

The Letter to Families

Pope John Paul II, 1994

A shortened version by Fr Richard Aladics

The Civilisation of Love

God is the Father of the Civilisation of Love. Human fatherhood and motherhood enable human beings to share in this Civilisation. Indeed, the family is the measure of God's plan - this plan can be called the Civilisation of Love. Yet today, society thinks of the family only in terms of what it gives and owes to the individual.

Of course, the individual receives much from the family - living in communion with others - this "communion" is the hinge of the Civilisation of Love. But "communion" is not just a gift, it is also a task. That is why, from the outset, a man and a woman must have their hearts and minds turned to God so that selfishness does not obscure love.

It is human fatherhood and motherhood which reveal the capacity which the person has to live the truth in love; fatherhood and motherhood express love's extension and depth. They are tasks which can only be freely undertaken, but when they are undertaken freely these tasks open the person up to God, to other people and to marriage and the family. The mystery of the family flows directly from the mystery of God: in marriage the unity of a man and a woman is so firm that they become "one flesh". But this unity does not close them up in themselves, but opens them to a new life.

Parents bring to a new individual into being, but this new individual is a person, which means that God is present in this "bringing forth" - a person is, in him or herself, open to God and eternity. This is the dimension of procreation which has been definitively revealed by Christ. God "wills" a person in every birth, and parents should be aware that God "wills" every individual for his or her own sake - we have been created in the image of God.

However, either we are made for God, or are we made for ourselves; surely it can't be both? We weren't made to be torn in two. St Augustine resolves this question when he says; "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you." That is to say, between these two different finalities - being made for myself or being made for God - there exists a relationship, a complementarity, a unity. Man is called to be whole and he finds himself fully in God. The words of consent in marriage are an expression of the vocation to communion: the good of the spouses and then, the good of the family. These goods are an essential part of the Civilisation of Love.

However, do all families actually experience this common good? No, and the reason is because families today have too little humanity - there is a shortage of people with whom to create and share the common good!

So, man is a being for his own sake, but he can only find himself through a sincere gift of himself. We have been redeemed by Christ, who became man for us and for our salvation. In other words, we have the capacity for great love, but that love has to be nurtured - to love means to give and receive something which can only be given freely and mutually.

Love is demanding. Real love means loving to the end. This is the meaning of spousal love - loving to the end. For two people to give themselves to each other in marriage means that they have been redeemed - that they have received the gift of love from Christ - that they have been redeemed by the most sincere gift of all - the blood of Christ. This is why the Eucharist is the crowning of the marriage rite. This redemption is expressed in the consent of the spouses - "being a sincere gift" is now a part of their lives. "Being a sincere gift" requires the outpouring of the Holy Spirit not just on the wedding day, but throughout married life.

What about children who are brought to birth in marriage. Is a child really a gift (to the family and to society)? Yes, because a person is a good in him or herself. A child is a good for the family because that is the place where he or she can exist for themselves. A child is a good for society because of the dignity of the person.

In marriage the moment of "one flesh" is a great moment; it is a moment of special responsibility for spouses. The moment in which they are called to confirm the mutual gift of self, and the moment in which they can become a father and a mother. The truth of this moment must always be safeguarded.

The two Civilisations

The expression "Civilisation of Love" comes from the Second Vatican Council's teaching in the Decree "Gaudium et Spes" that "Christ fully reveals man to himself and makes known his sublime calling." The Civilisation of Love is the way of the Church, and the family is right at the heart of this Civilisation.

There is another civilisation which exists today. Contemporary civilisation is linked to scientific and technological progress. It is agnostic in theory and is utilitarian (that which leads to the greatest happiness) in practice; it is a civilisation of production, use and things. Not of persons. In this civilisation women are objects for men, children are a hindrance to their parents, a family is an obstruction to its members. Look, for instance, at the sex education programmes in schools, look into the pro-abortion lobby, The "safe-sex" touted by this civilisation, in fact, endangers both the person and the family. In this civilisation the loss of truth about one's own self and about the family, leads to a loss of freedom, which leads to a loss of love.

Love which is true is demanding; it builds up persons and communities. God is at work within this kind of love, for God is Love. Here we should recall how St Paul spoke about love in his first letter to the Corinthians - 1 Cor 13: 4 - 7 - this is the Magna Charter of the Civilisation of Love. A gift is "for others" - this is the most important dimension of the Civilisation of Love. The communion of persons, which is the family, should be a preparation for the Communion of Saints!

Let us look at the Fourth Commandment: Honour your father and your mother. This Commandment speak about the family and its interior unity - its solidarity. In order to bring out the communion between generations the divine Legislator could find no more appropriate word than this: "Honour". This word does not exalt the family in an artificial way but emphasises its subjectivity and the rights flowing from it. After God, my family is my first benefactor, thus "honour" is analogous to the "worship" owed to God.

"Honour" means acknowledge; let yourself be guided by the firm acknowledgement of the person. If this Commandment demands honour to parents, it also demands concern for the good of all the family. The call within this Commandment to look to the good of the family is greater than any human right.

So, the Civilisation of Love is not a "utopia", it is a task to be carried out with the help of grace. Love is similar; it is a basic duty of married people. Their love is the hinge of human civilisation which cannot be defined as anything other than a Civilisation of Love. Through the family passes the primary current of the Civilisation of Love.

The education of children is an essential part of being a parent. This education is founded upon two basic truths: first, that man is called to live in truth and love, and secondly that man finds fulfilment through a sincere gift of self. An education is a person who "begets" spiritually, and "giving honour" is the basic condition for every educational process.

The role of the Church in education is not just religious and moral, but concerns the entire process of education. The Church wishes to carry out this mission above all through families who have been made capable of undertaking this task through the sacrament of marriage. Within the family there are some fundamental dimensions of education: religious education, vocational discernment and preparation for marriage. The whole process of education depends upon the Civilisation of Love.

Let us ask now: what should the family expect from society? First of all a recognition of its identity and its status in society, and a recognition of the fundamental issues of marriage and the family - that marriage is constituted by a covenant between a man and a woman and that marriage is the foundation of the family. That as an institution it possesses certain rights. A truly sovereign and spiritually vigorous nation is always made up of strong families who are aware of their vocation and mission in history. The family lies at the heart of all society's problems and tasks.

The Bridegroom is with you

Jesus describes himself as a Bridegroom which expresses the profound truth of spousal love: I am with you. He fulfils the most radical demands of love.

Christ transforms natural marriage; for what marriage is in nature becomes, by the will of Christ, a true Sacrament of the New Covenant, sealed by the Blood of Christ the Redeemer. In Christ, marriage now leads to the true good of men, women, the family and society. Christ establishes the person and society upon the true rock of marriage, for in Him the bodies of husband and wife are the dwelling places of the Holy Spirit! For we know that in Christ man has been made a new Creation - he is one with Christ and has been endowed with the dignity of an adopted child of God (cf Gal 3: 28).

So the Apostles, overcoming their initial fears about marriage and the family, came to understand that both these are a true vocation which comes from God and its an apostolate - that marriage and the family contribute to the transformation of the earth and the renewal of the world.

Greater than the evil in the world is the Sacrament of Penance (which has been called a second Baptism).

Greater than all the corruption in the world is the Sacrament of Confirmation (which brings Baptism to maturity).

Greater than all is the power of the Eucharist - the sign of the triumph of the Civilisation of Love. Christ has loved us to the end - this is spousal love!

Marriage is a "great mystery" because it is a Sacrament of the spousal love of Christ for His Church.

The love with which the Bridegroom loves the Church continuously renews her - even though she remains a Church of sinners - making her holy. This is the meaning of the "great mystery". The greatest meaning of marriage then is that the spouses discover Christ as their point of reference for their way of loving. In human terms they become "one flesh", but in reality, they are a part of Christ's love for the Church. The Church is present in the "domestic church" (a particular marriage and family) and in its experience of love. And only when husbands and wives share in Christ's love can they too "love to the end".

The "great mystery" which St Paul speaks about (Eph 5:32) is a summary or a compendium of his teaching about God and man. Western thought has been gradually moving away from this teaching and has introduced a dualism into its understanding of man, contrasting and separating the two dimensions of humanity: spirit and body, and relating humanity more with the animal world than with God. In this view, the body does not receive life from the spirit; the spirit does not give life to the body, and man ceases to live as a person, fully open to God and other people.

The richest source for understanding man is Christ, the Word made flesh - "Christ fully reveals man to himself". This is the reply of the Church to modern rationalism, and this reply is important for the family also.

The modern age seeks to understand the material world and psychology, but in himself man remains unknown. It follows then that the family remains an unknown reality. In the modern age man is estranged from the great mystery. Modern rationalism does not accept the mystery of man and man and woman, nor is it willing

to accept that the full truth about man has been revealed by Christ. It may acknowledge the need for a supreme being, but it firmly rejects the idea of a God who became man in order to save man.

Rationalism is a radically different way of looking at creation and the meaning of human existence. In this view it is unthinkable that God should be the Redeemer, much less that he should be the Bridegroom - the primordial and unique source of the human love between spouses. If you don't think that there is a God who loves us, nor the possibility that the family can share in the "great mystery" there is only the temporal dimension of life left. Then life becomes merely the scenario of the battle for existence, the desperate search for gain, and financial gain before all else.

The "great mystery" is threatened in us and all around us. Husbands and wives are at the forefront of the need to rediscover the "great mystery" and recommit themselves to it. We must also speak of the beauty of man and woman - their beauty as brother and sister, as a couple preparing to be married, as husband and wife - they are from God and he has called them to be a mutual gift, He has given them the vocation to love which introduces them into the realm of the "great mystery". Christ speaks so strongly about any thing which attacks human love because he wants to safeguard the holiness of marriage and the family.

"To the family is entrusted the task of striving, first and foremost, to unleash the forces of good, the source of which is found in Christ the Redeemer of man. Every family needs to make these forces their own so that ... the family will be strong with the strength of God."

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