

## IN THE SERVICE OF THE FAMILY IN LATIN AMERICA\*

### **"The Ways of Love are not Useless"**

In a collective interview to the international press during the last Synod of Bishops, the Secretary General of CELAM (Latin American Episcopal Council) awakened the interest of journalists on speaking of an organization which he defined "the most operative of the apostolic movements of adult laymen in our Latin America."

Bishop Eduardo Pironio's words take on their real dimension if considered in close connection with the document of the second general assembly of Latin American bishops, which met at Medellin in 1968. In the third chapter, on "Family and demography", the Bishop of Medellin recall that "owing to various factors . . . the institution of the family has always had a very great overall importance in Latin America. They make an "insistent appeal to the rulers and to all those with responsibilities in this field to give the family its rightful place in the construction of an earthly city worthy of man and help it to overcome the great evils that afflict it and may prevent its full realization." They affirm explicitly that in view of the special conditions of the continent it is necessary to give the family apostolate priority in the planning of the overall apostolate. They ask that this apostolate of the family should have its place in the concern of all, and they lay down its main lines.

In this interview the Secretary General of CELAM was referring to the Christian Family Movement and the unpretentious, tenacious and disinterested work it has been trying to carry out for twenty years in this part of the world. The C.F.M.

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exists exclusively in terms of the family pastoral apostolate announced by the Bishops and works in its service; such is its full significance.

### ORIGINS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY MOVEMENT

The beginnings of the Christian Family Movement go back to 1949-50. It appeared more or less simultaneously in Montevideo (Uruguay) and Buenos Aires (Argentina).

Its genesis, which has some curious aspects, certainly presents lines of grandeur and traces of evangelical beauty.

A Passionate priest, an Argentine of Irish origin, an itinerant missionary in Uruguay — Pedro Richards — preaches a spiritual retreat for a group of married couples. It is a pioneer experience. The themes and reflections of the retreat are all based on the great values of married life: the vocation to marriage, the sacramental dimension of marriage itself, the full significance of human love, fatherhood and motherhood. And above all the spirituality of the married Christian.

At the end of the retreat an unexpected fact takes place. All the couples present the preacher with a real challenge: after having revealed the mystical doctrine of marriage, the importance of the family, the necessity of a systematic and organized action in favour of the family in that country, has he the courage, or even the right, to leave them? Why not remain with them, to do something together on behalf of the family? From that moment, with the consent of his superiors there is a change of direction in Father Richard's life. The itinerant missionary, accepting the challenge, begins with his group of married couples an experience that is unprecedented in the continent. A journey in Europe and in the United States gives him useful contacts with organizations working with the same aims as those they had in mind. In France, there were the *Equipes Notre Dame*, which Canon Caffare had initiated four years before and which were helping a large number of married couples in those difficult post-war years to rediscover the spirituality of their marriage. In the United States contact was made particularly with the *Cana Movement*, which was initiating a valid experience in the line of preparation for marriage, and with the incipient *Christian Family Movement*, the

main concern of which was to prepare married couples for commitment and apostolic action in their parish community and in their social environment.

The decision of the married couples and the Father was not just to transplant any of these outside experiences.

They would take the inspiration that had brought them into existence and animated them, and embody this inspiration in new forms, perfectly adapted to our people and our families with their typical problem. Thus the Christian Family Movement began.

### PRINCIPAL ASPECTS

From the very beginning, the C.F.M. defined itself as the apostolate of the family on behalf of the family. Even more, from the first moment it imposed upon itself as its fundamental postulate that the missionary activity of the family cannot be based on anything but a solid and deep mystical doctrine of marriage and married life. "Neither married spirituality without family apostolate, nor family apostolate without married spirituality": more than a slogan, this was the programme of action, the ideological foundation, the deep inspiration and the mystical doctrine of the C.F.M. from its birth.

*Married spirituality* was conceived by the movement not as a book of prescriptions of acts of piety, but as the patient and persevering study, in joy, of the great spiritual values of marriage and the family life: the dimensions of human love, which are generally not well known, the life couple, the sense of parenthood, the mystery of the Cross in the life of the married, and so many others. Numerous married couples in every country have been shaken up, formed and sustained by the Christian Family Movement, from 1950 onwards, to seek themselves, and spread to many others, that spirituality that is characteristic of their condition and defines it.

The C.F.M. established the *apostolate of the family* in four fundamental sectors particularly. First, that of the indispensable preparation for marriage and for family life (it will gradually be discovered, later, that his preparation, to be valid and not illusory, must begin not on the eve of marriage but long before, if possible during the period of engagement). Second, that of conjugal harmony: not fragile and precarious

harmony of a non-belligerency agreement, but the harmony of mutual integration: not the timid and static harmony which consists just in "not betraying" the other, but the delicate and laborious harmony, won day by day throughout the whole life of the couple, which is realized in the fullest possible meeting of bodies and spirits. Third, the sector, more and more explored today, of the relationship between parents and children and the mission of upbringing. Fourth, the sector of the involvement of the family in society. It must be pointed out here that our best families have a kind of radical vice, an original sin, as it were, a chronic tendency to shut out other families and society. They do so out of spiritual asepsis and fear of contamination; out of underestimation or indifference; out of self-consciousness or natural reserve; or because of the impossibility of communication. From its beginning, the Movement undertook to inculcate family openness and to help Christian families in practice to be open.

All this would lack an apostolic character, if it were exhausted inside the Movement, and destined exclusively for the close circle of married couples forming it. The most fruitful intuition of the C.F.M. was precisely to use its own members for an unlimited circulation of the ideals its stands for and in the name of which it meets, to an ever increasing number of married couples.

### THE METHOD OF THE C.F.M.

The pedagogy of the Christian Family Movement can be divided, fundamentally, into two points: to insert the married couples in a team so that, supporting one another, they will continue to deepen their spiritual life and intensify their apostolic commitment; and, gradually, starting from the point at which they met, to induce them to *involve themselves* in a more and more explicit, and demanding way, not only or mainly with the organization called C.F.M., but with the Family, the Church, the human community.

With this aim in mind, right from the beginning the Movement formed teams of eight or ten members under the chairmanship of one of them and, if possible, with the assistance of a priest as counsellor and animator. This structurization in teams is essential, and without it the movement does not exist.

The teams are called to a human and Christian development, and the elements of this development, various but all important, are:

1. The capacity to reflect, work, pray, and live in a team, setting out from the group that is necessarily heterogenous, indefinite and unstable at the beginning, up to its transformation into a compact community, of faith, prayer, charity, common action, with common aims;

2. The study of suitable subjects (not theoretical and speculative), but dynamic and geared to action) in pursuance of the aim established by the Movement according to definite stages;

3. The presence of the priest with his precise mission as educator in faith, beginning from the concrete events of life;

4. Special spiritual retreats for married couples, formation days, *aggiornamento* courses;

5. Progressive commitment of the married couple in practical apostolic activities, at the level of their capacity, until they are able to assume tasks of greater responsibility without the danger of losing heart.

These points, as a whole, constitute the method of action of the C.F.M., a method which, in order not to betray itself, must always maintain its dynamic character: "formation for action in action and by means of action" is the formula dear to Catholic Action and which the Movement has taken as its own. In this way it prepares married couples for their apostolic function in the service of the family, putting them in touch, in a lively, concrete way, with the most various family problems and the requirements of married life, while imbuing them with evangelical values at the same time. This contact can be educative for married couples only if they receive the spiritual and apostolic formation that will allow them to form a critical judgment on the problems they cope with.

### APOSTLES OF THE FAMILY

The anxious aspiration of those married couples who made the retreat in 1949, met with a response that was certainly more positive than they could or dared to hope for. The preacher did not leave them to themselves as they feared; on the contrary he undertook the same plan, together with them, as

they wished. And the desired Movement, which came into being in one of the smallest countries in Latin America, spread rapidly to the whole of the super-continent.

In all these Latin American Countries, the C.F.M. has assisted, in just over twenty years, a large number of married couples, made aware of the problems of the family in all their acuteness, implications and breadth. Thanks to the Movement it was possible to multiply the number of these married couples, and get them to look, beyond their domestic problems, at the problems of the Family as a social and human reality. Thus the Christian Family Movement has been faithful to its original inspiration. It has given the Church in Latin America modest but authentic apostles of the Family.

#### ON THE EVE OF A NEW MEETING

From Mexico to Uruguay and Argentine, in all the countries of the continent, with seriousness and patience, the Christian Family Movement has been preparing its sixth Latin American Meeting, in the last few months. Texts of motion and carefully drawn up questionnaire are at the basis of this preparation for a meeting that is important for two reasons.

It is important because, coming after three meetings dedicated to the micro-world of the family and its problems (Montevideo 1957, Mexico 1960 and Rio 1963), and two others (Caracas, 1966, Santiago, Chile 1969) open to the socio-political reality in which the family is involved, this sixth meeting needs, must and wishes to seek a vital synthesis of the two poles of the Movement: the family one and the social one. A *vital synthesis*: not an ingenious and facile approximation by means of abstract concepts and high-sounding expressions, but the deep and difficult convergence of lines always in tension.

Important, too, and still more so, owing to the great, difficult and complex subject that has been chosen for it.

#### LACK OF LOVE AND NECESSITY OF LOVE

Among many possible and certainly important subjects, the choice fell on the following: "Education to love". But it was desired, nevertheless, that more than a mere speculative treatment of the subject, it should be a programme to be carried out in all its possible extension and significance. Why, however,

be concerned with "education to love" to the extent of holding a congress of an international character on the subject? The choice of subject was dictated by an observation made by sociology but supported by historians, pastoralists, and all those who analyse contemporary society from a certain angle: the observation that the relations among men, persons, or groups, are unquestionably suffering today from a crisis that can be defined from various standpoints but at the root of which there is a crisis of love, more precisely, a lack of love.

This lack is revealed in the various categories and in the various pictures of social life. An apparently contradictory, but highly expressive manifestation of this lack, on the psycho-social plane, is the advance of free love and the rising tide of pornography in our civilization. "Eros" is growing because love is lacking. A manifestation of its lack on the family plane is the wave of divorces that create instability in the institution of the family, it is the growing difficulty of the father-son dialogue. On the political and social plane, a manifestation of it is the irrepressible outbreak of violence all over the world today.

To an ever increasing extent, the convergent reflections of those who, at congresses and in books and specialized reviews, seriously study the trends of the contemporary world, conclude that beyond all superficial explanations, the deep motivation of a tumultuous, traumatizing relationship of conflicts among men is visible *deficiency* of real love. It would be of little use correcting the peripheral and accidental disproportions, if this really decisive fundamental lack were not corrected in contemporary society.

### WHY THIS LACK OF LOVE?

Absence of love in human society: a phenomenon of such proportions has evidently a series of causes and numerous consequences at different levels of human life and different symptoms that declare it.

A meeting such as that of Bogota would not have either the time or the capacity to survey all the causes, all the defects, all the signs that reveal the phenomenon. For this reason it has chosen, for the sake of example, as it were, a cause, a consequence and a symptom characteristic of the lack of love, those considered particularly significant for some reason. These three

choices will form kinds of sub-themes of the thought and practical conclusions of the meeting, in the framework of the subject "education to love".

### THE HUMAN PERSON

Among the deepest causes of the weakening of love, from which our civilization is suffering, is certainly an *insufficient sense of the human person*.

*Gaudium et Spes*, speaking of marriage and its riches, defines the love that animates it as "a close interpersonal communion". The same can be said of every true love, on any plane. No love draws on its complete human dimension and its possible fullness unless it puts two persons in a certain degree of intimacy, the deepest sense of the word "person". There is an inevitable degradation, debasement, disqualification of human love whenever one of those who love each other lowers or abandons — to a lesser or greater extent — his quality as a person and becomes an object or thing. On the contrary, human love grows enormously to the extent to which the two affirm themselves as real persons.

*Persons*, that is, intelligent and free human beings, but endowed with instincts and passions, who try, at every moment, to meet the challenge of events with a harmonious affirmation of reason and freedom.

*Persons* also implies: to be endowed with an inner vocation to rise continually above oneself and to meet a high ideal in which following the call to likeness with God and to behaviour as a son of God, is present.

*Persons*, that is, beings marked by particular inalienable and incommunicable riches, which make everyone something particular and original, but at the same time beings open to others with the deep secret affinities that produce solidarity and create a society.

*Persons*, finally: beings never completed but in a permanent state of growth and self-mastery. This dynamic movement is made up of the effort of the individual and at the same time the converging and brotherly help of all the others.

All these elements are essential for the full meaning of the human person. When they are respected as a whole, they bring forth the sense of, and respect for, the person and con-



fer a certain tone on men's lives together. When they are denied, underestimated or neglected in some way, there arrives the crisis of the sense of the person, and social life suffers from this crisis in large and small societies. The society of our day, in fact, suffers without any doubt from this very crisis of the senses of the human person. The crisis is called massification: it is called, in a word, being reduced to things. It is necessary to combat this.

### THE DIGNITY OF WOMAN

Among the most revealing aspects of the lack of love in relations among persons, discrimination at all levels, exasperated nationalism, intensification of the class struggle, glaring social inequalities, the Meeting, for its reflections, will take one: the low state that, in spite of everything, woman continues to have in various strata of our society.

The place given to woman, not only on the abstract plane of concepts, but also and particularly on the practical plane of social behaviour, is an important datum to measure the significance and content of a civilization.

Today we are witnessing a revolution called, symptomatically, the "liberation of woman". The perspectives in which this "liberation" is set, however, do not hold out hope for a real social and cultural advancement of woman, particularly because it does not eliminate precisely what was necessary to eliminate: reducing woman to being a mere object of man. I am very much afraid that in this way the lower condition of woman, today, differs very little from what it was in the patriarchal age. The transformation threatens to be only apparent.

This is proved by the fact that in our Latin American countries, by and large, woman is still the object in unions based merely on mutual consent, without the bond of permanent affection, without protection for the future, without sacramental dimension, without moral and human greatness.

A movement for the real advancement of woman, without a deceptive competition with man or the desire to be the same as he is, is necessary to give social life a balance that it certainly lacks. But such a movement demands respect for the dignity of woman, a dignity that does not consist just in having a place in the sun and in taking part in social, political and administra-

tive functions, but implies a world of philosophical, ethical and also theological concepts, which are often far from influencing civilization today.

Therefore, the meeting of the C.F.M. has chosen as one of its sub-themes the "dignity of woman". Its concern is that, within every family, in the ranks of its own Movement and of society in general, woman should see her dignity as a woman accepted and promoted. This will take place only when her fundamental equality with man is recognized and to the extent to which it is recognized, without hateful and humiliating discriminations. When and to the extent to which woman will be given the opportunity to serve society without sacrificing her femininity, on the contrary making her particular and unmistakable contribution as a woman. When and to the extent to which she will no longer be subjected to the degradation that our erotic civilization imposes on her and which pervade all the mass media, making her an instrument to exploit man's instincts. The Meeting will have to yield some concrete results in the direction of raising the condition of woman in our communities, in order to satisfy one of the postulates of *Mater et Magistra*.

### THE INCOMPLETE FAMILY

An inevitable and dramatic consequences of the lack of love is the *birth of incomplete families* in society. There is a general tendency to consider incomplete only or mainly the family that is violently mutilated as a result of the death of one of its members. Actually, this incompleteness created by the inexorable law of death is less grave, sorrowful though it is.

The family is incomplete in an even more traumatizing way when one the spouses absents himself when still alive: absents himself physically by abandoning the home or absents himself morally by forgetting his mission and function in the family. The family is incomplete when divorce or more less legal separation breaks up the married couple that is the foundation of the family. It is incomplete when man and woman unite and remain united only out of a biological impulse, without real love. Incomplete, when husband, wife and children live together but do not really share their lives, side by side without real communication. When dialogue is impossible or becomes tense or irritable, monosyllabic. When a gulf yawns between parents and children which no one tries to bridge.

The problem of the incomplete family seems to be one of the most acute in our countries, at least judging by the trends and destiny of a people at a certain level, far beyond purely political, economic-financial, or administrative questions. We think that the whole future of a Continent now in the development phase — if a really complete development is desired — will largely depend on our capacity to solve this problem and to help millions of families to reach their fullness. All the partial efforts made by persons and groups, Churches, family movements, institutions and governments, should tend in this direction, when they deal with the family. This is the direction in which preparation for marriage, family counselling, associations of parents and teachers, family therapeutics, should proceed. In the direction of preventing the multiplication of these incomplete families.

The considerations made so far show that the Bogota Meeting of the C.F.M. will have its starting point in the family problems, but does not end or exhaust itself in the latter, because it extends to far wider perspectives. It touches upon a problem of humanism for the moment of history in which we live.

*Education for love* as regards those who will be at Bogota will certainly be a concern to set up homes that are harmonious, complete, happy and luminous. But it will also, and we would almost say particularly be a concern to build a world in peace, justice, brotherhood and solidarity. The meeting would not be complete if it did not reach this point, however ambitious it may seem.

*Education for love* will also mean preparing as large a number of persons as possible in order to introduce love instead of resentment, hatred and violence in relations among men, at all levels of human society.

In this wide and universal sense, the Meeting has taken as its motto the following words from *Gaudium et Spes*, words which have almost passed unnoticed but are extremely eloquent: "The ways of love are not useless". In view of the fascination of violent means and the discouragement with which dialogue is regarded, we wish to repeat these forgotten words of the Council.

**THE FUNCTION OF THE FAMILY**

*Education for love*, finally, should be a task common to all. The school, the parish, the neighborhood group, the association should educate people to love incessantly with all the means at their disposal. The teacher, father, the counsellor, the leader, are all called to educate to love.

But for the teaching of love, there is no better school than the family. Every family, born of love and sustained by love, is ideally in the best situation to develop real love in each of its members. But under the condition that it should realize within itself what is the substance of the institution of the family: intimacy and openness to others, mutual respect and trust, close communion among persons; and above all, a great, lasting, real love.

May it be the Lord's will that the Christian Family Movement will emerge from this Meeting better prepared to help our families, in this great mission: to educate their members to love, and thus influence the destinies of our Latin American Continent, at the historic turning point it is called to live.

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