



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II FOR THE XXXI WORLD DAY OF PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS

*Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and
Dear Faithful of the whole world,*

The celebration of the World Day of Prayer for Vocations coincides, this year, with an important ecclesial event. It is the inauguration of the "First Continental Latin American Congress on Pastoral Care for Vocations of Special Consecration on the Continent of Hope".

This Assembly has set for itself an in-depth task of examining, encouraging and promoting vocations. As I express a keen appreciation for this pastoral initiative, which aims at the spiritual good not only of Latin America but of the whole Church, I call upon everyone to support it in common and confident prayer.

The World Day of Prayer takes place, besides, during the International Year of the Family. This affords the opportunity of calling attention to the close relationship which exists between family, education and vocation, and particularly between family and priestly and religious vocations.

In addressing myself to Christian families, I wish thereby to confirm them in their mission of educating the young generations, which are the hope and future of the Church.

1. "This is a great mystery" (Eph 5:32)

In spite of profound historical changes, the family remains the most complete and the richest school of humanity, in which one lives the most significant experience of unselfish love, fidelity, mutual respect and the defence of life. Its particular task is to protect and hand on virtues and values, by means of the education of the children, in such a way as to build up and promote the good of individuals and of the community.

This same responsibility involves, with greater reason, the Christian family, because its members, already consecrated and sanctified in virtue of their Baptism, are called to a particular apostolic vocation by the sacrament of Matrimony (cf. *Familiaris consortio*, nn. 52, 54).

The family, to the extent to which it becomes conscious of this singular vocation and measures up to it, becomes a community of sanctification in which one learns to live meekness, justice, mercy, chastity, peace, purity of heart (cf. Eph 4:1-4; *Familiaris consortio*, n. 21). It becomes, in other words, what Saint John Chrysostom called "the domestic church", that is, a place in which Jesus Christ lives and works for the salvation of men and for the growth of the kingdom of God. The members of the family, called to faith and to eternal life, are "sharers in the divine nature" (2 Pt 1:4), they are nourished at the table of the Word of God and of the Sacraments, and they express themselves in that evangelical way of thinking and acting which opens them up to a life of holiness on earth and of eternal happiness in heaven (cf. Eph 1:4-5).

Christian parents, demonstrating a loving care for their children from their earliest years, communicate to them, by word and example, a sincere and lived-out relationship with God, made up of love, fidelity, prayer and obedience (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 35; *Apostolicam actuositatem*, n. 11). In this way, parents encourage the holiness of their children and render their hearts docile to the voice of the Good Shepherd, who calls every man to follow him and to seek first the kingdom of God.

In the light of this horizon of divine grace and human responsibility, the family can be considered a "garden" or a "first seminary" in which the seeds of vocation, which God sows generously, are able to blossom and grow to full maturity (cf. *Optatam totius*, n. 2).

2. "Do not conform yourself to this age" (Rom 12:2)

The task of Christian parents is as important as it is sensitive, because they are called to prepare, cultivate and protect the vocations which God stirs up in their family. They must, therefore, enrich themselves and their family with spiritual and moral values, such as a deep and convinced religious spirit, an apostolic and ecclesial consciousness, and a clear idea of what a vocation is.

In fact, for every family, the decisive step to be taken is that of accepting the Lord Jesus as the centre and pattern of life, and in him and with him, becoming conscious of being the privileged place for authentic vocational growth.

The family will fulfil this task if it is constant in its commitment and if it relies always on the grace of God. For Saint Paul declares that "God is the one who, for his good purpose, works... both the will and the deed" (Phil 2:13) and that "the One who began a good work... will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus" (ibid., 1:6).

But what happens when the family lets itself become involved in consumerism, hedonism and secularism, which upset and block the fulfilment of God's plan?

How sad it is to learn of situations, unfortunately numerous, of families overwhelmed by such phenomena and of the devastating effects! This is certainly one of the greatest concerns of the Christian community. It is above all the families themselves who pay the price of the widespread disorder of ideas and of moral behaviour. But the Church also suffers from this, just as the entire society feels its effects.

How can children, rendered morally orphans, without educators and without models, grow in their esteem for human and Christian values? How can those seeds of vocations, which the Holy Spirit continues to put into the hearts of the young generations, develop in such a climate?

The strength and stability of the fabric of the Christian family represent the primary condition for the growth and maturation of sacred vocations, and they constitute the most pertinent response to the crisis of vocations. As I wrote in the Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*: "Every local Church and, in more particular terms, every parochial community must become more vividly aware of the grace and responsibility that it receives from the Lord, so that it might promote the pastoral care of the family. No plan for organized pastoral work at any level must ever fail to take into consideration the pastoral area of the family" (n. 70).

3. "Ask the Master of the harvest, therefore, to send out labourers for his harvest" (Mt 9:38)

The pastoral care of vocations finds its first and natural setting in the family. Indeed, parents should know how to welcome as a grace the gift which God gives them in calling one of their sons or daughters to the priesthood or religious life. Such a grace must be asked for in prayer and received actively, by means of an education which allows the young people to perceive all the richness and joy of consecrating oneself to God.

Parents who welcome the call of a son or daughter to a special consecration for the kingdom of heaven with a sense of gratitude and joy, receive a special sign of the spiritual fruitfulness of their union, as they see it enriched by the experience of love lived out in celibacy and virginity.

These parents discover with amazement that the gift of their love is, as it were, multiplied, thanks to the sacred vocation of their children, beyond the limited dimensions of human love.

To bring families to the awareness of this important aspect of their mission requires a pastoral activity aimed at leading spouses and parents to be "witnesses and co-operators of the fruitfulness of mother Church, as a sign of, and a share in that love with which Christ loved his bride and gave himself for her" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 41).

The family is the natural "nursery" of vocations. Pastoral care of the family, therefore, should direct a very special attention to the properly vocational aspect of its task.

4. "Let the one who has responsibility in the community show care and diligence" (Rom 12:8)

Walking together, following Christ, towards the Father is the most appropriate vocational programme. If priests, religious men and women, missionaries and committed laity concern themselves with the family and intensify the forms of dialogue and of a common seeking to live the Gospel, the family will be enriched with those values which will help it to be the first "seminary" of vocations and of consecrated life.

Let *priests, diocesan and religious*, take to the problems of family life, so that, by means of the proclamation of the Gospel, they might give light to Christian spouses about their peculiar responsibilities, and thus the parents, well formed in the faith, will be able to guide their sons and daughters who might be called to give themselves unreservedly to God.

Let *all consecrated persons*, who are particularly close to and accepted by families because of their apostolic service in schools, hospitals, institutions of assistance and parishes offer joyful witness of their total gift to Christ. Let them, with their lives lived according to the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, be a sign of and call to eternal values for Christian spouses.

Let *the parish community* sense itself responsible for this mission to the family and support it with long-term projects, without being too concerned about immediate results.

I entrust to committed Christians, catechists and young couples the task of catechesis in the family. With their generous and faithful service they will help children to have their first taste of a religious and ecclesial experience.

My thought goes in a special way towards my *venerable Brothers in the Episcopate*, as the ones first responsible for the promotion of vocations, and I recommend that they make every effort to see to it that the pastoral care of vocations be systematically joined with that of the family.

Let us pray

O Holy Family of Nazareth, community of love of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, model and ideal of every Christian family, to you we entrust our families.

Open the heart of every family to the faith, to welcoming the word of God, to Christian witness, so that it become a source of new and holy vocations.

Touch the hearts of parents, so that with prompt charity, wise care, and loving devotion they be for

their sons and daughters sure guides towards spiritual and eternal values.

Stir up in the hearts of young people a right conscience and a free will, so that growing in "wisdom, age and grace", they might welcome generously the gift of a divine vocation.

Holy Family of Nazareth, grant that all of us, contemplating and imitating the assiduous prayer, generous obedience, dignified poverty and virginal purity lived out in your midst, might set about fulfilling the will of God and accompanying with far-sighted sensitivity those among us who are called to follow more closely the Lord Jesus, who "has given himself for us" (cf. Gal 2:20).

Amen!

Given at the Vatican, 26 December, Feast of the Holy Family, in the year 1993, the sixteenth of my Pontificate.