



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO the Bishops who serve as Presidents of
Latin American Episcopal Commissions for the Family

Thursday, 12 December 1996

Your Eminences,

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I am pleased to receive this morning the Bishops who serve as Presidents of the Latin American Episcopal Commissions for the Family and their co-workers, and various Latin American members of the Pontifical Council for the Family, who have come to take part in this meeting whose primary purpose is to prepare the *Second World Meeting with Families*.

I am grateful for Cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo's kind words. I also address a special greeting to Cardinal Eugênio de Araújo Sales, Archbishop of Rio de Janeiro, and Archbishop Cláudio Hummes of Fortaleza, director of the Family Apostolate of the National Bishops' Conference of Brazil.

The Archdiocese of Rio de Janeiro, the rest of Brazil and all Latin America, with the valuable collaboration of CELAM, are preparing the world meeting that will take place on 4-5 October 1997. This meeting will afford the Successor of Peter a new opportunity to address the world's families, encouraging them to intensify and fulfil their commitments at this moment in history, as the theme chosen suggests: *The Family: Gift and Commitment, Hope of Humanity*.

With a view to this preparation, you have already embarked on an educational campaign, using catechetical material which will be the topic of reflection throughout the world and a help to everyone in taking responsibility for the tasks of this urgent pastoral priority. Accompanying you with my prayers, I am also preparing for this meeting, which will enable me again to visit the Latin America I love so much.

2. Your visit takes place 15 years after the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio* was published, the valuable result of

the Synod on the Family celebrated in 1980. It is a basic charter as it were that recognizes the family's decisive and overriding importance for humanity and the Church, and it has given a vigorous incentive to the renewal of the family apostolate. At the same time, it has also given an impetus to this particular apostolate, offering the Bishops a valuable tool for helping families fulfil their mission, so that husband and wife may reflect the Lord's faithful love and, with his Church, take part in God's work by transmitting life and raising their children in authentic Gospel values.

In our times, it is essential to deepen everyone's personal commitment to helping enrich this primary and vital cell of society. It should not be forgotten, in the general planning of ecclesial activities, that the family is the first and principal path of the Church. Awareness of its central value for evangelization must imbue the whole structure of diocesan pastoral care.

3. *Familiaris consortio* insists most particularly on the rights of the family, for which it is as it were a Magna Charta. For this reason, encouragement should be given to projects that endeavour to make all institutions having legislative or governmental responsibilities—in view of the rights of this natural institution expressly desired by God—respect, help and promote the family as a basic, necessary good for society as a whole. The future of humanity and of Latin America certainly passes through the family.

4. As everyone knows, wherever the Church has been unable to carry out her usual work of evangelization, it has frequently been families that have preserved and maintained the faith, passing it on to the new generations. This function proper to the family as the first teacher of its new members expresses the true vocation and mission of Christian parents, whose primary responsibility involves their children's human and religious formation.

5. In recent years we have witnessed with deep concern the appearance of a systematic challenge to the family, which calls into question the values that form this natural institution's very foundations. Under the pretext of caring for and protecting the family and all families, the fact that there is a model loved and blessed by God is overlooked. The specific character of the spouses' conjugal promise is denied, underestimating this indissoluble commitment. Likewise, an attempt is sometimes made to introduce other forms of union, contrary to God's original plan for the human race. In this way, the rights of the family are disregarded or weakened, thereby threatening society at its very roots and attacking its future.

Indeed, marriage or the conjugal commitment of a man and woman, with mutual love and the transmission of life, are primary values for society, which civil legislation cannot disregard or combat. This is why the Church and her Pastors cannot be indifferent to certain attempts at substantial changes which affect the family structure. Undoubtedly everything related to the fundamental rights of children is crucial: to have a real home, to be accepted, loved, educated and to have the good example of their parents. A child's greatest poverty is to be deprived of the love, protection and tender warmth of a family.

With the Christmas holidays close at hand, we approach the cave of Bethlehem with deep veneration. There we find the Holy Family in which our Saviour was born and grew up. Contemplating this divine mystery, we discover how the light of a star illumines the ways of humanity and guides us toward the threshold of the third Christian millennium. The light of this star, as God's presence among men, must also illumine us all and lead us to truly commit ourselves to tirelessly promoting the perennial values of the family, the little domestic church, the sanctuary of life and the cradle of the

civilization of love.

6. Dear brothers, in my Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente* I stated that the preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 must necessarily pass through the family (cf. n. 28). I therefore encourage you to continue this specific task. May the contemplation of life in the house of Nazareth, an example for all the world's families and the place where the Lord, "the Saviour of the world, yesterday, today and forever" (*ibid.*, 40), experienced family life, I encourage you to offer the world the light for which humanity is waiting. May the Apostolic Blessing I affectionately impart to you be of great help.

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