

THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS AND THE FAMILY

By

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

It would be very difficult to stand here and then to try to summarize, within the time frame of this convocation, everything that transpired during the recently-concluded Synod of Bishops in Rome. So many aspects of family life in the Christian context were discussed, and so many ramifications explored by the 216 Synodal Fathers and the sixteen married couples present, that any attempt to capsulize what happened would be an exercise in futility.

The written portion of this talk, therefore, will confine itself to the message issued by the Bishops at the end of the Synod. That message, as some of you may already have learned, was beamed to the Christian families in the modern world.

I have decided to confine the written portion of this lecture to this message because the deliberations in Rome during the month-long assembly are, as you know, beamed to the Holy Father and not to the People of God in the world. And, until Pope John Paul II issues a formal document based on these deliberations, we are not at liberty to conjecture on what the contents of that document would be.

But our Message to the Christian Families has been released. Moreover, it has been published. I feel safe, therefore, in discussing it with you.

We started off with a statement that we recognized our own limitations. Therefore, we were in no position at all to attempt to give answers to the various problems concerning marriage and the family. Therefore, we stressed that our message was purely a sharing, a humble effort to present our views to the people of the world without any grandiose pretensions that ours was the definitive statement.

We looked at the situation of Christian families today, and our look was both edifying and saddening. We were saddened, for instance, by the fact that there are so many Christian

families today that are in dire poverty and in extreme economic straits. This is particularly true in the countries of the Third World. We were saddened likewise by the fact that, in the prosperous countries of the First World, the malady was not material poverty but spiritual misery.

Surely, my friends, you are aware of the empty lives that the affluent live in the developed countries, of the almost total loss of spiritual values and their replacement by purely material ones. This has resulted in spiritual bankruptcy, a condition that — at least to my mind — is even worse than financial poverty.

We were edified, however, by certain positive family values that remain prevalent today in some countries of the developing world. Countries like the Philippines. I am sure I will be forgiven for my immodesty in the Synod when I spoke of the many wonderful values that are found in Filipino families. Values like the continuing respect in which parents are regarded by the children, the love and affection that the younger ones display to their *lolos* and *lolas*, the solicitude and concern that elder brothers and sisters feel for their younger siblings. I spoke of how many Filipino *kuyas* and *ates* believe it is their responsibility to support their younger siblings through college, often postponing their own marriage plans, sometimes giving them all up altogether.

We spoke of our great distress over the violence perpetrated by certain international organizations and certain governments on families and family life. The Philippine government, alas, is not exempted from this. Its encouragement of sterilization, its promotion of contraceptives, its passage of coercive laws — the withholding of income tax exemption for children in excess of four, the denial of maternity leave privileges to mothers who have had a certain number of children — show it is following the worldwide trend to do violence to family life in pursuit of an ephemeral ideal known as improved quality of life.

In the message, we spoke of God's plan for marriage and the family, of how all people are called to participate in His divine life. We said that the family is called in a special way to carry out this plan because it is the first cell of society and of the Church. This Church, we were careful to emphasize, regards marriage as a covenant of love and life. But Christian marriage, we pointed out, is possible only for those who have undergone conversion of heart.

It is only those who have been converted who will understand that the pains and the sufferings frequently undergone by Christian families are part of Christian life because the Cross is an inextricable part of the Christian way.

How are families supposed to respond to God's plan? We were explicit in our answer. We said the best response is through education and formation: education in the formation of moral sense, of love and faith and in human and Christian values.

The Christian family performs this education and formation because it is the "domestic Church," because it is a community of faith living in hope and love.

We believe — and we said so categorically in our statement — that the family is the foremost agent of evangelization and catechesis.

And, because of all the foregoing, the Christian family should at all times be willing to welcome new life into its fold, to share its goods with the poor, and to be open to others.

To the bishops in the Synod, these are all-important. The willingness to welcome new life should be particularly emphasized particularly during these times when so many couples, even supposedly Christian couples, are practising birth control through means that are chemical, mechanical or surgical, and not natural. The willingness to share with others is likewise important because we live in a materialistic world, and more and more, people are becoming selfish and egocentric, not mindful of their Christian obligation to be men for others.

The bishops, for their part, stressed that the apostolate of the family should be of the greatest interest to the whole Church, not only because it is a real ministry, but because families are the source and fountainhead of vocations.

And this is something that would be of primary interest to those among you ladies who consider yourselves advocates of women's liberation. Our message stressed the essential equality between men and women. We believe that they should not have an adversary relationship, as some feminists seem to be saying. Rather, their roles complement each other. Husbands and wives have different charisms, but when applied to the family, these charisms work for the greater glory and good of the children because their rights and their dignity are safeguarded.

In concluding the message, we declared that the human condition is frail, that there are many difficulties that assail Christian couples, particularly those couples who sincerely wish to live up to the moral norms of the Church. But we said that the whole Church will help these couples, strengthen their resolve and fortify them against weakness. This can be done if they leave themselves open to God's saving grace.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: this, in brief, is what the Synodal Fathers declared in their message. As can be gleaned even from just a cursory reading of the message, it is evident that the Church has an abiding concern for the Christian family, that it is willing to help it in every way.

Personally, I find myself extremely gratified over what happened at the Synod. I saw the deep interest and the concern of the bishops. And I have every confidence that, so long as this men remain in positions of responsibility and influence in their respective jurisdictions, the fate of the Christian family is in good hands.

Thank you very much. God bless you and remember, I love you all very dearly.