

(English translation)

Lucerne, May 16, 1999

The Future lies in the Family

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The family's trinitarian roots

The family is indissolubly interlinked with the mystery of the very life of God, which is Unity and Trinity: "God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying: 'Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth...'" (Gen. 1: 27-28).

And when Jesus was asked to speak of marriage, he quoted this very phrase from Genesis, recommending that they go to the "origins" in order to understand something of the mystery of conjugal love.

Therefore, when God created humankind, he formed a family, that is, a man and a woman called to communion in the image of the mystery of love of his own being. He called them to be fruitful and to use all creation, in likeness to the inexhaustible paternity of God.

"In the light of the New testament," affirms the Pope, "it is possible to glimpse in God himself, in the trinitarian mystery of his life, the original model of the family. The divine 'We' constitutes the eternal model of the human 'we', above all, of that 'we' which is formed by man and woman created in the divine image and likeness."¹

The family is rooted in this very reality.

Certainly, the mystery of love envelops all creation. The laws of nature are laws of love and human love sums up and sublimates this continual game of unity and distinction.

Guardian of life and treasure chest of relations of love

Human love has different seasons. It begins with falling in love, almost a spark of God's love to enkindle a family, a flash that illuminates the person loved with new light, a new reality that changes one's life, that gives happiness and enthusiasm in order to embark together on a journey whose end is not in sight. It is almost the genetic patrimony of a couple.

Then there is the season of fruits, of growth, of consolidation. Situations change, and even people themselves evolve with time and are transformed. Love knows other moments, other flavours, other expressions, and the capacity to love needs to be continually renewed.

The whole future of the couple is encased in this dynamic, which makes them one in the perspective of indissolubility. It is a future that leads them beyond themselves, especially through the generation of new lives.

Conjugal fecundity, in fact, has many expressions, the most typical of which is the generation of new human lives.

In procreation, the couple cooperates with the creative action of God who, through them, enlarges his family on earth. Bonhoeffer writes: "He (God) enables men and women to participate in his continual act of creation. Parents receive their children from God and must lead them back to him."² In the newborn baby we find the typical way in which couples give, in a sense, God to the world.

Parenthood is an important step in becoming a family. It is the kindling and multiplying of new relationships, a phenomenon that will gradually increase as the experience of the family develops in time.

1. John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, 1994, Vatican Press, n. 6.

2. D. Bonhoeffer, Sermon on the occasion of a marriage in the military prison of Berlin, Tegel, May 1943.

The family becomes a treasure chest, a wonderful intertwining of loving relationships, of family intimacy, of friendship: nuptial love between husband and wife, maternal-paternal love towards children, filial love towards parents, love between brothers and sisters, love of grandparents for their grandchildren and vice versa, for aunts and uncles, for cousins, friends, and neighbours... God's idea of the family is truly like a mysterious jewel reflecting different facets of love.

Social dimension and impact on society

In the course of its life, the family is transformed from a man-woman uni-duality to a communion of persons, like a spring that initially surges forth with freshness and force and gradually becomes a stream that gives life to an ever vaster area.

Thus, the family becomes a generator of sociality. Already, Cicero had described the family as the principle of the city and almost a seedbed of the State.³ Because the family is a resource for its members in the various seasons of their life, and because it was created by God in the image of his mystery of love, the family is the ideal model for every human society.

Back in 1993, at a *convention* held in Rome in preparation for the International Year of the Family, I communicated this thought of mine, highlighting the wealth of the values inherent in the family when it is in harmony with God's design, values which, when extended and applied to humanity, can transform it into one big family: values like communion, solidarity, a spirit of service, of reciprocity, which appear to be "normal" in the life of the family, could offer a new breakthrough to the inflexible institutional structures, and become reference points for a new social order.

There are already structures and institutions in the world for the good of the human person, but these structures need to be humanized, to be given a soul. The spirit of service must reach the same intensity, the same spontaneity, and the same spirit of love for each individual as in the family.⁴

Great upheavals are not needed to bring about this authentic and profound social revolution. It would be enough for each family to truly be itself, and to take as a personal call the heartfelt invitation of Baden-Powell, founder of the 'Scouts': "Family, become what you are!"⁵

Present-day situation of the family

If we observe the international situation of the world around us, these brief reflections of ours on what the family is and should be, can appear to be a naive utopia.

The Western world is pervaded by an individualistic culture, particularly attentive to analyzing and to promoting man and woman in view of needs and consumption. Thus, instead of being a divine gift of relationship, sexuality becomes an idol which disrupts the integrity of the human person, ever more distant from love and fecundity. People base their lives on emotions and see sexuality as a kind of game in which couples change partners, thus undermining that basic trust in the stability of sentiments which is indispensable to family life.⁶ ...

The children are the first victims of such situations. They are deprived of the reference point of parental unity and they are forced to deal with the shattering of this figure into numerous and successive pseudo parents.

"Bovet writes: "The family is like a 'living body' and its members are like its organs. Just as the head, heart and cells are part of every living body, similarly, the father, mother and children are part of

3. Quoted by T. Sorgi, *Costruire il sociale. La persona e i suoi piccoli mondi*, Città Nuova, Rome, 1991.

4. *The Love that Comes From God, reflections on the family*, New City Press, New York, 1993, p. 93.

5. Cf. C. L. Gentili, *Per star bene in famiglia*, Nuova Fiordaliso, Città Nuova, Rome, 1998, p. 11.

6. Cf. G.P. Di Nicola, A. Danese, *Amici a vita*, Rome, 1997, p. 39.

the family. The children must be able to experience a profound, full relationship with the father and mother in order to be able to honour and love them.”⁷

And yet, today the stable marriage bond appears to be almost in contradiction with personal freedom. More than relational values, differences and incompatibilities are emphasized. ...

The crisis of the family institution can be interpreted as a social phenomenon, but it is not this alone. We recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights, a fundamental “charter” for the civil community, an important step toward its humanization. And yet, the blatant and hidden violations of these rights are innumerable. They occupy the media and fill us with sadness. All these injustices, in the final analysis, end up affecting the smallest and most vulnerable part of society, the individual family.

In a sense, the family is like the “container” of humanity’s suffering today. No global statistics agency can give us the real significance of this phenomenon. We can only question ourselves: how many partners have left one another and feel frustrated? How many children are deprived of one or the other parent? How many children are dependent on drugs? How many are caught up in the spirals of delinquency and prostitution? How many husbands and sons have been snatched away by wars? How many elderly people are abandoned? How many children die of hunger every day? How many terminally ill die in the chill of indifference? And the incurable? The world of the disabled?

We can describe families today with an image: a wounded and desolate mother who, clasping to her heart the suffering of humanity, cries out to heaven “why”.

The situation almost takes our breath away. We would spontaneously ask: what is the future of the family? Or worse still: is there a future for the family?

Jesus forsaken

In the face of such a great mystery of suffering, one feels lost, disoriented.

In the Bible, there is an apex of suffering expressed with a “why” cried out to heaven. The evangelist Matthew tells of this when he narrates the death of Jesus: “About three o'clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Mt. 27:46).

In that moment, Christ experienced the whole gamut of devastating suffering: anguished fear, the betrayal and abandonment of his friends, an unjust and arranged trial, torture, humiliation, condemnation and crucifixion, the capital punishment reserved for slaves. Perhaps it is not possible for us to understand it today in all its brutality, in its utter destruction of the person and his memory.

In the end, the unexpected cry that gives us a glimpse of the drama of the God-Man: “Why have you forsaken me?” It is the apex of his suffering, it is his interior passion, it is his darkest night. He who had said: “The Father and I are one” lives the tragic experience of disunity, of separation from God. All because, out of love for humankind, he took upon himself all the negative, all the sin of humanity.

In that abandonment, the final and greatest sign of his love, Christ reaches extreme self-annulment and re-opens to human beings the way to unity with God and with one another. In that “why”, which remained unanswered for him, every why finds an answer. Are not all those who suffer anguish, loneliness, failure and condemnation similar to him? Are not the divisions between family members, groups and nations images of him? Can we not see Jesus forsaken in those who lose, so to speak, the sense of God and his plan for man, who no longer believe in love and so accept just any substitute?

⁷ T. Bovet, *Situazione dei Cristiani nel mondo*, Zurich, 1944.

There is no human tragedy or failure in the life of a family that is not included in the night of the God-Man. That death of his already paid for everything; he signed, as it were, a blank cheque capable of containing the suffering and sin of humanity – past, present and future.

In that tremendous experience, almost like a divine grain of wheat that rots and dies in order to give new life, he also reveals to us the truth of the greatest love: to be capable of giving all of oneself, to make oneself nothing out of love for others. “The sign of God who annuls himself,” writes von Balthasar, “by becoming man and dying in the most total abandonment, explains why God accepted (...) all this: it was in harmony with his nature to show himself as love without measure.”⁸

Through that emptiness, that nothingness, grace and life began to flow again from God to man. Christ restored unity between God and creation. He recomposed the design, he brought about new men and women and therefore, also new families.

The family can be restored to its original splendour

The great event of the suffering and abandonment of the God-Man can therefore become the reference point and secret source capable of transforming death into resurrection, limitations into opportunities of love, family crises into moments of growth. How?

If we look at suffering solely from a human point of view, there are two possibilities: either we find ourselves in a dead-end analysis because suffering and love are part of the mystery of human life; or we seek to remove that uncomfortable obstacle by escaping in other directions.

But if we believe that God has a plan of love for our life, and if, strengthened by this faith, we discern in the small and big daily sufferings, ours and those of others, a reflection of the suffering of Christ crucified and forsaken, a participation in the suffering that redeemed the world, it is possible to understand the meaning and perspective even of the most absurd situations.

In the presence of any suffering, big or small, in the presence of contradictions and insoluble problems, let us try to enter within ourselves and come face to face with absurdity, injustice, innocent suffering, humiliation, alienation, desperation... We will recognize one of the many faces of the Man of suffering.

It is the encounter with him, the ‘divine Person’ who made himself an individual without relationships, with him, the God of our times, who transforms nothingness into being, suffering into love. Our “yes”, our love for and acceptance of him will begin to break down the various expressions of our individualism and make us new men and women capable of healing and revitalizing through love the most desperate situations. But is all this possible?

We can share two indicative experiences.

Claudette, a French young woman had been abandoned by her husband. She had a one-year-old son. The closed provincial environment and her family compelled her to ask for a divorce. In the meantime, however, she met a couple who spoke to her of God who is particularly close to whoever is suffering: “God loves you,” they told her. “He too was betrayed and abandoned like you; in him we can find the strength to love and to forgive.” Little by little, her resentment subsided and she began to act differently. Even her husband was influenced by her change in behaviour. When they found themselves in front of the judge for the first audience towards a divorce, Claudette and Laurent saw one another in a new way. They accepted the idea to think it over for six months. They started seeing each other again and when the magistrate called them back to finalize the divorce, they said “no”. As a matter of fact, they went down the stairs of the court holding hands. Later, the birth of two more children gladdened a love which had deepened its roots through suffering.

8. Cf. H.U. von Balthasar, *Solo l'amore è credibile*, Borla, 1991, p. 143.

Another experience. One night a beautiful family right here in Switzerland learned directly from their son that he was dependent on drugs. They sought treatment for him, but it was in vain. One day he did not return home. Sentiments of guilt, fear, powerlessness, shame. It was the encounter with Jesus forsaken in a typical wound of our society. They embraced him in this suffering and they seemed to understand in their heart: "True love makes itself one with the other, enters into his or her reality...". Both parents opened themselves to concrete acts of solidarity aimed at these sufferings. They organized a group of families who brought sandwiches and tea to the young people of the Platzspitz, which at that time was the drug hell of Zurich. One day they found their son there – his clothes were torn and he was exhausted. With the help of other families, he was able to begin and successfully conclude a long journey to freedom.

And we could continue with other experiences....

They are not dreams, they are daily experiences of many families who, through the inclined plane of the God-Man's abandonment have turned the depths of their suffering into new life.

At times, separations are recomposed and families are reunited; other times no, the outward situations remain as they are, but the suffering is illuminated, the anguish is comforted, the fracture overcome; at times, the physical or spiritual suffering endures, but it acquires a meaning by uniting it to the "passion" of Christ who continues to redeem and to save families and all humanity. The yoke becomes light.

Therefore, the family can try to return to the original splendor of the Creator's design, drawing from the source of love which Christ brought on earth.

I think that couples and families can quench at this spring all their thirst for authenticity, for constant and unreserved communion, for transcendent, lasting, ever new values. Also because God himself can become present in their home and share his own life with them: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name," (which means in my love), said Jesus, "there am I in the midst of them" (Mt. 18:30). Becoming the dwelling place of God's presence is a splendid possibility offered also to families.

A family that lives in this way is actively involved in all that happens around it. Simply by being what it is, it has the capacity to witness, to announce, and to heal the social tissue around it, because life in itself speaks and works. I have seen from experience that it is able to open home and heart to the urgent needs and dramas of society, to the various forms of loneliness and alienation. It is even able to incarnate and organize solidarity in ever wider circles, to the point of promoting effective actions to influence institutions, block erroneous laws and measures, and orient politicians.

Through the presence and activity of its members in the various sectors of society, the family is also able to enter into dialogue with institutions, bring resources closer to concrete needs, create awareness and the necessary conditions for adequate political action in favour of the family and for fostering public opinion based on values.

I believe that nothing could be more beautiful for the world than to have families like this. Because, let us ask ourselves, what is it that humanity seeks? Happiness. And where does it seek happiness? In love, in beauty, and it is willing to pay any price to obtain it. In these families, there is the fullness of human love and the beauty of supernatural love.

I have seen families like this, and they are truly wonderful. Everyone finds them fascinating. From the outside, they appear to be families like all others, but they have a secret, a secret of love. The "suffering that is loved" unites them to Christ who dwells in their homes attracted by the mutual love that unites them, and with them, with these families, he is transforming the world.

Conclusion

I wanted to share these thoughts with you which come from the bottom of my heart and from the experience of many families. I would like to encourage in all of us a concrete commitment to act in every way possible for the true good of the family. In fact, the health of the first cell of society is of the utmost importance for the destiny of all humanity.

“To save the family,” writes the great Catholic writer Iginio Giordani, “is to save society: the state is comprised primarily of families. If families break down, society can only do the same.”⁹ He also said: “Married couples become collaborators of God in giving life and love to humanity... Love goes out from the family and expands to one’s profession, the city, the nation, to humanity. It is a distribution in ever wider circles, like a wave that expands into the infinite. A revolutionary longing and restlessness, kindled by the Gospel, has been burning for twenty centuries; it thirsts for love.”¹⁰

(*Nuova Umanità*, 21 [1999/5], 125, pp. 475-487)

9. I. Giordani, *The Family a Community of Love*, New City Press, New York, 1989, p. 15.

10. Ibid., *Il laico Chiesa. Città Nuova*, Rome 1988, p. 107 e 155.