

Introduction

It is an honour and pleasure to address you at this *Seventh World Congress of Families*, celebrated this year in the wonderful city of Sydney.

The topic chosen for this session, ‘*Strengthening Marriage and Family Life: the solution to social and economic challenges*’, is one of immense importance for the world today, and because core issues of life and human relationships are found, at their highest expression, within the natural institution of the Family, the Holy See considers it very important to speak of the Family, not just to its own Christian members, but also to every person of good will.¹

For this reason, I sincerely thank you for the opportunity to address you today as President of the Pontifical Council for the Family.

The Family resulting from marriage is the basis of society

Taking as my point of departure the words of Cicero, one of Rome’s greatest intellectuals, we could begin by stating that “*Familia est principium urbis e quasi seminarium rei publicae*”. That is to say, *the Family is the basis of society and virtually the school for all social life and issues*. It is from the Family that citizens come to birth and it is within the Family that they find the first school of the social virtues which constitute the animating principle for the existence and development of society itself. Cicero, who by the way, was not a Christian, implied that the civilized world, as known, would otherwise not exist at all without the Family.

Like all great thinkers before and after his era, Christian or not, the Family was and is considered the first and basic expression of man’s social nature and fulfilment.² This is so because the Family, which results from the marital union between one man and one woman, constitutes a community of parents and children, which at times extends to a community of several generations.³ Furthermore, what makes this community rank first, regarding the highest possible fulfilment and development of each person, is the fact that the marital union of the man and the woman is innately ordered towards a lifelong partnership of self-giving, of fidelity, towards procreation and the rearing of children,⁴ that is, natural goals and qualities of marriage which are inherently directed for the benefit of every single member of the

¹ Cf. Holy See, *Charter of the Rights of the Family*, 1983, L, M.

² Cf. John Paul II, *Letter to Families, Gratissimam sane*, 1994, 7.

³ Cf. John Paul II, *Letter to Families, Gratissimam sane*, 1994, 17.

⁴ Cf. Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et spes*, December 7, 1965, 48.

Family: for the husband, the wife, the children and in their own way too, for all their relatives.

From such obvious facts of nature, we ought to begin by stating that any comprehensive consideration that seeks to strengthen the Family and Marriage, must above all focus upon the Family's fundamental social reality. This reality powerfully results from the marriage of a man and a woman, which, properly understood, is set apart from cohabitation or unions with 'divorcist mentalities'. The difference is precisely because of that distinctively natural human characteristic of *permanence* which is so genetically engrained within the innermost desire of every spouse, and let us not forget too, of every child, who also needs and wants to see his or her parents as one, for life.

By drawing attention to the Family's genetically social role resulting from the stable life-giving union of marriage, we shall best be enabled to help people and society recover their appreciation for the natural Family -mother, father and children- for what it is, not a religious belief, or a Christian institution that the Church would like to impose, but a *fact of life*, that cannot be removed from the innermost heart and soul of every single human being.

Yes, we all know and can see that deep within every person there is the desire to be part of a Family resulting from marriage. Indeed, numerous sociological researches confirm that the Family - understood as the mother, father and children - takes first place in the aspirations of people at large. What is more, and surprisingly at odds with public opinion, studies have also revealed that the great majority of young people actually look forward to a happy marriage of a lifelong and faithful union with their husband or wife.

In this regard and drawing now on certain sociological studies promoted by the Pontifical Council for the Family, I wish to provide what I hope are some useful guideposts for consideration:

1. First, the rights of marriage and the Family

Scientific research has proven the fact that getting married constitutes an added value for persons and for society, in that marriage enhances the quality of the relationship of the couple and has important positive consequences (biological, psychological, economic and social) for children and adults. Research also reveals that cohabitation, in contrast to marriage, is less stable and thereby, generates more uncertainties both in the people who form that union, as well as in their children. Studies illustrate too, that divorce itself, and even the choice of single parenthood, increases the risk of school failure for children.

However, before I continue, and in recognition of the heroic efforts of many single parents, or of so many victims of separation or divorce, I wish to acknowledge the fact that God's grace has no bounds and that He can work powerfully through the lives of those who love and act according to His will.

Nevertheless, and to return to observable facts, to empirical data, in a forum such as this we need also to acknowledge those situations which both disadvantage our children, and hinder the fulfilment and happiness of adults. We have to face that reality and work to minimize the problem wherever possible. No doubt, a task that must be approached with great compassion and sensitivity.

Therefore, and as already stated, we need to acknowledge that Family relationships are not only a precious good, but furthermore, of their nature they are grounded emotionally and biologically upon stability. When Family relationships suffer instability, all members of the Family are at risk. Countless studies illustrate that marriage stability, in particular, is decisive for the successful socialization of children. By contrast, divorce, as well as birth outside marriage, increase the risk of poverty for children and mothers. Also, studies show that children raised without a father account for a very high percentage of the homeless, of adolescent suicides and of youth in prison. All families face problems and challenges, but broken, reconstituted or incomplete families experience additional problems.

Marriage, that stable union between one man and one woman, that is open to life and the raising of children, generates benefits for the person and for society that other forms of "living together" are unable to do in such complete measure. People and individuals who find themselves in relationship situations without the blessings of a naturally constituted Family must be given authentic care and attention. However, this should not be done at the expense of the rights of marriage and the Family. Indeed, individual rights must forever be protected. *Consanguineal* rights too, are inalienable. These rights have their proper due. But of fundamental importance for the promotion of *human rights* is the recognition of the rights of the *Family based on marriage*.

This implies the protection of marriage in the framework of human rights and of Family life as an objective of every juridical system.⁵

For this reason, while seeing to the just needs of individuals, the State cannot exceed the *limits of human rights* and thus, mistakenly grant in law a marital recognition or marital privileges to non-marital unions or situations.

Sociologists and economists warn that excessive broken-family assistance programmes, the proliferation of divorce laws,⁶ as well as the marital provisions for

⁵ Cf. Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Family and Human Rights*, 1999, 9.

⁶ Cf. Holy See, *Charter of the Rights of the Family*, 1983, Art. 6, b.

serial re-marriages, cohabitation, and single-parents, have brought about a collective depreciation concerning the Family and stable marriage. In addition, there is an associated sharp rise in the expectations for government financial assistance, a situation which cannot be maintained indefinitely. Furthermore, with the impact of broken or incomplete families on the increase, the socio-economic benefits given by the Family to society are seriously reduced.⁷

Indeed, all governments are aware of the financial costs that arise when marriages fail. Yet, while governments continue to finance the costs arising from the breakdown of Family life, comparatively little is spent on preventive measures.

Among the many preventative measure which may come to mind, one positive measure would be educational and formational courses. To speak of one example at an ecclesial level, we can easily affirm that in order to enhance the possibility of a successful marriage, couples may avail themselves of a marriage preparation programme.

Strengthening marriage and Family life calls for a concerted effort at all levels to address preparation for marriage. This begins in the home. It requires relationship training at all stages of life, including the school years and early adult life. By way of contrast, however, there are enormous expectations around training for work, but much less for preparing to enter a life-long commitment in marriage with its beneficial outcome for society.

2. With these facts in mind, in consideration of the rights owed to the Family and marriage, and with this reference to work, I now wish to address the question of Family and Work.

As I just mentioned, the development of each person is best achieved from and within the Family. Yet, modern economic theories ignore Family requirements altogether, and give single-minded emphasis to the productivity of their individual employees, regarding families as accidental groupings wherein employees happen to live with their respective relations. Isolating the individual employee from the Family not only does harm to families, but to society itself. What should occur instead is that the world of work recognize the importance of the Family to human society and from there organize itself in such a way that labour policies authentically give utmost attention to Family needs.

By way of example, consideration ought to be given so that remuneration for work should be sufficient for establishing and maintaining a Family with dignity by means of a proper “Family wage.” Family allowances too, or compensation for the specific contribution that a father and a mother offer to society deserves greater

⁷ Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 63, a.1, c.

attention, as these contributions can be appreciated in their own *complementary* way within the areas of up-bringing, health, education.⁸ States should make it possible for the structure and the remuneration of work to aid women and men in fulfilling their particular vocation as mothers and fathers, as they are allowed to dedicate time to their children.⁹ Equally, it is important to keep in mind that marriage has a right to assistance, especially if it involves a large Family or members with special needs.¹⁰ Furthermore, it is important also to provide means for families to both acquire and keep a decent home as the stable physical place from where the Family may play out its invaluable social role.¹¹

Indeed, if such policies were applied, not only would families be stronger, but social cohesion and harmony would be enhanced, and paradoxically, the economy would be strengthened.

3. *This last point now leads to the third area which I would like to address today. That is: Family and Social Capital.*

Free and democratic political and economic processes are possible only where there is a strong social fabric, where the public and civil sphere require and reward basic human values, promote the common good and ensure the circumstances in which families can be created and thrive.

When speaking of social fabric, leading writers have stressed the basic role of the Family. A great 19th century proponent of democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville, stated that, “*modern democracy needs a solid and stable Family.*” This means that not only does the Family benefit from a strong social fabric, but as it builds and strengthens relationships, it is also the creator of primary social capital, and can thus be regarded as an important source of “the wealth of nations.”

Some may say that the Family has changed over the centuries, but we must also realize that, whatever circumstances families may encounter on an empirical level, the Family’s constitutional genome does not cease to be the source and origin of society. Without this ‘social genome,’ this fundamental cell of society, which constitutes the primary vehicle for the humanization of persons and social life, the very existence of society is seriously under threat.

⁸ Cf. John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation, Familiaris Consortio* 23, 25; Cf. *Laborem Exercens*, 19; Cf. John Paul II, *Message for the XXVIII World Day of Peace*, 1995, 5.

⁹ Cf. Holy See, *Charter of the Rights of the Family*, 1983, Art. 10; Cf. Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Family and Human Rights*, 1999, 26-27.

¹⁰ Cf. Holy See, *Charter of the Rights of the Family*, 1983, Art. 3, c.

¹¹ Cf. Holy See, *Charter of the Rights of the Family*, 1983, Arts. 9.a., and 11.

Conclusion

Dear friends, in contemporary debate there is much discussion of different types of “families”, and disagreements are fairly marked. While acknowledging that no one, regardless of their circumstances is to be marginalized or denied solidarity, I do believe, there is a general agreement on one point: that the natural Family progression –marriage, mother, father, children– is the one in which our humanity is best and most surely realized and which society is called on to regard most highly.

The Family is the place where our most intimate relationships are formed. Family based upon marriage is a great source of hope for humanity. We never lose hope, not even if cultural currents continue to hold that loving someone for life is an impossibility. Yet I ask myself: how is it that no one disputes for example, that a young man enthusiastically professes undying love for his favourite rugby or cricket team, but instead cannot be tolerated for saying the same thing concerning his wife! Clearly something is wrong!

We are all well aware that the Family is threatened on many sides, and its extinction is prophesied time and again. Nevertheless, because the Family is inscribed within the heart of each human being, it can only continue to exhibit a vigour, a resilience much greater than that of the ongoing trends which work against it.

May all of us gathered in dialogue and hope, contribute to the protection of the Family and marriage, to peoples’ greater happiness. May God pour out His abundant blessings upon you and all those whom you represent. I wish you all a very successful *Seventh World Congress of Families*.

Thank you for your attention.