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## REVITALIZING SOCIETY THROUGH THE FAMILY: VISION OF JOHN PAUL II

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WITHOUT STRONG FAMILIES AS ITS FOUNDATION, WESTERN SOCIETY WILL GRADUALLY disintegrate. Catholic teaching on the family, forcefully proposed by Pope John Paul II, could, however, serve as a catalyst for rejuvenating our crumbling social life. Like the Pope, I am convinced that the “future of humanity passes by way of the family.”<sup>1</sup> Catholics must rekindle and share their hope that only by strengthening the family can society be revitalized. For the Church’s social doctrine to bear fruit in any area, its lessons must first be learned in this primary cell of society. The dignity of the human person and work, as well as the principles of participation, subsidiarity and solidarity, must first be lived in the family before they influence the wider world.

### WHAT IS THE FAMILY?

All too frequently, the media reminds us that popular movements are working to redefine the meaning of “family.” Several years ago, Mass Mutual Life Insurance asked 1,200 randomly selected adults to choose from a list their preferred definition for “family.” Only 22% of the respondents selected: “a group of people related by blood, marriage or adoption.” Almost 75% chose “a group of people who love and care for each other.”<sup>2</sup> This latter choice, of course, does not exclude traditional marriage and family, but it does point to what many people think is essential to a definition.

Even more significant than this opinion poll are the redefinitions drafted by legal experts, such as the New York State Supreme Court. In favorably adjudicating a gay lover’s right to an apartment after the death of a partner, the judges had to re-define “family” to make their decision. For legal purposes, they wrote, a couple could be considered a family if it met the following four tests: an exclusive and lasting relationship; an emotional and financial commitment to each other; presentation of themselves in everyday life as a family; and reliance upon each other for daily services.<sup>3</sup> The judges excluded heterosexuality, marriage and blood ties as relevant criteria in defining “family.”

Such attacks on the traditional family are, to be sure, not entirely new. In the West, similar opinions have existed from Plato through Rousseau to Marx. Key to 18th-century Enlightenment thinkers, for example, was their desire to free humans from the shackles of tradition - a tradition that included the family as a permanent relationship between man and woman rooted in marriage. The “philosophes” held that all communities were formed by social contract, by arrangements freely entered into by consenting adults.

Having abstracted the person from integral ties to the family, these Enlightenment forerunners facilitated its redefinition. Not intending to abolish the family altogether, they hoped to reform it in light of the individual’s needs. For the most part, these thinkers continued to hold the family in high esteem, because it provided for the individual’s wants. Only custom, however, dictated that the family meet these needs. They gave no necessary reason why it, as op-

posed to other institutions, had to provide them. The increased emphasis on the individual as the subject of political rights in the 18th century laid the foundation for the crisis at the end of the 20th century.

Though we are only now reaping its bitter fruit, a more significant social shift cannot be imagined. When the primary reality in society becomes the individual, the family ceases to be its primary community.

Exaggerated individualism characterizes modernity, focusing on the person isolated from every collective entity, including the family. The human person is a self-contained reality, without reference either to family or any community outside the self, and the search for one's own individual identity becomes life's principal concern. Collective institutions, especially the family, are held to constrain the autonomous and sovereign individual. Whenever this view is accepted, the family is redefined as just "one of many freely chosen and freely disposable mechanisms whose purpose is the fostering of the individual's project of self-attainment."<sup>24</sup> Every other institution must bow before the insatiable claims of the individual.

In the contemporary world, this individualism has led to societal breakdown. The family has largely forfeited its claim to be society's most fundamental institution and has become only "a project of individuals." As such, it is now susceptible to redefinition, reconstruction and termination at will. Being a family has been replaced by participating in a personal lifestyle, dependent upon the unpredictability and instability of free choice. Neither the findings of the Mass Mutual Life Insurance poll nor the decision of the New York State justices should surprise us. They merely witness to a shifting definition of family that is gaining in popularity and respectability.

In defining the family, Catholics begin with a counter-cultural perspective. What has God made known about the family? That's what is most important. Conscious of the Church's liberating good news, Pope John Paul has made defense of the divine plan for marriage

and the family, "which can and must always be recognized as God's *gift* to humanity,"<sup>25</sup> a principle of his pontificate. I believe that his teachings, if followed, provide a solid foundation for renewing society and implementing the Church's social doctrine.

Since the "truth" of any reality depends on how God understands it, we must begin with God's design for the family in any vision we develop. Catholic teaching resolutely refuses to redefine the family so as to include co-habiting couples, homosexuals living together or any merely consensual arrangements not originally founded on marriage. This does not limit the "family" to the mother-father-child triad, since it includes all those who are related, independent of their age or household arrangements. The Church then is not tied to a particular kind of family, whether extended or nuclear. Its forms have changed in the past and will change in the future. Historians and sociologists have chronicled great shifts in family functions. Its consumptive role has replaced its former productive role. The state and other agencies have taken over its protective responsibilities. School systems

have assumed its educational functions. Finally, job prestige and income have displaced its former status-conferring role. Despite these changes, the Pope teaches that the family still fulfills functions vital to society's well being.

Though its sociological structures show a rich variety through time and place, God's plan for the family is unchangeable. Armed with Scripture, tradition and Church teaching, Pope John Paul II draws on a rich storehouse from which he derives his insights on how the family can renew society.



## FAMILY AS "CELL" OF SOCIETY

Never neglecting its interpersonal and procreative roles, the Pope consistently recalls the family's vital social role. In doing so, he is supported by the philosophical-political tradition, stretching back to Aristotle, which declares the family to be society's fundamental community.

All modern papal documents formulate Catholic

doctrine in a similar way: “The family, founded upon marriage freely contracted, one and indissoluble, must be regarded as the natural, primary cell of human society.”<sup>6</sup> God Himself gave the family its mission of being society’s primary vital cell. John Paul II frequently repeats that the family is “the basic cell of society.”<sup>7</sup>

As its life-giving nucleus, the family must participate in developing society. Every social institution, every ecclesial concern touching education, work, economics, culture and politics is connected with the family. The Church’s rich tradition of social doctrine, so forcefully defended in the Pope’s three major encyclicals, *Laborem Exercens* (1981), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) and *Centesimus Annus* (1991), depends for its realization on the family first to embody this teaching. To build up God’s kingdom, we cannot bypass society’s most fundamental community.

The family makes its primary contribution to society simply by living its own interior vocation to the full. For all things to be restored in Christ, the family must be the primary instrument of that restoration. It has the responsibility not only to sanctify its own members but also to participate in social life in order to make the world more worthy of its creator.<sup>8</sup> If it is a school of social life, a household of hospitality and a protagonist of family politics, then the family is fulfilling its calling. When strong within, the family can assume its responsibilities to public life.

In witnessing to their own identity, including its religious vision and values, strong families inevitably make our easy-going pluralist society uncomfortable. When the smallest cell of society is at ease with religion, it implicitly raises the question why religious beliefs are excluded from the public forum. Catholic families refuse to accept that religion is irrelevant to crucial social questions. By drawing the family into public life, the Pope reminds us that family community and religion are vital to every society. Without them, genuine social life collapses into a heap of privatized interests - personal pleasure, material prosperity and naked power.

For John Paul, the family should neither exist in isolation nor merely serve as a safe refuge in a tumultuous world. Fearing our retirement into apolitical ghettos, the Pope warns us against a family egoism that would concentrate exclusively on its interior life of interpersonal communion. It must not close itself off from the

wider community. According to the Holy Father:

Far from withdrawing into itself, the family is called to open itself to the social environment to become - moved by the sense of justice, by concern for others, and by the duty of its responsibility toward the whole of society - an instrument for humanizing and personalizing, a service to neighbors through various expressions of fraternal help, a defense and conscious guardian of its own rights and duties.<sup>9</sup>

By nature the family is to be open to other social communities.

At the 1980 Synod, the bishops requested that the Holy See draw up a charter of family rights. The Pope made a first draft,<sup>10</sup> and in 1983 the Holy See promulgated its *Charter of the Rights of the Family*. It affirmed that family and society “are mutually linked by vital and organic bonds” and “have a complementary function in the defense and advancement of the good of every person and of humanity.”<sup>11</sup> The family’s social responsibilities are integral to its vocation. Among its obligations is the family’s duty to further a social order that maximizes personal freedom. In other words, the family’s social task is to form persons who are “open to the community, moved by a sense of justice and concern for others, as well as by a consciousness of responsibility toward the whole of society.”<sup>12</sup> The family exists not only for itself but for other communities.

Although the Pope vigorously insists that other institutions, such as the state and economic enterprises, respect the family, he also frequently reminds families of their responsibilities toward society. When they are married, Christian couples assume a “kingly mission of service.” At marriage new families receive “both a command that they cannot ignore and a grace that sustains and stimulates them”<sup>13</sup> to take part in public life. The Holy Father has made innumerable appeals that precisely as communal units families should be instruments for social justice. The family itself must be, the Pope says, an “active and responsible place for proper growth and proper participation in social life.”<sup>14</sup>



## THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN “PERSON”

As contemporary society becomes increasingly depersonalized, things, efficiency and technique become more important than people. According to papal teaching, the family is not just a legal bond or a social contract but a communion of persons. Consequently, the family is “the place of origin and the most effective means for humanizing and personalizing society.”<sup>15</sup> Awakened to personhood in the family, its members can participate in shaping a society of persons, a true “civilization of love” - in the phrase so dear to Pope Paul VI.

In the family one first becomes aware of his or her dignity “and learns what it means to love and to be loved, and thus what it actually means to be a person.”<sup>16</sup> As a community of persons, the family strengthens the social fabric by “preventing society from becoming an anonymous and impersonal mass.”<sup>17</sup> Family bonds save the individual from being suffocated between the state and the marketplace.<sup>18</sup> By recognizing the human dignity of each member, regardless of age or “utility,” the family helps to make possible a society based on the dignity of the human person.

According to John Paul II, the family should make love flourish, that love which is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. Essential to its vocation, therefore, is encouraging its members to form loving, interpersonal relationships. The family has “the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love.”<sup>19</sup> Whenever a family fosters love, it performs an inestimable service to society and to the coming of the kingdom.<sup>20</sup> If we are first a communion within the family, then we can later enter into communities in society. A civilization of love has its roots in a family of lovers.

In the home a person’s dignity should be regarded as the sole measure of his or her value. To affirm the other as a person occurs only in loving the other for his or her own sake. The family is the primary institution responsible for fostering the inviolable dignity of every human person. We should be thankful for the family’s essential service to both its own members and society in this regard.<sup>21</sup> Nothing is more crucial to John Paul’s social doctrine than our having a “correct view of the human person and of the person’s unique value, inasmuch as the human being ‘is the only creature on earth which God has willed for itself.’”<sup>22</sup> Without this vision of divinely-given human dignity, first lived in the family, we cannot

hope to build a society grounded in justice.

How parents mold their children is crucial for developing both their personality and their virtue. After childhood, never again does a person have the same malleability and readiness to respond to the positive example of others. Despite innumerable disagreements, child experts all recognize that family stability and parental love are the irreducible minimum required for an education that will foster the growth of good citizens. When the Pope reminds parents of their duty to educate their children in social virtues, he is building on this conventional wisdom.

Aristotle believed that if children did not love their parents and other family members, then they would love no one but themselves. Treasuring family ties teaches individuals to love, to feel secure and to trust others. With strong family bonds and loyalty, children will be equipped to assume their adult responsibility for being leaven in the world. Revitalizing society depends on love and trust - and these are first and best imparted in the family.

Integrating members into the wider community’s social life begins in the family. Here children meet the first “others”: parents, siblings, relatives. Because the family is a community of persons, it is the irreplaceable first society where healthy interpersonal relations can flourish. These social virtues, first lived in the family cell, are “the animating principle of the existence and development of society itself.”<sup>23</sup>

“The very experience of communion and sharing that should characterize a family’s daily life,” says John Paul II, “represents its first and fundamental contribution to society. Promoting mature communion between persons within the family is “the first and irreplaceable school of social life, an example and stimulus for the broader community relationships marked by respect, justice, dialogue and love.”<sup>24</sup> As the first school of social virtues for new citizens, the family humanizes society from within. It is uniquely suited “to teach and transmit cultural, ethical, social, spiritual and religious values, essential for the development and well-being of its own members and of society.”<sup>25</sup>

## SOLIDARITY

Using innovative terminology, John Paul calls

participation in family life, based on shared communion, “solidarity.” When members recognize personal interdependence, this “moral and social attitude” expresses their solidarity, their “firm and persevering determination to commit [themselves] to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.”<sup>26</sup>

Solidarity is a moral virtue that binds all human beings to one another.

In the first instance, solidarity should be fostered in the home so that it can also serve to transform society. Solidarity is a counter-force to the hyper-individualism that is crippling us with its “me first” whining. “In order to overcome today’s widespread individualistic mentality,” writes the Pope, “what is required is a concrete commitment to solidarity and charity beginning in the family, with the mutual support of husband and wife and the care which the different generations give to one another.”<sup>27</sup> Failure to develop family solidarity means that communities and nations will continue to pursue their own narrow self-interest, indifferent to their neighbor’s needs. Our first and often neediest brothers and sisters are within the family. To respect and care for them teaches us how to treat others.

In *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul mentions two manifestations of external family solidarity that have social repercussions. When a family devotes itself to hospitality and to social service activities, “especially in favor of the poor, or at any rate for the benefit of all people and situations that cannot be reached by the public authorities’ welfare organization,”<sup>28</sup> it affects the public realm. Secondly, if the family shows “preferential option’ for the poor and the disadvantaged.”<sup>29</sup> then this preference, once learned within the family, will significantly influence the kind of political and economic choices made in the public arena. If such solidarity is not modeled in the family, little chance exists that it will influence justice and development in a wider sense.

## DIGNITY OF HUMAN WORK

If society has strong families living their vocation, then policy makers will inevitably be inspired to

change their political agendas. The Pope is convinced that families can change how people look at the meaning of the work they do. Sociologists now frequently point out how the industrial revolution degraded and routinized work. As a result, the family, where work was no longer done, became an emotional refuge from a cold and competitive society.<sup>30</sup>

This shift in working habits inevitably led to the privatization of the family as a “haven in a heartless world.” The public sphere was separated from the private, and private life was invented. This gave new prominence to the interpersonal interaction of family members, while divorcing human work from a communal environment. According to John Paul, by relocating work where it is treated only as a means to enjoy family intimacy demeans its true value. Economic life is not just a necessary evil but a way through which human persons come to fulfillment in community. Again and again the Holy Father teaches that we must restore the dignity of human work. This will be realized only if we learn its value and dignity in the family circle.

In Scripture, the vocation to work is closely linked to that of founding a family. When God created man and woman in his image and likeness (Genesis 1:27-28), he gave them a two-fold command. They were to form a communion of persons for procreating and for subduing the earth. “Man is the image of God partly through the mandate received from his Creator to subdue, to dominate, the earth,” wrote John Paul. “In carrying out this mandate, man, every human being, reflects the very action of the Creator of the universe.”<sup>31</sup> From the beginning, therefore, work is integral to the family community. This is where we learn its authentic value.

Precisely as a communion of persons, the family determines the personal value of human work. In such a home, primary consideration is given to the family member who performs a particular task, not to what is done. The Holy Father unambiguously terms of reference for shaping the social and ethical order of human work ... simultaneously a community made possible by work and the first school of work, within the home, for every person.”<sup>32</sup> How we understand work in the family is how we shall value it in the marketplace.



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If the family places its priority on persons over things, then its example can help to mold a society where “the value of any human work does not depend on the kind of work done.” Instead it will be “based on the fact that the one who does it is a person.”<sup>33</sup> Work, after all, is for our good. Where people live in trust, security and love, they learn the worth of work as a human activity. To appreciate work in this personalized way is the root of any social renewal in the workplace.

## SUBSIDIARITY

By teaching that the family is the essential cell of society, the Church affirms that this original society is the subject of rights and responsibilities prior to any other community.<sup>34</sup> In the first instance, the family, not the state, exists to secure certain personal and social needs; namely, the regulation of sex, of property and of children. The state is for the family, not the family for the state. If the family’s priority is in any way compromised, then other institutions, to the detriment of the common good, will fill this role.

The Pope thinks that “the root of modern totalitarianism is to be found in the denial of the transcendent dignity of the human person” who is the subject of inviolable rights.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, when families are founded on human dignity, they serve to resist any incursions into their realm. They resist any state domination of human life.

Though our social nature demands participation in civic life, it also requires that various intermediary groups, primarily the family, play their own critical role. Catholic social doctrine calls us to implement the principle of subsidiarity. When applied to families, this means that “the State cannot and must not take away from families the functions that they can just as well perform on their own or in free associations.” Repeating traditional social doctrine, John Paul wrote that the state should “positively favor and encourage as far as possible initiative by families.”<sup>36</sup> Families who take subsidiarity seriously are the most effective bulwark against any government, even if benevolent, assuming total control over functions that are the family’s own responsibilities.

In the *Charter of the Rights of the Family*, the Pope promulgated “the fundamental rights that are inherent in that natural and universal society which is the family.”<sup>37</sup> He thereby provided governments with a model for

drawing up legislation affecting family policy. Opposing egocentric individualism, the Charter buttresses family rights by stressing that it is itself a juridical personality, independent of its members’ individual rights. The Pope presents the rights of the family in se, as a corporate reality interfacing with other social institutions. This too-little known document guarantees that the family has “the right to exercise its social and political function in the construction of society ... [and] to form associations with other families and institutions” to fulfill its role suitably and effectively.<sup>38</sup>

In recent decades, other major institutions have assumed many functions that families used to perform. Health care, education, recreation, and even catechesis have passed from the family to other groups. The principle of subsidiarity demands that the family should be recognized as society’s first agent of education, its primary health care provider and its principal teacher of religious values. According to papal social doctrine, the family best takes care of these needs. Parents should be convinced that they cannot delegate their primary responsibilities to any other institution: to school, state or parish. These complementary institutions should help families when they are unable to meet their obligations. They should never substitute for them.

The Catholic principle of subsidiarity impedes any totalitarian take-over of families by the “professional-bureaucratic complex”<sup>39</sup> of care-givers who think that they are best equipped to meet family needs. By insisting on the family’s rights and responsibilities, the Pope shores it up against those who would usurp its role as society’s original community. Society will not be revitalized by mandatory day care for children of welfare recipients, licensing of new parents, requiring education in public schools, or enrolling infants in school-affiliated programs. In health and education, state funds should be channeled to individuals and not to institutions.

Curtailing the family’s responsibilities weakens the whole fabric, that community of families which is a nation. The future of society is intimately bound up with the vitality of the family institution. For John Paul, the principle is clear: “Nothing that directly compromises the family can benefit society.”<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, every policy that promotes the family furthers social life.

## PUBLIC LIFE

In his apostolic exhortation, *The Lay Members of Christ's Faithful* (1988), the Pope admonishes the laity "never to relinquish their participation in 'public life', that is, in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the common good."<sup>41</sup> In doing so, he discourages people from withdrawing into narcissistic family affairs. A viable democracy presupposes a concern with public life and virtue. Keenly aware that people are formed by public culture, the Pope begs Catholics to see to it that crucial subjects - religion, the transcendent worth of every person, and other ethical and moral questions - remain in the public forum. Only if the family is itself confident of its purpose and mission, however, can it have this moral impact on the wider community.

The family has a definite political significance that goes beyond the lives of its individual members. It provides the natural environment for developing virtues such as consensus, balancing acts and the compromises that are necessary in a free and democratic society. Without this social formation within the family, hyper-individualism and its consequence, loss of freedom, will result. John Paul II is concerned with political passivity, a withholding of involvement, a decrying of deteriorating social situations, without taking steps to remedy the situation. Families should not watch indifferently as their legal and political situation worsens. According to papal teaching,

families should take steps to see that laws and institutions positively defend family rights and responsibilities. "Families should grow in awareness of being 'protagonists' of what is known as 'family politics,'" wrote the Pope, "and assume responsibility for transforming society."<sup>42</sup> Among the many policies that pro-family voluntary associations should promote are those that allow women to stay home with their children without undue financial burden, that pay a family wage to heads of households, and that guarantee health care to family members.<sup>43</sup> A sound family politics insists that life's most significant questions about meaning and purpose, treasured in the family, will be addressed in the public forum. To ignore them leads to decadence.

## CONCLUSION

Revitalizing Western society cannot bypass the family. When family life and values are debased, then society becomes corrupt. Human dignity will be compromised. Work will become exploitation. A dangerous totalitarianism will reign, and freedom will be destroyed. If the family is strong, self-confident and respectful of human dignity and work, solidarity and subsidiarity, then social-political life will be enriched and society will flourish. Pope John Paul II's teaching on the family can guide us in overcoming the individualism, sensuality and materialism of this dying century and provide the social blueprint for the *aggiornamento* of the approaching millennium.



## NOTES

- 1 *Familiaris Consortio*, 86. See also *Familiaris Consortio* 75 and *Christifideles Laici*, 40.
- 2 Jean Seligmann, “Variations on a Theme,” *Newsweek, Special Edition*, “The 21st Century Family” (Winter/Spring 1990), 38.
- 3 Jerrold K. Footlick, “What Happened to the Family?” *Newsweek* (Winter/Spring 1990), 18.
- 4 Brigitte Berger and Peter L. Berger, *War over the Family: Capturing the Middle Ground* (Garden City, 1983), 122.
- 5 John Paul II, “Teach Whole Truth about Family,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, 1234 (1 April 1992), 3.
- 6 *Pacem in Tecris*, 16.
- 7 *Familiaris Consortio*, 42; see also *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 33 and *Christifideles Laici*, 40.
- 8 Edouard Gagnon, “Preface,” *Christian Family in the Teaching of John Paul II* (Homebush, 1990), 14.
- 9 1982: *Christian Family in the Teaching of John Paul II*, 98.
- 10 *Familiaris Consortio*, 46.
- 11 “Preamble,” Charter, E, in *Christian Family in the Teaching of John Paul II* (Homebush, 1990), 177.
- 12 *Familiaris Consortio*, 64.
- 13 *Familiaris Consortio*, 47.
- 14 *Christifideles Laici*, 40.
- 15 *Familiaris Consortio*, 43.
- 16 *Centesimus Annus*, 39.
- 17 *Centesimus Annus*, 49.
- 18 *Centesimus Annus*, 49.
- 19 *Familiaris Consortio*, 17.
- 20 *Familiaris Corasortio*, 50; see also *Christifideles Laici*, 52.
- 21 *Christifideles Laici*, 37.
- 22 *Centesimus Annus*, 11.
- 23 *Familiaris Corasortio*, 42.
- 24 *Familiaris Corasortio*, 43.
- 25 “Preamble,” Charter, E, in *Christian Family in the Teaching of John Paul II*, 176-177.
- 26 *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38.
- 27 *Centesimus Annus*, 49.
- 28 *Familiaris Consortio*, 44.
- 29 *Familiaris Consortio*, 47. See also *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 42.
- 30 See Christopher Lasch, “The Family as a Haven in a Heartless World,” in *Family in Transition*, ed. Arlene S. Skolnick and Jerome H. Skolnick, 6th ed. (Glenview, 1988), 563.
- 31 *Laborem Exercens*, 4.
- 32 *Laborem Exercens*, 10.
- 33 *Libertatis Conscientia*, 85; see also *Laborem Exercens*, 6.
- 34 *Familiaris Consortio*, 46.
- 35 *Centesimus Annus*, 45.
- 36 *Familiaris Consortio*, 45; see also *Rerum Novarum*, 12.
- 37 Introduction,” *Charter of Family Rights*, in *Christian Family in the Teaching of John Paul II*, 174.
- 38 *Charter of Family Rights*, article 8 in *Christian Family in the Teaching of John Paul II*, 184.
- 39 Berger, *War over the Family*, 35.
- 40 *Christian Family in the Teaching of John Paul II*, 140.
- 41 *Christifideles Laici*, 42.
- 42 *Familiaris Consortio*, 44.
- 43 *Laborem Exercens*, 19.