

Congress
“THE FAMILY IN THE SECULARISED WORLD
WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON THE PROBLEM OF THE ELDERLY”
(Prague, 8-9 March 2016)

Conference:

“The Family and the Elderly: Challenges and Resources of these interconnected terms”

Introduction

1. A realistic vision—and not idealistic or ideological one—shows us that this foundational institution of society (the family) is based on *differentiation* and *complementarity*. And these two qualities are called to co-exist in a reciprocity that allows, among other things, humanity’s perpetuation within history. Complementarity and differentiation are part of being human. The human person is, in a sense, an incomplete being; yet, precisely this makes it possible for the person to constantly advance in his or her existential transformation. This progress takes place at all levels: from within the private and intimate (philosophers would say that the person is incommunicable) to the person’s social dimension. The life of every person is built upon immanent actions (that change the person and his or her environment) and transcendent actions (which go beyond everyday immediacy).

This combination of complementarity and differentiation appears in the anatomical and philosophical formation of the human person, in every aspect of the person’s being. It is, therefore, a given fact. It is not a product or an evolution of ideas that makes the person’s material-spiritual specificity what it is. (The non-material or spiritual dimension of the person can be fully shown, through the analysis of free action—that we cannot undertake here and now). Now, this brings us to marriage, a special union between man and woman. Furthermore, man and woman are made for each other in all the strata and levels of their respective beings. This anthropological fact has been enriched in a new way by those who have received the revelation of the Christian mystery, which is not contradicted by anthropological data, but instead, unsuspectingly and holistically enriches the latter. Moreover, Christian revelation holds that the image of God on this earth is given in a special way in the union of a man and a woman—not in the isolated man nor the individual woman but in their union. From this springs forth a series of entirely new consequences in the human

person's constitution and actions. Let us mention a few: 1) the singular dignity of man and woman; 2) the sacred character of their union; 3) the sacredness of the fruit of their union, the gift of life; 4) the foundational role of education—to name but a few that are more immediate. Finally, this union and its consequences are “epiphanies”, that is, manifestations of God's presence in this world. In other words, God dwells not only in a temple, in a Forbidden City, as was thought in the history of some religions. Instead, He dwells paradigmatically in this human complementary and its fruitful union. This presence obviously requires a common-union, a communion made possible by a dynamic of dialogue and encounter, which thus, incarnates God's coming into the world.

2. I totally agree with the title of your Congress: *The Family in a Secularized World*. This aspect bears in mind a large number of developments and insights that are not necessarily negative in the development of human institutions (e.g., “Give to God what is God's and to Caesar what is Caesar's” Lk 20:25). But in what concerns our world today, it often implies ignoring the union between a man and a woman as images of God, or overlooking the fact that human life is God's gift, or disregarding the fact that the human person can find God precisely in and through family life. This is the situation in which we find ourselves. Now is not the right time to talk about the long process that led to the secularization of marriage and the family, which began recently with the Protestant Reformation and the French revolution, and some of whose consequences appear in today's context.¹ We have every reason, then, to concentrate our efforts and hopes in an untiring pedagogy which can prove to our contemporaries the beauty, truth, uniqueness and, consequently, the need to provide, maintain and disseminate the true genesis of the family, i.e., the institution of Creation and, in the Christian Revelation, the institution of Redemption.

3. The family and the elderly

Here and today, we find ourselves in a social situation that is new to human history. Thanks to advances in medical science, the coexistence of different generations is not something anecdotal or circumstantial, but we could say “generalized.” It is quantitatively and qualitatively a widespread fact. This “generalization” is leading to the birth of new relationships. And these new extended relationships of individuals and through time have never existed before in history.

¹ Cfr. G. Abbà, *Quale impostazione per la filosofia morale*, LAS, Roma 1996

At the same time, in contemporary societies, we generally observe three sociological elements² in relation to the family:

- 1) the instability of families and a *boom* of the divorce mentality
- 2) residential and social mobility
- 3) the “qualitative” distancing between adults and the elderly (a diversity of cultural, ethical and religious styles) on both sides, i.e. parents and elders-grandparents.

Therefore, in the face of these facts, both positive and negative challenges appear that we could sum up with the phrase: **the strength and weakness of the elderly**.

4. Strength and weakness of the elderly

The elements of strength would be: greater autonomy of the elderly with respect to the past; more energy in the first phase of aging thanks to medical progress; better cultural education of the elderly, where their revenues give them leisure time that they did not have in their working age. However, we also see many clear elements of weakness: the difference of mentality between the generations is practically becoming an abyss on the cultural level because of the current rhythms. The elderly person has a cosmos different from that of his or her grandchildren and even of his or her children. There are few sociological studies on the problematic relationship between grandchildren and grandparents, which is sometimes marked by violence.³

It would be good to study this rapport and increase its possibilities in the future, because we must constantly deepen and enrich this special relationship.

We could say, however, that “mutual enrichment” is generally possible, because giving and receiving exist in this kind of relationship. This is so not only because grandparents can offer financial support, take care of the young or raise them in extreme situations, but also because the grandparents may in turn be emotionally rewarded by their grandchildren for their efforts. In short, the helping role of grandparents with respect to parents, in all the parent-child relationships and functions, is in certain cases necessary and indispensable for the care of the young, when for various reasons parental care is decreased or lacking. This relationship can be “integrative,” “occasional” or “substitutional.” The former is most desirable. And, in this sense, the proposed integrative educational responsibility of grandparents for

² Cfr. G. Campanini, “I nonni e la famiglia allargata,” *Familia et Vita* 13 (2008), 49-55, especially 51-53.

³ I. Merzagora, “La violenza in famiglia,” in O. Fumagalli - A. Sammassimo (eds), *Famiglia e Matrimonio di fronte al Sinodo*, Vita e pensiero, Milan, 2015, 310-311.

their grandchildren is enriching. Their mere presence is already a manifestation of comprehensive security, of affection, reception, an example and witness of life, regardless of the specific contribution that they can make.

In some geographical contexts, the current utilitarian mentality, which is one of the fruits of society's secularization, bases relations on the balance of mere consequences.⁴ They are based on the principle of utility and on the benefits obtained. According to this principle of utility -also widespread on the socio-sanitary level- the elderly are not useful, because they cost more than what they can contribute. And, logically -as Pope Francis untiringly denounces- they become *waste material*. The paradigm of this is the pro-euthanasia mentality that is setting in, often not only because of physical alterations, but also because of complex relational situations and the neglect of the elderly.⁵ Lacking a vital horizon, they become prone to such a choice. In the process of the family's secularization, this mentality is an apex of the deconstruction of the human being. When man has become the master and possessor of the beginning of human life, it only remains for him to become master and possessor of his own death.⁶

A man can die in Adam or he can die in the New Adam. Euthanasia is one of the concrete manifestations of this purely earthly, autonomous and absolute conception of human existence. Dying in the New Adam means trusting that life has a dimension and a sense that goes beyond the obsolete and apparent, what one can feel, what one can measure, and what one can expect. This is a challenge not only for medicine, which does very well with the whole care network of palliative models, but above all for the family as the organ and center of human relationships. The temptation of euthanasia can be overcome only through the healthy family, and that obviously represents a challenge within our current context.

Now, what is a healthy family, or rather how does a healthy family function? Different sociological studies⁷ (including those carried out by the PCF) have proven that a healthy family is one formed by a man and a woman open to life and capable of generating harmonious relations among its members, both descending and ascending. This type of family creates a relational capital of the greatest magnitude by the unique kind of relationship that it develops. The conjugal relations, the parent-child relationships and those between siblings, are inscribed in the family genome, and they also create harmony in social relations. The family's DNA is important. If it is

⁴ Cfr. C. Simon, art. "Utilitarismo," in C. Simon (dir.), *Nuevo Diccionario de Bioetica*, Monte Carmelo, Burgos, 2012.

⁵ Francis, Address to participants in the 28th International Conference sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers, 23 November 2013.

⁶ L. Ciccone, "La eutanasia," in *Comentario interdisciplinar a la Evangelium Vitae*, BAC, Madrid, 1996, 453-465.461.

⁷ Cfr. P. P. Donati, *Famiglia risorsa per la società*, CISF, Milan, 2012.

healthy, the attitude toward the elderly will be dignified and they will be respected. Today, this is not the case in many contexts, where laws and customs lead to a relativism of unity and fidelity that is proper to authentic married life. Obviously, children are the first to be affected, and secondly the elderly. Today, we are witnessing what some call “time poverty,” because families do not have time to devote to their children and their elders, regardless of the many different causes that generate this poverty. The frenetic pace often makes family relationships suffer. In consequence, some also want to rediscover domestic work with fair remuneration as an employment opportunity that allows them, at the same time, to care for the elderly in a more personal and humane way.⁸ Family friendly politics should imagine such solutions. For this would obviously help to improve not only the quality and dignity of life for the elderly and even their economic advantages, but it would also strengthen the family through the intensified network of relationships. In this regard, the theme proposed by the United Nations for this year: “*Healthy families and sustainable future*” would show that a healthy family contributes to a more decent future, so that all its members can gain fair treatment. I refer to the abovementioned studies. These healthy families also offer a school in the growth of both individual and social virtues. Reciprocity, gratuity, complementarity and dependence are not traits belonging to person who has failed or is underdeveloped. Instead, they are potentialities that make the person more authentically and fully human. The contrary would be a *super human being*, not in the nietzschean sense, but in its realistic sense. In this context, the elderly in general and grandparents in particular, contribute irreplaceable capital for the relational management of grandchildren. Union, fidelity, solidarity, respect and suffering in themselves are pedagogical in the family. And, here, the elderly person is irreplaceable. A family is greater and better if it enjoys the life and the relationship of the elderly. This approach is not only an antidote to euthanasia and the pro-death mentality, but it also represents a healthy education for future generations. The challenge is naturally the harmonization, balance and present role of the elderly, rather than elimination, which would, before all else, be an impoverishment of the complex of family relationships.

Consequently, in today’s family there are many generational, situational and cultural challenges that can be an opportunity to strengthen the family institution or, on the contrary, erode it even more. In this last part, I would like to indicate how the elderly can become a resource for society and for the family. The capital transmitted by them

⁸ Concrete examples and experiences are presented by the International Federation for Family Development (IFFD) www.iffd.org.

reaches beyond their educational, economic and helping abilities; these belong to the order of foundational relationships: being a son, a spouse, a parent. Grandchildren can learn from the elderly what it means to be a parent, a spouse, a son or daughter. The Christian faith gives us in full measure the clarity of vision to understand and transform these relationships; moreover, as Pope Francis says, the quality of a society and of a family can be known by the way in which it treats its elderly members, how the grandparents are considered within the family.⁹

Different cultures have called and continue to consider them as living “libraries,”¹⁰ while others see them as burdens to be freed from. In this sense, it is useful to formulate a reflection from a legal point of view as well. Especially in the broadening contexts of divorce, where marital breakdown causes children (grandchildren) and grandparents pain. Healing marital relations and stabilizing marriages is one of the fundamental tasks that will have immediate impact on the desirable relationship between the elderly and the young.

5. The Church’s recent teaching

In its recent teaching, the Church has addressed the issue of the elderly from various points of view. Almost at the close of the second millennium, St. John Paul II wrote a beautiful letter to the elderly -his contemporaries, as he called them- in which he presented the elderly person from different angles. The Pope of the family declared that a place of particular importance is owed to the elderly, recalling how the commandment of love is translated immediately in the fourth commandment to honor one’s parents.¹¹ Moreover, he encouraged the elderly not to lose heart, to keep the will to live, and warned them against the temptation, always nearby, of a sweet death, which should never be considered moral or legally accepted. Our Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI, also often evoked the figure of the elderly and of grandparents. His address to the XVIII Plenary Assembly of the PCF, on April 5th, 2008, is of great importance. There, the topic under discussion was “*Grandparents: their witness and presence in the family.*” The PCF had already addressed the issue in a document published in 1993 with the declaration of Toronto and at the VI World Meeting of Families, in Valencia (Spain), in 2006.

⁹ Cfr. Francis, General Audience on the vocation of the elderly, 4 March 2015.

¹⁰ Especialmente la africana, Cf., Juan Pablo II, Carta a los ancianos, 1/10/1999

¹¹ Cf., Juan Pablo II, Carta a las Familias, *Gratissimam Sane*, 2/2/1994, numero 15

Recently, Pope Francis has dedicated many of his reflections on this topic. Let us note that the Pope challenges the authenticity of both society and the family in their treatment of the elderly. They are objects of veneration in some cultures, and in others they are viewed as a waste. In his recent series of catechesis on the family, the Pope dedicated two general audiences to this issue: the first, on March 4th, 2015, was entitled “Grandparents” and the second, on March 11th, “The vocation of the elderly.” Now, the latter seems important to me. Pope Francis said that old-age has a grace and a mission; it is a vocation. “This period of life is different from those before [...] our societies are not ready, spiritually and morally, to appreciate the true value of this stage of life.” And this challenges us to work in that direction. I therefore, greatly appreciate that the Charles University in Prague and the University of South Bohemia for organizing this conference, thus, in a way echoing the words of Pope Francis. Society must re-discover the role of the elderly, not only because they accumulate a wealth of experience for future generations, not only because they have a teaching mission that has often been hidden and unseen -although it is real and constant- not only because in many cases they are a cushion for financial emergencies, but above all because it is a matter of justice—of distributive justice and social justice. They deserve the full attention of every society worthy of the name. It is certainly an existential thermometer for our contemporary societies. Europe needs the living memory of its elders.¹²

Conclusion

The human being -male and female- is not an isolated being or merely an individual. This is proven by the fact that he or she receives life and gives life; and this fits squarely into our theme: children and the elderly are directly involved in the liquefaction of marriage, because it directly injures both the children and the elderly.¹³ Marriage as a stable and faithful union has to be prepared, accompanied and supported at all levels:¹⁴ cultural, economic, political as well as religious, because the good treatment of children and the elderly depends on it. The family is, therefore, the resource, and awareness of its origin, i.e. marriage, is urgent.

Having seen and summarized examined the evolution in both civil society and the Church, the elderly are called to play an even more central role. Without a doubt because of their number. However, quality is the challenge. They can be agents of cohesion and unity, living models of wisdom and living libraries; but it is urgent to

¹² Francis, Address to the European Parliament in Strasburg, 25 November 2014.

¹³ Cf., Corriere della Sera, edizione del 23 febbraio, I diritti dei nonni.

¹⁴ Cf., V. Paglia-A. Sciortino, ed. S. Paolo, Roma 2015

meet the deficit to which Pope Francis drew attention, and to develop in the future the vocation about which the Pope has spoken.

Their human and relational capital must not be wasted. They should feel actively involved, in this third or fourth stage of life; when their vitality declines, they should not be treated passively, but with justice and charity. These virtues are distinct, but one requires the other. And in this work of mediation between the new generations and the past, the role of the family founded on marriage is crucial. It is the married couple that must increasingly value the elderly and, thus, teach the children. They will do with their parents what they have seen them do with their grandparents. Up to 50 or 60 years ago, this was unusual, numerically speaking. But it no longer is. In consequence, the educational mission of parents has this novelty for new generations. The challenge is great, because precisely the current generation of parents has suffered the most from the historic changes linked to secularization.¹⁵ Yet, they will always have wise and patient elders with them, hoping against hope for their heart's awakening. Also in sickness, obviously linked with old age, the family is central. The family is the natural and normal milieu for all its members. The health authorities too, say this. In the later stages of life as well, whenever possible, the elderly should be in the family home. This is a big challenge for today's turbulent society; but it is not impossible. All family members should be coordinated and involved together; this fundamental attitude of acceptance should be promoted; and, ultimately, this golden rule must be lived. In this way, consciously or almost without knowing it, we will be living more fully as humans and closer -whether we are conscious of it or not- to God.

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¹⁵ R. Navarro-Valls, *Matrimonio y Sinodo sobre la familia: influencia de factores culturales*, en *Familia e matrimonio di fronte al Sinodo* (a cura di) O. Fumagalli-A. Sammassimo, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2015, 365-383.