



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS

JOHN PAUL II

FOR LENT 1994

*"The family is at the service of charity,
charity is at the service of the family"*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

1. The Lenten Season is the acceptable time which the Lord gives us that we might *take up anew our journey of conversion*, grow in faith, hope and love, enter more fully into the Covenant willed by God and experience a season of grace and reconciliation.

"The family is at the service of charity, charity is at the service of the family". In choosing the theme for this year's Lenten Letter, I wish to invite all Christians to change their lives and their ways of acting, in order to be a leaven which *gives rise in the heart of the human family to charity and solidarity*, values which are essential to the life of society and the life of each Christian.

2. Above all, I encourage families to grow more aware of their mission in the Church and in the world. In their individual and community prayer they receive the Holy Spirit who comes to make all things new in them and through them, opening the hearts of the faithful to concern for all. Drawing from the source of love, all are enabled to transmit this love by their life and their actions. *Prayer makes us one with Christ and thus makes all people brothers and sisters.*

The family is the first and foremost place in which we come to appreciate and live the fraternal life, the life of charity and of solidarity, in all its many forms. In the family, we learn attentiveness, openness and respect for others, who must always be able to find their proper place. Life in common is also an invitation to a sharing which helps us to rise above our selfishness. In learning

to share and to give, we discover the immense joy which comes from the communion of goods. With great tact, parents should strive by word and example to awaken a sense of solidarity in their children. From childhood, everyone is called to mortification and fasting in order to grow in character and self-discipline, overcoming the desire to possess everything for oneself alone. What we learn in the family stays with us throughout life.

3. In today's particularly troubled times, may families follow the example of Mary, who hastened to visit her cousin Elizabeth, and *draw near to their brothers and sisters in need, lifting them up in prayer!* Imitating God's own concern for all, we must be able to say, "I have seen the affliction of my people because their cry has come to me" (1 Sam 9:16); in this way we will not remain deaf to their appeals. The poverty of an ever-increasing number of our brothers and sisters destroys their human dignity and disfigures humanity as a whole: *it is a scandal which cries out for the response of solidarity and justice.*

4. Today, *we must be especially attentive to the sufferings and poverty of families.* Many families have in fact crossed the threshold of poverty, and no longer have the bare essentials to feed themselves and their children, to provide their children with a normal physical and psychological growth and the chance to attend school on a regular basis. Some families do not have the means to find decent housing. Unemployment is becoming more widespread and increasing the poverty of entire sectors of the population. Women are left to provide for the needs of their children and for their education, which often leads young people to roam in the streets, to seek refuge in drugs, alcohol abuse or violence. More and more couples and families are experiencing psychological and relational troubles. Social problems contribute at times to the break-up of the family. All too often, unborn children are not accepted. In certain countries very young children are forced to live in inhuman conditions or are shamefully exploited. The aged and handicapped, because they are not financially productive, are left completely on their own and made to feel useless. Some families, because they are from other races, other cultures or other religions, encounter rejection in countries where they have settled.

5. Faced with these grave problems, which have reached global proportions, *we may not keep silent or do nothing, because they are destroying the family,* which is the basic unit of society and of the Church. We are called to take the situation in hand. Christians and all people of good will have the duty to help families in difficulty, providing them with the spiritual and material help needed to overcome the often tragic situations of which we have spoken.

In this Lenten Season, then, I especially encourage sharing with the poorest families, so that they can fulfil their responsibilities, especially with regard to children. No one ought to be rejected simply because he is different, weak or poor. On the contrary, such differences are a source of enrichment for building together. *When we give to the poor, we give to Christ,* for the poor "have put on the face of our Saviour" and are "God's favoured ones" (St Gregory of Nyssa, *On Love for the Poor*). Faith calls for sharing with one's brothers and sisters. *Solidarity in material things is an*

essential and primary expression of fraternal charity: it provides each one with the means for surviving and for leading a decent life.

The earth and its riches are the property of everyone. "The abundance of the whole earth must bear fruit for all" (St Ambrose of Milan, *On Naboth*, VII, 33). In the difficult times in which we are living, it is certainly not enough to give from one's surplus; what is needed is *to transform ways of acting and patterns of consumption*, giving from what one needs and keeping only what is essential, so that all people can live in dignity. This Lent, let us abstain from our often immoderate desire for material goods, so to offer our neighbour what he desperately needs. *The fasting of the rich must become the feast of the poor* (cf. St. Leo the Great, *Homily 20 on Fasting*).

6. I encourage diocesan and parish communities to recognize the necessity to find practical means of assisting needy families. I know that numerous diocesan synods have already made progress in this regard. Agencies for the pastoral care of families should also be able to make an important contribution. By their participation in civic organizations, Christians should also make every effort to call attention to the pressing duty to help families in need. Once more I appeal to the leaders of nations to discover, on both the national and the international level, the means for putting an end to the spiral of poverty, especially the poverty of families. The Church is confident that government leaders and heads of business, in developing economic policies, will come to appreciate the changes which need to be made, as well as their own obligations in this regard. In this way families will not depend solely on financial assistance, but will be able to meet their basic needs by the labour of their own members.

7. The Christian community joyfully welcomes the initiative of the United Nations to make 1994 an *International Year of the Family*. Wherever she is able, she will be happy to offer her specific contribution to this celebration.

Today let us not harden our hearts! Let us heed the Lord's voice and the voice of our brothers and sisters!

May the acts of charity done throughout this Lent, by families and for families, bring profound joy to all and open our hearts to the Risen Christ, "the first-born among many brethren" (Rom 8:29). To all who respond to the Lord's call, I willingly impart my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 3 September 1993

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