

THEME OF THE 1980 SYNOD OF BISHOPS

THE ROLE OF THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY IN THE MODERN WORLD

The theme chosen by John Paul II for the next General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 1980, "The role of the Christian family in the modern world", was presented and illustrated to accredited journalists in the Vatican Press Office.

The Press Conference, presided over by H.E. Mons. Ladislau Rubin, Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, was introduced by the Director of the Holy See Press Office who, after recalling that problems concerning marriage and the family had been considered for some time a subject on which a Synodal Assembly should make a pronouncement, said:

"After the Synods on Evangelization and on Catechesis, the Family appeared more and more clearly and eminently as a privileged subject of Christian catechesis itself and an important element of evangelization."

Among the propositions of the last Synod on Catechesis, presented to the Pope, here is one that says explicitly: "In spite of the problems and changes with which it has to cope today, the family remains the first community in which man opens to truth, love and to relationship with others."

Answering the consultations of the Secretariat of the Synod on themes to present to the Pope, the Episcopal Conferences proposed the Family.

The Council of the Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, which met at an ordinary session from 16 to 19 May 1978, noted that the moment had come to devote the whole synodal assembly to the study of family problems. Paul VI of venerated memory, on examining the proposals of the Council of the Secretariat, directed his choice to the theme of the Family.

This choice was confirmed also by John Paul I, and by the present Sovereign Pontiff; the theme has been formulated definitively in this way: "De muneribus familiae Christianae in mundo bodierno" (The role of the Christian family in the modern world).

Immediately afterwards H.E. Mons. Rubin began to speak, illustrating to the journalists the various stages of the preparation and the outlines of the document which intends to offer the Bishops an overall view of problems concerning the family.

PREPARATION OF THE SUBJECT

The Council of the General Secretariat of the Synod was convened, for its ordinary meeting, from 12 to 18 December 1978. On the agenda there figured, in the first place, preparation of the Outlines document, which was to be sent to the world Episcopate, in order that the whole Church might examine the theme proposed and that study of problems concerning the family might be brought about.

In this first phase of preparation for the Assembly, it was a question of asking and obtaining from all Episcopal Conferences suggestions, observations and above all, proposals, which could constitute the basis of discussion at the Synod. Subsequently the Experts, who had prepared the first draft and had followed the discussions of the Council carefully, in collaboration also with some Members of the Council itself, drew up a new draft according to the deliberations of the Council, so that it would correspond better to the requests of the Bishops and the expectations of the People of God.

The text of the consultation document, in its definitive form, was submitted to the attention of the Pope, who authorized that it should be printed and sent to all the Patriarchs, Bishops, Heads of Congregations and Members of the Union of Superiors General.

As far as possible, the consultation document will be examined also by priests and laity of the whole church.

From the replies, which will arrive by the end of the current year, the Secretariat of the Synod will draw up a new document, which will be called "Instrumentum laboris", intended, this time, for Members of the future Assembly only.

For this reason, the Episcopal Conferences have already been requested to proceed with the election of their representatives, according to the sphere of competence of each one and to the theme now proposed for consultation, which will be, next year, discussed by the Synod.

OUTLINES

The Outlines intend to offer Bishops a certain general view of problems concerning the family.

The Outlines document is based on the family in its totality and unity, according to the requests of the Episcopal Conference.

Dealing with the "Role of the family", the Synod does not aim at drawing up a list of the rights and duties of the family, but wishes to see better the mission that God confers on spouses and on the family with the Sacrament of Marriage, in order to study, afterwards, the essential conditions in order that the family may carry out this mission in the Church and in the world.

The outlines document is, therefore, subdivided into three parts preceded by an introduction.

The introduction points out the connection between this subject and the subjects of the preceding Synods, that is, Justice in the World, the Ministerial Priesthood, Evangelization and Catechesis.

All these ministries of the Church need operators and means.

No one is better suited than the Christian family to bring forth priestly and religious vocations to meet these necessities. Therefore, the Christian family is important for the community, as its first social cell, and for the Church, as "ecclesia domestica."

The significance of the subject is also clarified in the introduction. It is a question of the role of the family in the modern world.

The word "Role" must be taken in a theologico-pastoral sense, in a dynamic sense which calls the family of today to its mission in the Church and in civil society. For this reason, it is desired to stress the general conditions of the family and to specify the specific ones of the Catholic family.

1. In the first part, the document sets to observe the situation of the family today, fifteen years after Council, which had dedicated special attention to it. Since then many things have changed, both in the Church and in the world.

Among the elements that influence the pastoral life of the family, the document indicates some, for the sake of example.

For instance, mention is made of the existence of a new awareness of the pastoral importance of the Christian family, which can be observed in the family as a school of love, in family spiritual life, in the role of the family in society and in the Church.

Under the title "The Christian family in the transformation of the role incumbent on the family in society today", a study is made of the influence of modern society on the family, with the various legislations and provisions of modern law, with the change in the status of women, with economic and social changes and with the very concept of marriage and of the family.

This view of the situation does not ignore or underestimate the particular difficulties of the Christian family, such as, for example, the religious pluralism which distinguishes modern society, the rejection by certain environments of the doctrine of the Church in the field of morals, external circumstances, the growing lack of the concept of the sacred and sacramental nature of marriage, ignorance.

2. In the second part, the document dwells on some doctrinal motivations, such as, for example, "the mission and the responsibility of the Magisterium and of the Church with regard to the conjugal and family community".

As for the responsibility of the Magisterium regarding the conjugal and family pact, the *Outlines* stress that the Christocentric aspect of the family and marriage does not harm its human aspect, because in marriage there exist something greater than in the human pact.

The union of man and woman embraces the whole span of their existence and their whole "spirit and soul and body" (1 Thess 5.23). The union, in fact, in the image of the covenant of God, the Creator with his people and of Christ the Saviour with his Church, transcends the two persons who give and receive each other, since from this union there will be born sons and daughters.

Then mention is made of the plan of God the Creator with regard to the conjugal and family community. In the wake of *Gaudium et Spes* the document recalls that God's plan, as the guide of human realities, teaches that the deep community of life and conjugal love, founded by the Creator and structured with its own laws, is established by the conjugal pact, which is an irrevocable personal consent.

To help reflection on this reality, the document considers some aspects of the religious significance of family life: "personalistic" aspect, which is expressed in the bilateral relationship between man and woman, in which the spouses educate, elevate, and enrich each other; and the aspect of "fertility", which is the logical evolution of conjugal love. This love leads the spouses to procreation and to the upbringing of new persons.

The Outlines also specify that, according to the recent Magisterium — especially of Paul VI, of venerated memory, in the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* — the two aspects of union and procreation in marriage are inseparable.

The document goes on to recall how, in the plan and work of God the Redeemer, there has been constituted by means of the mystery of Christ a new and eternal covenant, thanks to which the whole human family is gathered in the society of children of God and brothers united by means of Christ's charity.

The marriage of Christians is integrated in the mystery of Christ; the new pact, the new union "in Christo", takes the place of the purely human contract, raising conjugal love to the firmness of Christ's charity, without taking anything away from its specifically human element.

The perfecting of conjugal love is realized, therefore, by means of the will of God who confers his graces on the spouses. The permanence of God's gift, which calls for faithfulness and demand indissolubility, is at the same time a source of graces which help the spouses to overcome their difficulties.

Thus, asceticism and conjugal chastity are imposed as constant duties and commitments for married couples who wish to live their consecration to God in a specific way. This calls for generosity, complete donation, constant attention to the other, mutual respect, forgiveness of offences and, in particular, it demands the practice of conjugal chastity.

The latter does not imply hatred of the body, or contempt for conjugal acts and legitimate pleasure, but it demands that every dimension of conjugal life should be subordinated to and referred to God, honouring the partner and manifesting true love.

3. The role of the Christian family in the modern world. Set in its socio-pastoral context and enlightened by the reminder of some doctrinal principles, the mission and the function of the family is summed up in some considerations of a practical and topical nature in the third part of the document.

After specifying that the purpose of the Synod is not to draw up a list of the duties and rights of the family but recognition of the specific gift that God confers on married couples by means of the Sacrament of Marriage, the Outlines, following the Catechesis of Vatican II envisage:

— the role of the family in the upbringing of children and in the transmission of faith;

— the role of the family in the preservation of spiritual values and in the sanctification of its members;

— the role of the family in the advancement and animation of social life.

With this order it was desired to follow the teaching of the Council on the threefold mission of the People of God — prophetic, sanctifying and kingly.

1) The prophetic role of the family is carried out in the sector of education and the transmission of faith. Every family, which has collaborated with God in giving birth to new creatures, has the duty of teaching them what is necessary to lead a fully human life. Parents are the first and principal educators of their children. The other members of the family, who communicate to the young their own wisdom and experience, are particularly fitted to help in this task.

When the family entrusts its children to academic institutions, it does not intend to, and cannot, renounce its own educative responsibility. True Christian education must promote the formation of the human person in view of his ultimate purpose.

Therefore those who are born in a Christian family are marked by baptism, they are called children of God and consequently, they have the right to acquire the mentality and to see examples that will open to them the way to holiness on earth and eternal happiness in heaven. The parents are, from the early infancy of their children, proclaimers and educators of their faith.

Furthermore, it is the duty of Catholic parents to get their children to take part in the life of the parish and other communities and associations which are necessary and useful for their Christian education and formation.

It is also their right — which cannot be denied by any power — to choose for their children the school and religious instruction that will ensure them the spirit to conform to their Catholic faith.

2) The role of the family in the preservation of spiritual values. The family, defined by Vatican II "the most complete and rich school of humanity", is a guardian and teacher of virtue. It guards the deposit of love, generosity and faithfulness.

Love establishes between the spouses a mutual open mindedness and agreement about the decisions to be taken. The same love that becomes fruitful and is realized in the transmission of life brings forth in parents the desire and inclination to transmit the

riches received in heritage, such as, for example, culture, wholesome traditions, virtues . . . And since various generations coexist in the same family, a biblical sign of the Lord's blessing, the family itself becomes a school of wisdom and communicability in helping one another, living and operating.

The role of the Christian family, in this field, is to aim at sanctification: from the moment of the commitment assumed at the celebration of marriage to the mutual promise of help in daily sanctification, to the transmission of sanctification lived and testified to the children and, through them, as new citizens, to the whole of society.

Among the present-day problems of the Catholic family, with which the Synod will have to deal, mention is made, among other things, of the question of family prayer, love and conjugal faithfulness, witness to Christ's love and missionary and priestly vocations.

3) The role of the family in the advancement and animation of social life.

This is what reveals and testifies to the royal mission of the family.

For the Second Vatican Council the family is the first and vital cell of society. The Author of all things constituted marriage as the principle and foundation of human society. He did so, not only because the new citizens are born of the family, but also because it is the first school of social virtues.

Owing to this complex identity, the family has its own peculiar reality and purpose, it has duties and rights in society.

The civil community must respect the autonomy and initiative of the family, and it is the duty of the family to carry out its tasks in the economy of redemption and also of the life and temporal development of the People of God.

The rights and duties of the family, Vatican II teaches, are universal and inviolable. Therefore all things that man needs to lead a worthy and really human life, must be made accessible to him.

In the first place alongside the right to freedom, the Outlines stress the right of every man to found a family and have children. For this reason, the Church invites everyone to collaborate effectively for the advancement of marriage, the first conditions for the formation of the family.

The civil authorities must take into account the nature and requirement of the family as regards housing, the upbringing of children, working conditions, social security . . . And this in order that the young will be able to found a family and maintain it decently.

The family — the Christian one in particular — has the task and the possibility of opening the hearts and minds of its members to the necessities of the whole of mankind. The sons of faith must learn that God, the Father of all men, conferred the same dignity and the same right to respect on everyone.

The Christian family is called to expand beyond itself and to offer society its specific aid and its own spiritual riches.

PROBLEMS OF THE CATHOLIC FAMILY TODAY

Changes in the conditions of life, work, and free time, have a deep impact on the very structure of everyday life, and, in interpersonal relations, they often cause imminent evils, which violate the integrity of the person and offend man's dignity.

Christian-families would be able to bring a remedy, if they really undertook to exercise their rights and carry out their duties according to the nature of their kingly task.

Therefore, the Synod should seek the best way to recall the principles regarding the rights of the family: for example, how to integrate it actively in pastoral works and the apostolate, how to help so many parents, tired by the hubbub of the city and the weight of their work, not to flee society, but to shoulder their social responsibilities which begin, in the first place, at home with regard to children.

The Outlines wonder whether, in the process of social innovations that concern the family, especially in the social and medical field, family associations should intervene on the national and international plane to concern themselves with the problems of the family and meet the requirements of the fundamental rights of the person.

The problems and prospects are many indeed. They indicate the dangers and the stakes involved with regard to the future of the family and of society.

We have listed some, the Outlines recall others, and with the answers that will reach the Secretariat, a good many will emerge.

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The Assembly of Synod Fathers will deal with them after a wide survey and a real sensibilization, lived within the People of God in its varied conditions of existence.

Faced with the new changes and new ideologies, the circle of family and responsibility extends to the national and international society.

The Church is aware that it is important that the family should be strong and healthy in order to bear witness to love and to operate for justice in a humble and constant catechesis which ranges from care for the children to awareness of the commitment for the defence of the other.

In this the Church needs the collaboration of everyone. She needs the young particularly in order that, formed and strengthened in their Christian identity, they may behave as children of God in the service of the society of brothers.

There are a great many different means of bringing this about. They are found when the artisan is aware of his capacities.

Therefore, the new mentality of modern man, who has become more and more convinced of this temporal responsibility, must remain open to the vertical dimension of his being and action.

The media of social communication, of every kind, have a specially important role in this field.

At the end of the exposition, H. E. Mons, L. Rubin, who was accompanied by Mons. Edmond Farhat, an Official of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, answered the questions posed by the journalists.