



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE FORUM OF
CATHOLIC FAMILY ASSOCIATIONS**

Saturday, 27 June 1998

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,

Dear Representatives of the Forum of Family Associations,

1. I am very pleased to greet you with the words of *Familiaris consortio*: "Family, become what you are!" (n. 17) which effectively indicate the objective for which you generously expend your mental and physical energy.

I greet and thank Bishop Giuseppe Anfossi, who has expressed your sentiments, illustrating the aims of the Forum of Catholic Family Associations of Italy, of which you constitute an important delegation. My heartfelt thanks to all of you for this visit, with which you wish to renew your adherence to the Successor of Peter.

I know that you work tirelessly with the 38 associations and regional committees belonging to the Forum, to enable Italian families also to fully express and develop their identity and mission at the cultural, social and political levels. To achieve this you have most appropriately based your Statutes on the Charter of the Rights of the Family so that in just a few years your sodality has won widespread esteem and consideration, becoming the timely and courageous voice of the needs and legitimate claims of millions of Italian families and a serious and credible spokesman for the various social and political forces. In you the Church sees a great hope for the present and future of families in Italy.

2. The situation in Italy, as in many other parts of the world, is marked by radical challenges which must be faced with courage and unity of purpose. Today too, the family is the most precious and important resource available to the Italian nation which is so dear to me. The vast majority of Italians profoundly believes in the family and its values, and this conviction is shared by the young generation. Families make an incalculable contribution to social life, assuming the burden of serious problems such as widespread unemployment among young people and inadequate social security and health care.

Nevertheless, families receive little help due to the aleatory and uncertain nature of family policies which too often fail to provide them with sufficient economic or social support. Here, we should recall the clear dictate of the Italian Constitution which states: "The Republic facilitates with economic measures and other provisions the formation of the family and the fulfilment of its task in its regard". The marked decrease in the birth rate that has been afflicting the Italian population for many years is beginning to have a negative effect on society. This should alert attention to how detrimental to the nation's true interests is the absence of an effective family policy.

Even more worrying however, is the direct attack on the family institution which is developing at the cultural level and in political, legislative and administrative spheres. This ignores or distorts the significance of the constitutional norm with which the Italian Republic "acknowledges the rights of the family as a natural society founded on marriage" (art. 29). In fact, setting aside fundamental ethical and anthropological considerations, there is a clear tendency to equate other and quite different forms of coexistence with the family. Furthermore, equally explicit and timely is the attempt to give legal dignity to methods of procreation that disregard the conjugal bond and do not adequately protect the embryo. Moreover, the grave injury to the moral and juridical conscience is still represented by the law on voluntary abortion.

3. It is precisely the radicalism of current challenges that highlights the importance and function of the Forum of Family Associations. Through it, many associations, each one with its own specific vocation and tradition, can effectively collaborate in the defence and promotion of the family.

By drawing from the vital sap of family spirituality and by applying to concrete situations the guidelines set out by Christian social teaching, you are called first and foremost to undertake a moral and cultural commitment to help the men and women of our time understand more deeply and live with renewed enthusiasm and dignity the great Christian and civil tradition of Italy, centred on the importance and value of the family. It would be mistaken to consider the progressive disintegration of the family as an inevitable phenomenon which almost automatically accompanies economic and technological development. On the contrary, the family's future is entrusted first of all to each person's conscience and responsible commitment, and to the convictions and values that are alive within us. Therefore we must always turn with trustful supplication to him who can change human hearts and minds.

However, rightly, you give equal attention to the laws and institutions in which the culture and moral convictions of a people are expressed and by which they are sustained, or conversely damaged. Dear brothers and sisters, continue and intensify your work, in all places and at all levels, so that those rights that naturally belong to the family may be concretely recognized. In doing this, you put into practice the principle according to which families "should be the first to take steps to see that the laws and institutions of the State not only do not offend but support and positively defend the rights and duties of the family", thus growing in the knowledge that they are protagonists of "family politics" (cf. *Familiaris consortio*, n. 44).

4. In your work for families, dear representatives of the Forum, you have the full support of the ecclesial community and of its Pastors who are well aware that the family is "the primary vital cell of society" and the "domestic sanctuary of the Church" (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, n. 11) and, in particular, that "today, the basic struggle for human dignity is centred on the family and life" (*Address to the Pastoral Theology Congress in Rio de Janeiro, 3 October 1997*; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 15 October 1997, p. 4).

The Church cannot avoid this challenge, because man, in the full truth of his existence “is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission” (*Redemptor hominis*, n. 14). She is responsible therefore, as my Predecessor of venerable memory John XXIII wrote, for the “right and duty not only to safeguard principles relating to the integrity of religion and morals, but also to pronounce authoritatively when it is a matter of putting these principles into effect” (*Mater et Magistra*, n. 239). The Christian community's testimony on behalf of the family is also significantly expressed through those means of social communication which can intervene with clarity in the cultural and political debate by proposing and motivating ideas and positions that genuinely conform to the nature and tasks of the family institution.

5. The responsibilities of politicians in this field are evident. It is up to them to promote legislation and to support government action which respect fundamental ethical criteria (cf. *Evangelium vitae*, nn. 71-73) without yielding to that relativism which, under the pretext of defending freedom and democracy, actually deprives them of their solid basis (cf. *Centesimus annus*, n. 46; *Veritatis splendor*, n. 99; *Evangelium vitae*, n. 70).

Therefore in no way can the lawmaker who wants to act in harmony with an upright moral conscience, contribute to creating laws that are in opposition to the essential rights of the family, founded on marriage.

In this field, an extensive and determined commitment to sensitization and clarification appears to be necessary. You are therefore appropriately devoting yourselves to this difficult but prophetic task, so that individuals and political forces may agree on what is consistent with the dignity of persons and the common good of human society, overcoming one-sided positions or other constraints.

Dear representatives of the Forum of Family Associations, while I thank you once again for the work that you carry out with such enthusiasm and courage, I implore for you and for all your associates the gifts of counsel and fortitude, to continue and develop the work you have begun so well.

May the Blessed Virgin, Mother of Hope, sustain and help you. For my part, my prayer accompanies you and, as a pledge of my affection, I cordially impart a special Apostolic Blessing, in expectation of the protection and comfort of the Lord.

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