities.

In an assembly like ours there is hardly any need to recall the importance of Christian family life, that "first vital cell of human society" (AA, 11). Surely we can say of the Filipino family what the Latin American Bishops — both at Medellin and at Puebla — affirmed: "the central significance of the family is a primordial feature of our culture". None of us needs any convincing on this point.

During his visit to Mexico, Pope John Paul II spoke of the negative effects of underdevelopment on the family, especially among the poor.

Migration to the cities in search of work and education, the mushrooming of urban slums, the increasingly difficult struggle of the poor to sustain themselves and maintain a decent livelihood, state-organized pressures for every means of birth regulation, the creation of marginalized subcultural groupings in urban areas, — all these erode and disintegrate the traditional bonds of cohesion in the family. Thus families are more and more fragmented, and this even during the earliest year of the children, once again especially among the poor.

Among the middle classes, more fortunate in some ways than the economically-disadvantaged, these and other divisive forces are operative: diverse living and recreational patterns, the time-demands of the parents' work and social obligations, the cultural ruptures created by new educational systems, languages, by "new" moral standards and hierarchies of value. All these lead to increasing mutual lack of comprehension within the family.

A pervasive materialism, sometimes accompanied by consumerism and by a pleasure-seeking ethos which, in sum, is basically pagan. The highly developed consciousness of modern freedom" in the younger generations, the plurality of values and ideological frameworks, even the diverse styles of "religious culture", the imported "sexual revolution" and its influence on social and sexual (especially pre-marital) behaviour, the images of life created by the movies and television, with their easy acceptance of violence, ostentation, infidelity, promiscuous sex, and the like, corrosive influence of pornography (now brought into middle-class homes by the "betamax invasion") — in greater or lesser extent the family crises present in the so-called developed countries are already quite active in the homes of the middle-class and the wealthy among us.

This impressionist sketch and random cataloguing of contemporary currents and trends tell us something of the societal forces which bear on family life and give us much food for thought. We must ask ourselves if we have considered in sufficient depth the real

situation of the Christian family in Philippine society today. Have we inquired, with courageous honesty, what its "state of health" is, communities committed to us by the Lord? Have we, together with Christian parents and youth, discerned how we might face up to these difficulties that confront the Christian home in a society where change will almost certainly be increasingly rapid and wide-ranging?

A few years ago, the Committee on the Family, of the hierarchy of France, after a series of studies and surveys, saw that Christian families in their countries were looking to the Church and their bishops to provide them with realistic guidance, as families, through renewed family life education. They asked that the Church make stepped-up efforts to provide married couples and Christian homes with strong and clear Christian teaching regarding marriage and family life. They wanted to catch a renewed vision of the sacramental dimensions of these great human realities. "Help us as families to understand the streams of change in society, to read the signs of the times vis-a-vis our homes and families, to know how, within the new shapes of human sociality, how to live out in all authenticity our responsibilities as Christian parents, how to "re-create" our homes so that they are in tune with the times yet wholly Christian, living by evangelical and sacramental ideals."

The same challenge faces every local church, every national and regional hierarchy, every bishop, pastor and Christian educator in the world today. For, as the social question has now become worldwide (in the words of Pope Paul VI, in *Populorum Progressio*), so the crisis of the family too has become worldwide.

There is truly the need of a renewed Christian vision of marriage and family in contemporary society. There is need of a renewed anthropological and theological perspective, made available to our faithful. There is the need of renewed catechesis on these realities for parents and their children on all levels of society.

Renewed: for the Church cannot entrench herself in a position of rigid conservatism of past norms, forms and policies. The Holy Spirit moves us, not toward a fearful and defensive guarding of all past positions. But neither is a woolly-headed liberalism which agrees to all the new trends an attitude of spirit which precedes from graced prudence. Rather, the Spirit creates in us, if we listen to Him, a true gift of discernment, of judgment, by His light, of the new realities, the new findings of the human sciences, and leads us to the new judgements and decisions we must make.

How important it is, my dear Brothers in the episcopacy, to find ways of communicating to our faithful people the renewed Christian vision of marriage and family. And, increasingly, how little it

is known, while often enough the mass media propagate purely secular views, naturalistic sociological and psychological perspectives, sometimes even blatantly pagan and crassly hedonistic attitudes. **Lumen Gentium** and **Gaudium et Spes**, those two great ecclesiological texts of Vatican II, together with **Apostolicam Actuositatem**, can readily serve us as rich veins of doctrine and pastoral guidance which can be fruitfully mined, for the instruction of our people. How many of our priests know this teaching well enough to explain it in its beauty and all its challenge to their communities? Perhaps only a few among us pastors have undertaken with sufficient zeal this family life education and formation which is so urgent today.

The Church teaches us that marriage is truly a sacrament of human love. She repeats for us that "by the sacrament of matrimony Christ comes into the lives of the Christian spouses. He continues to abide with them, so that by their mutual self-gift, they can love one another with perpetual fidelity, just as He himself has loved the Church and has delivered himself up for her." (Eph. 5, 26; **Gaudium et Spes**, 48).

At the heart of the Church's theology of marriage is this perpetual and redemptive presence of Christ, within the very heart of the "sacramental love" of husband and wife. His presence assumes the love of the two persons into His own love. The miracle of Cana symbolizes this: the change of water into wine. Christ the Lord gives to married love its fidelity and strength, the gentleness, compassion and mercy of his own heart, so that it can become the foundation of a family and the family's "many-sided love" (**Gaudium et Spes**, 48. Christian married love, love within the Christian family, the Council recalls for us, becomes the symbol and presence of the Father's own love for mankind, revealed in Jesus — like the tabernacle lamp which tells us, *Dios esta aqui*, God's love is here in our midst. The "graced-loving" which is the fruit of the sacramental covenant gives us the guarantee of the very possibility of human love transcending the limitations of human selfishness and changeability — by the power of the Spirit.

The Council has called the family "the domestic church", **ecclesia domestica** (**Lumen Gentium**, 11), in parvo, the realization of the mystery of communion and community in Christ: a community of equality and solidarity of persons (LG, 32), of mutual acceptance, trust, forgiveness, of sharing, corresponsibility, communication, dialogue (GS, 92).

As domestic church the family becomes the first and foremost school of Christian faith and prayer, of religious experience and sacramental life. It is the catechetical school par excellence — and

not of teaching only, but of the lived ways of authentic Christian existence. Here the depth, breadth, perseveringness of Christ-like love is imbibed; here simplicity of life, the great and necessary virtue of evangelical poverty of spirit (so much needed in our day as an antidote to consumerism) and the compassionate and open-handed sharing with the less fortunate are learned; here the critical attitudes toward materialism and the evangelical passion for social justice are inculcated from earliest years. The great domestic virtues of thoughtfulness and mutual respect, of collaboration and the subordination of self for a common task, of dedication to duty and to hard persevering work, and the spirit of Christian joy are fostered. Here the life-long love for Christ and his Church is planted and nourished, grows to maturity and fruitfulness in service. Family life is the great apprenticeship for Christian freedom — better perhaps, of christian freedom for responsibility and service. It is the parents who, above all, must teach their children that their truest happiness can be found in bringing happiness to others, so that the evangelical saying, "He who loses His life for my sake shall find it" becomes not a clever paradox, but the Gospel formula for generosity and fulfillment.

But none of these rich and fundamental Christian meanings and values are "automatically" communicated; neither are they communicated primarily by words. In the family they are communicated by deed and example, by a "dialogue of life". Again, we must remind ourselves, it is our duty as pastors to spare no effort to ensure that these meanings and values are kept and fostered within Christian families, through our own personal pastoral concern and by means of an increasingly important family life education.

"It devolves on priests duly trained in family matters to nurture the vocation of spouses by a variety of pastoral means, by preaching God's word, by liturgical worship, and by other spiritual aids to conjugal and family life, to sustain them sympathetically and patiently in difficulties, and to make them courageous through love, so that families which are truly noble will be formed (GS, 52).

It is not for me, surely, to develop in detail what a relevant and adequate family life formation should consist in. It is study and research done in your own dioceses, it is the pastoral experience of your priests, it is the contribution of lay leaders, parents, teachers, — all these gathered through your own initiative and your own deep pastoral interest, which will suggest what should be your preferred approaches to this indispensable pastoral work. There is need for all of these elements, applied within the context of your com-

munities, if you will develop the reflection, policies and programs called for by the Church's response to the "crisis of the family" today.

Just a few proposals may be allowed, before we end. We might note that the apostolate to the Christian family must be an apostolate of the entire Christian family, indeed of the entire Christian community. This apostolate will be an apostolate of evangelization and education, of Christian formation. Its concern is not directed to social and material services, but to the development of Christian persons and communities — to the development of the Christian family in the fulness of "graced living". At the least some of our priests, with special gifts and qualifications appropriate for this work, should be prepared for it, in our dioceses.

We can suggest also that in our country, of which so large a part of the population are economically less fortunate, our family life apostolate must give preferential (though not exclusive) attention to the poor. It should strive to develop leadership among the unlettered, the truly "simple faithful" who yet have great potential for understanding the religious significance of the marriage-covenant and even to transmit it to other believing, hoping and loving Christians like themselves. We will remember that Saint Paul addressed his sublime reflections on marriage to "simple folk" among the early Christians, humble people, working people not unlike our own. Our late Pope Paul VI, in *Evangelii nuntiandi* — not without the prophetic insight of a genuine pastor — saw the importance of the community and "grassroots" dimension of evangelization and Christian formation.

Before leaving this topic I would also like to mention to Your Excellencies/Eminences, the attentive study of the "Declaration of the Rights of the Family" which was ringingly endorsed by the International Conference of Catholic Jurists held in Manila during the Christmas week of last year. I believe that the document will repay your consideration, and it will perhaps be useful for "conscientization" of various sectors in your communities — teachers, lawyers, government officials and older students.

Your Excellencies/Your Eminences, I have touched on just a few things regarding the situation of the Christian family in our present-day world. I realize, as we come to the end of these reflections, that I have only skimmed the surface of so many issues of importance. No matter, in these months which precede the Synod on the family I am sure that these — and other related points — will serve as paths for your pastoral reflection with your priests and other ecclesial collaborators. I am certain that the Church in the Philippines,

which has so rich an experience of family life to draw from, will have much to contribute to the forthcoming Synod. May your insights and the lessons you yourselves have learned from your pastoral concern for the family serve as a source of light and inspiration for the entire Church.

Let me end with a wish and a prayer for the year which is still new. We await, as we noted earlier, the longed-for visit of His Holiness Pope John Paul II, to proclaim the layman-martyr, Lorenzo Ruiz, as the first native-born Filipino beatus. We are sure that this papal coming will renew the deep affection and loyalty which the Filipino people bear toward the person of him whom St. Catherine of Siena called "the sweet Christ on the earth." We are sure the response of our people will gladden the heart of the Holy Father.

May I urge that we take pains to "educate" our communities to prepare for the event spiritually, to explain the meaning of our loyalty to the Roman Pontiff — how, in these difficult times for the Christian faith, this solidarity with Peter is a source of strength and confidence — *portae inferi non praevallebunt*. Let this period of expectation also be a period of prayer for the strengthening and deepening of the Faith. The eighties open somewhat uncertainty, even ominously. We move, not onto broad sunlit uplands, but onto shadowed territory amid much turbulence. The coming decade will call for great fortitude, faith and confidence in the Lord. Let us pray to the Lord of History, whose providence presides over the destinies of men and nations, and His blessed Mother, Mother of the Church, to accompany our people throughout this new decade, to make of them more truly His people — a people which, as the well-known hymn says, "places its heart at His feet, in dedication, in loving service, in noble and unwavering faith."

Thank you, and good day.

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