

THE MISSION OF THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY ACCORDING TO ST. JOHN PAUL II

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“[S]pouses [do] not only exchange their own human love, but also the most precious thing God has given them—which is the gift of the Spirit—in a process of gradual growth in charity and expansion of their capacity to receive and give divine love.”



“You are the light of the world” (Mt 5:14): the words that Jesus spoke to the disciples echoed on the lips of St. John Paul II in his address to families: “Each family brings a light and every family is a light,”¹ a light that must illuminate the way of the Church and the future of the world. It was Saturday, October 8, 1994, and in St. Peter’s Square thousands of families had gathered for the first world meeting called for by the Eastern European pope at the end of the Year of the Family. On that unforgettable evening, bathed in the warm Roman October, the square teemed with the flickering lights everyone carried in their hands. This

1. John Paul II, Address to Families and Pilgrims at the World Meeting of Families (Vatican City, 8 October 1994), 6.

spectacle certainly inspired the pope in his impromptu speech, which came right from his heart after many days of prayer.

It was not a spontaneous vision without theological foundation. On the contrary, at the Second Vatican Council the Church tried to elaborate on her identity: “Church, what do you say of yourself?” And the answer was, “I am *Lumen gentium*, the light of the world.” If Christ is the light that enlightens every man who comes into the world, the Church reflects his glory for the benefit of all peoples (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 1). It is precisely the conciliar constitution *Lumen gentium* that speaks of the Christian family as a “small domestic church” (11), which therefore also brings to the world the light of Christ. Every family brings an indispensable light to the path of humanity, a light in the life of every person, because it reflects the original truth of the vocation to love, which is inscribed by the Creator in the heart of every man and woman. Every one of us, born into a family, lives off the memory of this light. The mission of the family is therefore precisely to shine the light of Christ in the world. But how can we bring this about today, in the context of current transformations?

1. ANALYSIS: THE OBSCURING OF THE FAMILY

What we see in our globalized society, in the East as well as in the West, is a severe shadow cast over the family in its identity and ability to bring light into the life of men. In the apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, Pope Francis speaks of an “extreme individualism which weakens family bonds” (33), “degenerating into an inability to give oneself generously” and forever in marriage (35, cf. 33).

This phenomenon is described by sociologists as the *privatization of love*, which is reduced to a purely subjective fact, resulting in the *privatization of marriage*, which is, as a result, no longer recognized as the origin of the family. Specifically, the link between marriage and family is being questioned radically. Current customs and legislations are developing a trend wherein marriage loses its constitutional social dimension and becomes a private contract, the result of an individual choice, which depends on the life project of each person.

1.1. *The liquidation of the family*

The cultural context in which we live not only presents a crisis of the family and of its traditional educational role, but also documents how effectively a strategy to “liquidate” the family is operating. The word “liquidate” must be taken in its literal sense before its metaphorical one, according to the analysis of the well-known sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. He defines our era as “liquid modernity,” characterized by deregulation and privatization of the tasks and duties of modernization. Its values are speed, change, flow, precariousness, and the temporary; as such, it cannot tolerate the family, the neighborhood, the parish community: it must “liquefy” or “liquidate” them.

Bauman speaks of *liquid love*: love becomes a commercial, marketable thing. In liquid modernity it is “normal” to conform the relationships of couples to commercial relations, where one’s partner and the love shared are some sort of good one is entitled to and can take when one feels like it, or throw away when one gets tired of it, because on the horizon looms a new “product” promising to be more rewarding. Liquid modernity is dominated by cravings that contrast with cultivated ties, a principle of stability.² If this is so, it explains the offensive against the marriage-based family, which does not adapt to the new rules, or rather to deregulation. It is therefore necessary to liquidate it.

1.2. *The anti-culture of absolute autonomy*

Underlying these economic, social, and lifestyle phenomena is also a well-organized cultural strategy, a real revolution; this starts with language, settles into the mentality and the legal institutions of the West and then gradually all around the world, as a kind of neocolonialism.³ The principle of the individual’s

2. Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003).

3. On this subject, see Marguerite A. Peeters, “The Specificity of Christian Kerygma in the Face of the New Global Ethic” (lecture, Kampala, Uganda, June 9, 2005); Eugenia Roccella and Lucetta Scaraffia, *Contro il cristianesimo. L’ONU e l’Unione Europea come nuova ideologia* (Casale Monferrato: Edizioni Piemme, 2005).

right to choose is stated as absolute in the context of sexuality, reproduction, and life. Further, it functions as a means of deconstruction of natural and traditional forms of relationships in the family, the local community, and society.

In the name of this individualistic idea of freedom, any understanding of sexuality is entitled to be practiced, and the same legal status is demanded for each practice: from domestic partnership to homosexuality and transgenderism. Contraception, free abortion, and artificial insemination are claimed as rights belonging to “reproductive health.” The principle of autonomy is associated with that of equality to ensure absolute neutrality from the State regarding different expressions of human sexuality. They belong to the private sphere; civil law only has to guarantee the equality of rights. But such neutrality of the State involves considering the family as a purely conventional superstructure, a transient form among many others, from which we can and indeed must emancipate ourselves.

Part of this manipulation is also the idea of a “plurality of family models” (cohabitation, heterosexual and homosexual *de facto* unions, temporary unions, etc.), based on a plurality of views.⁴ This reveals a change in strategy: we no longer speak of an “end of the family,” but of a “diversity of family models”: the family is not called into question, but a plurality of possibilities is opened up instead. We are clearly in a radically sceptical society that continues to speak of the family, provided it is void of meaning. However, if any kind of cohabitation can be considered a family, then the family has simply ceased to exist.

2. THE LIGHT OF THE FAMILY

Confronted with this obscuring of the family and the loss of its identity, we must rediscover the truth of its origins despite its distortions throughout history. But where can we find this truth?

4. Cf. Louis Roussel, “Les nouveaux modèles familiaux: évolution récente de la nuptialité, du divorce et des remariages en France,” in *La situation démographique en France et en Union Soviétique. Actes du 1er colloque franco-soviétique de démographie* (Paris: Ined, 1984), 135–49; J. H. Hagan, “Nuovi modelli di famiglia,” in Pontificio Consiglio per la Famiglia, *Lexicon. Termini ambigui e discussi su famiglia, vita e questioni etiche* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 2003), 635–39.

2.1. *The reference to the “beginning”*

“From the beginning it was not so” (Mt 19:8): so Jesus told the Pharisees who questioned him about the conditions of divorce. With these words Jesus refers to the plan of God the Creator, which is at the origin of everything. It is not only a return to the past, but to the truth that lasts throughout time because it is the origin of all things, according to the creative wisdom of God. This is already good news: God has a plan for the family! It is part of the Creator’s wise plan, not a product of historical contingencies.⁵ In this plan of God, therefore, we can find the family’s permanent identity.

What is the *beginning* that Jesus refers to? Literally and first of all, it is the story of *creation*, which is found in the book of Genesis, especially in the first chapter, culminating in the creation of man and woman “in the image and likeness” of God. The image of God is not in man alone or in woman alone, but in both as a communion of persons. Therefore, the reference to creation indicates that the understanding of the meaning of marriage is not based on a physical or biological theory, but on a personal category such as that of vocation. We are reminded of this by a passage from John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio*:

God created man in His own image and likeness: calling him to existence through love, He called him at the same time for love. God is love and in Himself He lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in His own image and continually keeping it in being, God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion. Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. (11)

The allusion to the beginning also reminds us of the gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word” (1:1), which refers to *Christ* himself, through whom “all things came into being.” He, the Son, is the perfect image of the Father, who manifested himself at the wedding at Cana also as a bridegroom. To find the identity of marriage we have to look not only at creation, but

5. Cf. *AL*, 62–63.

above all at the Son and at the mystery of the trinitarian relations: the relation of the Father with the Son and the Holy Spirit as a gift of love, which allows us to live out this filial identity.

Finally, the reference to the beginning also alludes to the human *heart*, which is the beginning of human acts, as recalled by the Lord Jesus himself (Mk 7:21–23). The personal identity of each of us is written on our hearts, where words and actions are conceived. The truth of the beginning is kept, therefore, not only in the Scriptures, but also in the heart, that is, in the most intimate memory of the person, in his conscience, as it were. How, then, do we recognize that truth?

2.2. The original experiences

The manner in which John Paul II taught us to read Sacred Scripture in his Wednesday catecheses implies a method of fruitful hermeneutical circularity between the word of God and man's experiences, which clarify one another. Starting from experience leads us to a concrete and lived reality, which is the basis of our life, and which saves our speech from an impersonal formalism. It is a reality common to all men and therefore not alien even to those who do not believe in revelation. "It is not good for man to be alone" (Gn 2:18): from original solitude, the story of creation indicates a series of primordial experiences that can guide his personal conduct and in which the truth about man is made manifest, experiences God uses to reveal his plan to man. It is precisely in this nucleus of intimate experience that the light guiding the moral itinerary of every person and the path of human civilization is given; tradition has called it "natural law." It is a light that illuminates the dynamic identity of our being and its growth toward maturity.

The family itself is the abode of these primordial experiences, which are indispensable references on the journey of life. There are three fundamental issues for all of us: to recognize oneself as a son or daughter, to be a husband or wife, and to become a father or mother. They are so decisive that the success or failure of life is linked precisely to their achievement.

2.2.1. *Recognizing oneself as a son or daughter*

Every man at birth receives his first fundamental identity, that of *being a son*, an indelible and decisive identity. His beginning is not decided by him; it is given to him. The dignity of every person bears a presupposition, so often forgotten: that of being created by an act of love. Thus love is so intimately united to the person that it brings us back to the origin of our existence.

Hence the importance of the family as the first communion of love, which is at the root of human life, a symbolic place that provides the means for the proper development of the person. Therefore, the relationship between parents and children carries in itself a character of finality. The family is the environment where each person is accepted unconditionally for what he or she is and not for what he or she can do. Recognizing the family as the original community means placing communion in the beginning, as the initial truth, and not just as a project that is the result of an agreement.

Without this primary relationship, each subsequent choice, especially that of marriage, remains compromised by a weak, rootless will. If one has the experience of freedom in being born and nourished in relationships with other people, then marriage becomes a true communion of persons. Human freedom is not indifference that chooses without presuppositions, nor is it unlimited arbitrariness. It is a created freedom, which exists precisely as created and always in relation to that origin. In order to become a good spouse, you must have freely accepted being a son or daughter. By contrast, this gives a better understanding of how individualism has generated a perverse conception of freedom, uprooted from the original relationship of “sonship” and therefore incapable of giving itself.

2.2.2. *Being spouses*

One can, therefore, understand the value of the body. It is not something foreign to the person, a quasi shapeless material to which any meaning could be attributed. If it were so, the body would be unable to establish real communion between people. Instead, it is the visible sign of the invisible reality of the person,

so that the sexual difference inscribed in the body indicates a call to a specific form of communion of two persons: one that makes them “one flesh,” according to the words of Genesis.

The affective dynamic, which is rooted in our physicality and is at the origin of human action, is a call to open up to others, even a call to self-giving, to accept others and come out of solitude. The conciliar constitution *Gaudium et spes* reminds us of this in a passage particularly dear to John Paul II, who so often quoted it: “Man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself” (24). This reaches its natural and sacramental pinnacle in the spousal relationship with another person of the opposite sex, in which the “sincere gift of oneself” is accomplished in a unique and exclusive, all-embracing and irrevocable form in the sign of the body. According to *Mulieris dignitatem*, “In the unity of the two, man and woman are called from the beginning not only to exist side by side or together, but they are also called to exist mutually one for the other” (7). Thus they express a certain similarity with the communion of the divine Persons, which serves somehow as a function of exemplary causality with respect to human love while strictly safeguarding the limits of this analogy.

2.2.3. *Becoming a father or mother*

It is generally accepted that the alarming crisis of low birth rates affecting Western affluent society, which is in demographic decline, is at bottom a crisis of hope. The eclipse of fatherhood is the radical expression of a diseased freedom, which, detached from its origin and bonds, necessarily ends up losing its capacity to move toward the future and becomes trapped in a project of individualistic self-realization.⁶

But hope is the most amazing of virtues: to hope one must have received a great grace, one must be very fortunate, as

6. Cf. Angelo Scola, *Il mistero nuziale* [The nuptial mystery], vol. 2: *Matrimonio-famiglia* (Rome: PUL-Mursia, 2000), 105–22. See also Giuseppe Angelini, *Il figlio. Una benedizione, un compito* (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 1991).

Charles Péguy said.⁷ The overabundant fruitfulness of the original gift bears fruit in the sacrament of marriage as a generous openness to communicating the gift received. “Isn’t the great law of love that of giving oneself to another in order to give ourselves together?”⁸ It is not a question of an extrinsically imposed rule, but of the dynamism inscribed in love. And therefore being a father or mother is neither a purely human project, to be deliberated with caution and possibly built with one’s own forces, nor a claim of an absolute right, as if a child could be the object of a claim. To become truly fathers, first of all we need to start with “kneeling before the Father, from whom all fatherhood takes its name” (Eph 3:14–15). The child can then be received as a guest that comes from afar, the fruit and abundant gift of love, whose first origin and final destiny lies in the mystery of God.

From these primordial experiences, recorded in the memory and heart of each person, housed in the sanctuary of the family, we can trace a path for the education of the human person: to recognize oneself as a son or daughter, to be a spouse, and eventually to become a father or mother.

3. THE SPECIFIC BEAUTY OF CONJUGAL AND FAMILY LOVE

Having laid out the reasons for the current obscuring of the family and recalled the light of those original experiences that are kept in the family, we can now focus on the fundamental content of conjugal and family spirituality: on that which nourishes the family’s mission in the world. Although the Council Fathers often valorized the theme of love⁹ with innovative statements, and though they also showed married life as a journey toward holiness,¹⁰ they did not really develop a concept for Christian

7. See Charles Péguy, *Le Porche du mystère de la deuxième vertu* [The portal of the mystery of hope], in *Oeuvres poétiques complètes*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 578.

8. Alain Mattheeuws, *Les “dons” du mariage. Recherche de théologie morale et sacramentelle* (Brussels: Institut d’Études Théologiques, 1996), 154.

9. Cf. GS, 49.

10. Cf. LG, 41.

spouses similar to that of “pastoral charity,” the phrase coined to express the love particular to priesthood. In the documents of Vatican II, the theme of the holiness of spouses and parents refers above all to mutual help and the educational responsibility of the family. The question of specific conjugal actions, while declared “noble and worthy,”¹¹ is not yet integrated into a perspective of holiness, but only linked to mutual enrichment.

It was St. John Paul II in *Familiaris consortio* (= *FC*) (1981) who finally spoke of “conjugal charity.” This presents a real novelty, based on the rich teaching of his Wednesday catecheses on the theology of the body. He states, “Conjugal love reaches that fullness to which it is interiorly ordained, conjugal charity, which is *the proper and specific way* in which the spouses participate in and are called to live the very charity of Christ who gave Himself on the Cross” (*FC*, 13, emphasis added). In conjugal love, participation in the Spirit in the very life of Christ “involves a totality, in which all the elements of the person enter: appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will. It aims at a deeply personal unity, the unity that, beyond union in one flesh, leads to forming one heart and soul” (*ibid.*).

Conjugal love between a man and a woman becomes, by the presence of the Spirit, a means of salvation and the way to holiness: by giving themselves to each other, the spouses will at the same time communicate to each other the divine charity that lives in their human love. In fact, conjugal love always refers to that intimacy that manifests itself in the call of the body and its instincts, and presents itself in the affections and the exultation of sentiment as full of a singular fascination, thus moving man and woman to receive one another and to give themselves, but always via the mediation of their bodies.¹² The Holy Spirit, with his transforming presence, is able to sort and transform all the richness that erotic experience implies. This enables the spouses to not only exchange their own human love, but also the most precious thing God has given them—which is the gift of the Spirit—in a process of gradual growth in charity and expansion

11. GS, 49: “Actus proinde, quibus coniuges intime et caste inter se ununtur, honesti et digni sunt.”

12. Cf. José Noriega, *Eros e agape nella vita coniugale* (Siena: Cantagalli, 2008), 38.

of their capacity to receive and give divine love.

The great German theologian of the nineteenth century, Matthias J. Scheeben, said that “marriage is a ‘church in the flesh.’”¹³ Indeed, if the Church is the Body of Christ and *Communio personarum*, which reveals a likeness to the divine communion of the Holy Trinity, then marriage is the sacrament in which the union of the bodies of the spouses expresses and carries out that communion of persons, the temple in which we celebrate the spiritual worship of God. All this leads to conceiving of and living the reality of marriage from a sacramental perspective, beginning to see the image of Christ the bridegroom in the human spouse.¹⁴

If the entire conjugal life, and not only the moment of celebration, becomes a sacramental sign of Christ’s love for the Church, his bride, then marriage takes on a surprising positivity and beauty. The spousal relationship is the means through which, by virtue of the sacrament, Christ’s saving action is extended to the spouses and, from the spouses, to the entire family that originates from their wedding. Thus conjugal charity is the source of a parental, filial, and fraternal charity (*caritas parentalís, filialis, and fraterna*). Family relationships that come from flesh and blood are nourished and transfigured by divine love so as to represent the fatherhood of him “from whom every fatherhood in heaven and on earth takes its name” (Eph 3:15). They represent the filial obedience of Jesus, the eternal theandric child.¹⁵ Finally, they represent the new fraternity that is born of the Spirit, and that, in respecting and valuing the law of proximity and preference, is always open to welcome even those who do not have a family of their own.¹⁶

13. For the quote attributed to Scheeben, see Albert Kriekemans, *Preparazione al matrimonio e alla famiglia* (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 1959), 93.

14. The conjugal spirituality of John Paul II is analyzed from this perspective in the recent work of Przemysław Kwiatkowski, *Lo Sposo passa per questa strada. . . La spiritualità coniugale nel pensiero di Karol Wojtyła. Le origini* (Siena: Cantagalli, 2011).

15. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Se non diventerete come questo bambino. Quattro meditazioni cristologiche* [Unless you become like this child] (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1992), 7–47.

16. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *La fraternità cristiana* [The meaning of Christian brotherhood] (Brescia: Queriniana, 2005).

CONCLUSION: THE “MYSTERY” OF THE FAMILY,
A SOURCE OF LIGHT

“This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church” (Eph 5:32). The mystery of the family, rooted in marriage, is a great light for the life of the world. In our contemporary mentality, a misconception prevents us from recognizing the authentic cognitive value of the mystery. It is usually understood as something incomprehensible and obscure, not worthy of attention. Thus relegated to the sphere of the irrational and subjective, the mystery of the family is excluded from public discourse and no longer brings its contribution of light to society. If we rediscover the original meaning of the word “mystery,” we also rediscover its ability to illuminate. As Gabriel Marcel said, mystery is that which, though invisible in itself because it is too bright, brings light to everything that surrounds it: without it, all would plunge into darkness.¹⁷ The family is not a problem; it is a mystery: an original truth, which precedes us, which is intimate, which we have to approach with reverence.

Now we can understand what splendor radiates from the mystery of the family to illuminate the life of man. First and foremost, it sheds light on the truth about man, because only in the family can man understand his nature as a son or daughter, who comes from love, who then learns to share love as a brother or sister, who is called to give him or herself in turn as a husband or wife, and who ultimately can discover the fruitfulness of love as a father or mother. But this light leads us further, for it is a first reflection in the order of creation of the light that comes from Christ, splendor of the Father. In him, the bridegroom of the Church, we find that the human family is the created image of the divine communion of the Holy Trinity. The Christian family is called to be a luminous epiphany of this communion, thus opening man’s path to God.

“The future of humanity passes by way of the family” (FC, 86), John Paul II said 39 years ago, a concept repeated in his own way also by Pope Francis in our times. Now we are able to grasp how prophetic his words were, precisely because of the

17. Cf. Gabriel Marcel, “Il mistero familiare,” in *Homo viator. Prolegomeni ad una metafisica della speranza* (Città di Castello: Borla, 1980), 81–113.

dramatic times in which we live. In the dark of the night in which we find ourselves, it is necessary for the life of the world that the light of the mystery of the family shine in its original truth, that it be lifted from under the bushel to illuminate the entire house of men.* □

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