



“The Heart of the Deepest Truth”

Pope John Paul II: Family Mass in York

Knavesmire Racecourse, York, Monday 31 May 1982

My brothers and sisters,

On this feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary I greet you in the Lord. I am happy to be with you in this historic city of York. We are in the shadow, as it were, of the beautiful Minster, and in the spiritual company of so many saintly men and women who have graced these northern counties.

I deeply appreciate the presence here of many fellow Christians. I rejoice that we are united in a common Baptism and in our renewed search for full Christian unity.

I greet all those civic representatives from different cities and towns of Northern England. I thank you all for your welcome.

I am conscious of the history, especially the religious history, of this part of England. I refer to Holy Island where Aidan and Cuthbert brought the Catholic faith. I recall Bede, who wrote so lovingly of the early life of the Church in England. I remember that a thousand years later men and women laid down their lives in this region for the faith they loved. Mary Ward taught the Gospel of Jesus Christ to English exiles; Margaret Clitheroe gave her life in this city of York. These holy women inspire women today to take their rightful place in the life of the Church, as befits their equality of rights and particular dignity. In that same period the priest, Nicholas Postgate, carried the Gospel across the moors and gave his life on this very spot.

This morning, in Manchester, young men were ordained to the sacred priesthood of Christ. They were answering the call of God's love. For many people, as for Margaret Clitheroe, that call from God comes in and through marriage and family life. This is our theme. In our liturgical setting, which calls to mind the supremacy of God's saving grace, you married people will be invited to renew the promises you first made on your wedding day.

In a marriage a man and a woman pledge themselves to one another in an unbreakable alliance of total mutual self-giving. A total union of love. Love that is not a passing emotion or temporary infatuation, but a responsible and free decision to bind oneself completely, “in good times and in bad”, to one's partner. It is the gift of oneself to the other. It is a love to be proclaimed before the eyes of the whole world. It is unconditional.

To be capable of such love calls for careful preparation from early childhood to wedding day. It requires the constant support of Church and society throughout its development.

The love of husband and wife in God's plan leads beyond itself and new life is generated, a family is born. The family is a community of love and life, a home in which children are guided to maturity.

Marriage is a holy sacrament. Those baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus are married in his name also. Their love is a sharing in the love of God. It is its source. The marriages of Christian couples, today renewed and blessed, are images on earth of the wonder of God, the loving, life-giving communion of Three Persons in one God, and of God's covenant in Christ, with the Church.

Christian marriage is a sacrament of salvation. It is the pathway to holiness for all members of a family. With all my heart, therefore, I urge that your homes be centres of prayer; homes where families are at ease in the presence of God; homes to which others are invited to share hospitality, prayer and the praise of God: "With gratitude in your hearts sing psalm and hymns and inspired songs to God; and never say or do anything except in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col. 3, 16. 17).

In your country, there are many marriages between Catholics and other baptized Christians. Sometimes these couples experience special difficulties. To these families I say: You live in your marriage the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity. Express that hope in prayer together, in the unity of love. Together invite the Holy Spirit of love into your hearts and into your homes. He will help you to grow in trust and understanding.

Brothers and sisters, "May the peace of Christ reign in your hearts . . . let the message of Christ, in all its richness, find a home with you" (Col. 3, 15. 16).

Recently I wrote an Apostolic Exhortation to the whole Catholic Church regarding the role of the Christian Family in the modern world. In that Exhortation I underlined the positive aspects of family life today, which include: a more lively awareness of personal freedom and greater attention to the quality of interpersonal relationships in marriage, greater attention to promoting the dignity of women, to responsible procreation, to the education of children. But at the same time I could not fail to draw attention to the negative phenomena: a corruption of the idea and experience of freedom, with consequent self-centredness in human relations; serious misconceptions regarding the relationship between parents and children; the growing number of divorces; the scourge of abortion; the spread of a contraceptive and anti-life mentality. Besides these destructive forces, there are social and economic conditions which affect millions of human beings, undermining the strength and stability of marriage and family life. In addition there is the cultural onslaught against the family by those who attack married life as "irrelevant" and "outdated". All of this is a serious challenge to society and to the Church. As I wrote then: "History is not simply a fixed progression towards what is better, but rather an event of freedom, and even a struggle between freedoms that are in mutual conflict" (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II Familiaris Consortio, 6).

Married couples, I speak to you of the hopes and ideals that sustain the Christian vision of marriage and family life. You will find the strength to be faithful to your marriage vows in your love for God and your love for each other and for your children. Let this love be the rock that stands firm in the face of every storm and temptation. What better blessing could the Pope wish for your families than what Saint Paul wished for the Christians of Colossae: "Be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another; forgive each other as soon as a quarrel begins. The Lord has forgiven you; now you must do the same. Over all these clothes . . . put on love" (Col. 3, 12-14).

Being a parent today brings worries and difficulties, as well as joys and satisfactions. Your children are your treasure. They love you very much, even if they sometimes find it hard to express that love. They look for independence and are reluctant to conform. Sometimes they wish to reject past traditions and even reject their faith.

In the family, bridges are meant to be built, not broken; and new expressions of wisdom and truth can be fashioned from the meeting of experience and enquiry. Yours is a true and proper ministry in the Church. Open the doors of your home and of your heart to all the generations of your family.

We cannot overlook the fact that some marriages fail. But still it is our duty to proclaim the true plan of God for all married love and to insist on fidelity to that plan, as we go towards the fullness of life in the Kingdom of heaven. Let us not forget that God's love for his people, Christ's love for the Church, is everlasting and can never be broken. And the covenant between a man and a woman joined in Christian marriage is as indissoluble and irrevocable as this love. This truth is a great consolation for the world, and because some marriages fail, there is an ever greater need for the Church and all her members to proclaim it faithfully.

Christ himself, the living source of grace and mercy, is close to all those whose marriage has known trial, pain, or anguish. Throughout the ages countless married people have drawn from the Paschal Mystery of Christ's Cross and Resurrection the strength to bear Christian witness - at times very difficult - to the indissolubility of Christian marriage. And all the efforts of the Christian people to bear faithful witness to God's law, despite human weakness, have not been in vain. These efforts are the human response made, through grace, to a God who has first loved us and who has given himself for us.

As I explained in my Apostolic Exhortation "Familiaris Consortio", the Church is vitally concerned for the pastoral care of the family in all difficult cases. We must reach out with love - the love of Christ - to those who know the pain of failure in marriage; to those who know the loneliness of bringing up a family on their own; to those whose family life is dominated by tragedy or by illness of mind or body. I praise all those who help people wounded by the breakdown of their marriage, by showing them Christ's compassion and counselling them according to Christ's truth.

To the public authorities, and to all men and women of good will, I say: treasure your families. Protect their rights. Support the family by your laws and administration. Allow the voice of the family to be heard in the making of your policies. The future of your society, the future of humanity, passes by way of the family.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, who are now about to renew the promises of your wedding day: may your words express once more the truth that is in your heart and may they generate faithful love within your families. Make sure that your families are real communities of love. Allow that love to reach out to other people, near and far. Reach out especially to the lonely and burdened people of your neighbourhood, to the poor and to all those on the margin of society. In this way you will build up your society in peace, for peace requires trust, and trust is the child of love, and love comes to birth in the cradle of the family.

Today and always, may God bless all of you, and all the families of Britain. Amen.

And how can we not recall those many families in Britain and in Argentina who bear the heavy weight of pain and sorrow because of the loss of their loved ones in the South Atlantic. As we ask God to comfort them in their reflection, let us pray for peace a just and lasting peace so that other families may be spared the sufferings of war, so that other husbands, wives and children may not have to surrender what is most sacred in the community of the family, love and life. Amen.

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