

THE FAMILY CREATES THE PEACE OF THE HUMAN FAMILY

1 January 1994

1. The world longs for peace and has a desperate need of peace. Yet wars, conflicts, increasing violence and situations of social unrest and endemic poverty continue to reap innocent victims and to cause divisions between individuals and peoples. At times peace appears a truly unattainable goal! In a climate made cold by indifference and occasionally poisoned by hatred, how can one hope for the dawn of an era of peace, which only feelings of solidarity and of love can usher in?

We must not lose heart. We know that, in spite of everything, peace is possible, because it is part of the original divine plan.

God wished humanity to live in harmony and peace, and laid the foundations for this in the very nature of the human being, created "in his image". The divine image develops not only in the individual but also in that unique communion of persons formed by a man and a woman so united in love that they become "one flesh" (Gen 2:24). It is written: "in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27). This specific community of persons has been entrusted by the Lord with the mission of giving life and of nurturing it by the formation of a family. It thus makes a decisive contribution to the work of stewardship over creation and provides for the very future of humanity.

The initial harmony was disrupted by sin, but God's original plan continues. The family therefore remains the true foundation of society, (1) constituting, in the words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, its "natural and fundamental nucleus".(2)

The contribution which the family can offer preserving and promoting peace is so important that I would like, on the occasion of the International Year of the Family, to devote this World Day of Peace Message to a reflection on the close relationship between the family and peace. I am confident that this year will be a useful occasion for all who wish to contribute to the quest for true peace -- Churches, Religious Organizations, Associations, Governments, International Agencies -- to study together ways of helping the family to carry out fully its irreplaceable task as a builder of peace.

The family: a community of life and love

2. The family, as the fundamental and essential educating community, is the privileged means for transmitting the religious and cultural values which help the person to acquire his or her own identity. Founded on love and open to the gift of life, the family contains in itself the very future of society; its most special task is to contribute effectively to a future of peace.

This it will achieve, in the first place, through the mutual love of married couples, called to full and complete communion of life by marriage in its natural meaning and even more, if they are Christians, by its having been raised to a sacrament, and then through the efforts of parents to carry out properly their task as educators, committed to training their children to respect the dignity of every person and the values of peace. These values, more than being "taught", must be witnessed to in a family setting which lives out that self-giving love which is capable of accepting those who are different, making their needs and demands its own, and allowing them to share in its own benefits. The domestic virtues, based upon a profound respect for human life and dignity, and practiced in understanding,

patience, mutual encouragement and forgiveness, enable the community of the family to live out the first and fundamental experience of peace. Outside this context of affectionate relationships and of fruitful mutual solidarity, the human being "remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, ... if he does not experience it and make it his own".(3) This love is not a fleeting emotion, but an intense and enduring moral force which seeks the good of others, even at the cost of self-sacrifice. Furthermore, true love always goes together with justice, so necessary for peace. It reaches out to those experiencing hardship: those who have no family, children who lack guidance and affection, the lonely and the outcast. The family which lives this love, even though perfectly, and opens itself generously to the rest of society, is the primary agent of a future of peace. A civilization of peace is not possible if love is lacking.

The family: victim of the lack of peace

3. In contrast with its original vocation of peace, the family is sadly, and not infrequently, seen to be the scene of tension and oppression, or the defenseless victim of the many forms of violence marking society today.

Tensions are sometimes seen in relations within the family. These are often due to the difficulty of efforts to harmonize family life when work keeps spouses far from each other, or the lack or uncertainty of employment causes them to worry about survival and to be haunted by uncertainty about the future. There are also tensions deriving from patterns of behavior inspired by hedonism and consumerism, family members to seek personal gratification rather than a happy and fruitful life together. Frequent arguments between parents, the refusal to have children, and the abandonment and ill-treatment of minors are the sad symptoms that family peace is already seriously endangered; certainly it cannot be restored by the sad solution of a separation of the spouses, much less by recourse to divorce, a true "plague" of present day society.(4)

Likewise, in many parts of the world, whole nations are caught in the spiral of bloody conflicts, of which families are often the first victims: either they are deprived of the main if not the only breadwinner, or they are forced to abandon home, land and property and flee into the unknown; in any event they are subjected to painful misfortunes which threaten all security. How can we fail to recall, in this regard, the bloody conflict between ethnic groups which is still going on in Bosnia - Hercegovina? And this is only one case, amid so many situations of war throughout the world!

In the face of such distressing situations, society often appears incapable of offering effective help, or even culpably indifferent. The spiritual and psychological needs of those who have experienced the effects of armed conflict are as pressing and serious as their need for food or shelter. Specific structures need to be set up for actively supporting families affected by unexpected and devastating misfortunes, so that in spite of them they will not yield to the temptation to discouragement and revenge, but will react in a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation. How often, unfortunately, there is no sign of this!

4. Nor can one forget that war and violence not only constitute divisive forces which weaken and destroy family structures; they also exercise a pernicious influence on people's minds, suggesting and practically imposing models of behavior diametrically opposed to peace. In this regard, one must deplore a very sad fact: these days unfortunately a growing number of boys and girls and even small children are playing a direct part in armed conflicts. They are forced to join armed militias and have to fight for causes they do not always understand. In other cases, they become involved in a real

culture of violence in which life counts for very little and killing does not seem wrong. It is in the interests of the whole of society to ensure that these young people give up violence and take the path of peace, but this presupposes patient education given by people who sincerely believe in peace.

At this point I cannot fail to mention another serious obstacle to the development of peace in our society: many, too many children are deprived of the warmth of a family. Sometimes the family is absent: in fact, the parents, taken up by other interests, leave their children to their own devices. In other cases the family simply does not exist: thus there are thousands of children who have no home but the street and who can count on no resources except themselves. Some of these street children die tragically. Others are led into the use and even the sale of drugs and into prostitution, and not infrequently they end up in criminal organizations. Such scandalous and widespread situations cannot be ignored! The very future of society is at stake. A community which rejects children, or marginalizes them, or reduces them to hopeless situations, can never know peace.

In order to count on a peaceful future, every child needs to experience the warmth of caring and constant affection, not betrayal and exploitation. And although the State can do much by providing means and structures of support, the contribution of the family to ensuring that climate of security and trust cannot be replaced, so important is it in helping young children to look to the future with serenity, and in preparing them to take a responsible part in building a society of true progress when they grow up. Children are the future already present among us; they need to experience what peace means, so that they will be able to create a future of peace.

The family: an agent for peace

5. An enduring peaceful order needs institutions which express and consolidate the values of peace. The institution which most immediately responds to the nature of the human being is the family. It alone ensures the continuity and the future of society. The family is therefore called to become an active agent for peace, through the values which it expresses and transmits within itself, and through the participation of each of its members in the life of society.

As the fundamental nucleus of society, the family has a right to the full support of the State in order to carry out fully its particular mission. State laws, therefore, must be directed to promoting its well - being, helping it to fulfill its proper duties. In the face of increasing pressure nowadays to consider, as legally equivalent to the union of spouses, forms of union which by their very nature or their intentional lack of permanence are in no way capable of expressing the meaning and ensuring the good of the family, it is the duty of the State to encourage and protect the authentic institution of the family, respecting its natural structure and its innate and inalienable rights.(5) Among these, the fundamental one is the right of parents to decide, freely and responsibly, on the basis of their moral and religious convictions and with a properly formed conscience, when to have a child, and then to educate that child in accordance with those convictions.

The State also has an important role in creating the conditions in which families can provide for their primary needs in a way befitting human dignity. Poverty, indeed destitution -- a perennial threat to social stability, to the development of people and to peace -- in our day affects too many families. It sometimes happens that, because of a lack of means, young couples put off having a family or are even prevented from having one, while needy families cannot participate fully in the life of society, or are forced into total emargination.

The duty of the State does not, however, excuse individual citizens: the real reply to the gravest questions in every society is in fact ensured by the harmonious solidarity of everyone. In effect, no one can be at ease until an adequate solution has been found to the problem of poverty, which strikes families and individuals. Poverty is always a threat to social stability, to economic development and ultimately therefore to peace. Peace will always be at risk so long as individuals and families are forced to fight for their very survival.

The family at the service of peace

6. I would now like to speak directly to families, in particular to Christian families.

"Families, become what you are!", I wrote in my Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*.(6) Become an "intimate sharing of married life and love",(7) called to give love and to transmit life!

Families, you have a mission of prime importance: that of contributing to the construction of peace, indispensable for respect for human life and its development.(8) Knowing that peace is never secured once and for all,(9) you must never grow weary of seeking it! Jesus, through his death on the Cross, has left to humanity his peace, assuring us of his enduring presence. (10) Ask for this peace, pray for this peace, work for this peace!

To you parents falls the responsibility for forming and educating your children to be people of peace: for this purpose, you in the first place must be workers for peace.

You children, facing the future with the eagerness of youth, full of hopes and dreams, value the gift of the family, prepare for the responsibility of building it or promoting it according to the particular callings that God will give you in due course. Develop a desire for good and thoughts of peace.

You grandparents, who with the other family members represent unique and precious links between the generations, make a generous contribution of your experience and your witness in order to link the past to the future in a peaceful present.

Families, live out your mission in harmony and to the full!

Finally, how can we forget the many people who for various reasons feel that they have no family? To them I would like to say that there is a family for them too: the Church is home and family for all.(11) She opens wide her doors and welcomes in all who are alone or abandoned; in them she sees the specially beloved children of God, whatever their age, and whatever their aspirations, difficulties or hopes.

May the family so live in peace that from it peace may spread throughout the whole human family!

This is the prayer which, through the intercession of Mary, Mother of Christ and of the Church, I offer to him "from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named" (Eph 3:15), at the beginning of the International Year of the Family.

From the Vatican, 8 December 1993.

NOTES

1. Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 52.
2. Article 16, 3.
3. Encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, 10.
4. Cf. Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 47.
5. Cf. in this regard the "Charter of the Rights of the Family presented by the Holy See to all Persons, Institutions and Authorities Interested in the Mission of the Family in Today's World" (22 October 1983).
6. No. 17.
7. *Gaudium et Spes*, 48.
8. Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 2304.
9. Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 78.
10. Cf. Jn 14:27; 20:19 - 21; Mt 28:20.
11. Cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 85.