



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES
CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS**

*To the Most Reverend Joseph A. Fiorenza
Bishop of Galveston-Houston
President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*

On the occasion of the Symposium to mark the Twentieth Anniversary of the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, being held on August 15-18, 2001 in Arlington, Virginia, I send warm greetings to all taking part, assuring them of my prayerful support. I thank the organizers of the Symposium, especially Cardinal William Keeler, Chairman of the Committee for Pro-Life Activities of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Bishop Anthony O'Connell, Chairman of the Committee for Marriage and Family Life.

The Church has always been committed to proclaiming God's plan for marriage and the family, and to supporting and strengthening the family institution. In fidelity to that mission, the 1980 Synod of Bishops was devoted to this theme. It was held at a time when families were experiencing increasing difficulties, and sometimes confusion, on account of rapid social change and new pressures and threats. On that occasion, Bishops from all over the world gathered to reaffirm the truth about marriage and the family, and to reflect on ways of assisting families to live in accordance with their specific vocation. The Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, published a year later, reflected the work of the Synod. Intended to be a celebration and reaffirmation of the role of the Christian family in the Church and in the world, the Exhortation placed a strong emphasis on its mission to safeguard, reveal and communicate love (cf. n. 17). Since its publication, considerable effort has been devoted to developing the theology of marriage and many pastoral initiatives have been undertaken in support of marriage and the family.

Twenty years later, however, the solidity of the institution of the family is still endangered by many insidious forces. The high level of divorce, and widespread acceptance of contraception and abortion, as well as other threats to life, are causes of concern for Bishops and for all who have

the good of the family at heart. Clear and convincing teaching regarding the divine plan for marriage and the family, and insistence on the need to protect and strengthen the institution of the family for the well-being of society, are urgent priorities.

God calls every human person into existence through love and for love. Inscribed in the nature of every man and woman is a vocation to love and communion, a vocation which may be realized in marriage or celibacy, each in its own way. The union of a man and a woman in marriage calls for unselfish and generous self-giving on the part of the spouses and for openness to the gift of life. Built on these solid foundations, the family comes into being as an "intimate community of life and love" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 48) and a communion of persons bonded by relations of mutual respect and love.

The fundamental task of the family is to serve life. Couples called to marriage not only have to be open to the gift of new life, but they also have the responsibility of ensuring the human, moral and spiritual education of their children. Spouses need to be vigilant in resisting the many contemporary threats to life and in helping society as a whole to respect, defend and promote the dignity of every human person, "at every moment and in every condition of that person's life" (*Evangelium vitae*, n. 81). I encourage initiatives aimed at helping married couples and young people preparing for marriage to undertake these responsibilities, such as catechesis on the true meaning of love and sexuality, training in chastity and personal maturity, and education in responsible procreation in accordance with the Church's teaching.

The Christian family is in a real sense a "domestic church" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 11), with parents as the primary educators of their children and the first heralds of the Gospel for them. To parents belongs the mission of handing down the faith by word and example, and of imbuing the family with a spirit of love and reverence for God and others. Since the future of evangelization depends in great part on families, parents have a particular responsibility to bear witness to Jesus Christ and participate actively in the life of the Church. By sharing in the Eucharist, receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation regularly, setting aside time for family prayer and performing practical acts of charity, families will be strengthened in fidelity and unity.

With these thoughts, I encourage those taking part in the Symposium to work together with ever greater zeal in ensuring that families, on whom the future of humanity depends, will always receive the strength and support they need. Commending all involved in the pastoral care of the family to the protection of Mary, Mother of the Redeemer and Mother of the Church, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

From Castel Gandolfo, 6 August 2001.

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