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## THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY IN JOHN PAUL II'S PROGRAM FOR BUILDING THE CIVILIZATION OF LOVE

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AMERICAN POLITICS OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS HAS FOCUSED ON TWO MAJOR ISSUES: the family and the legitimate role of government. Ever since Dan Quayle's famous few words about unwed mothers, the "family values" debate has been a national pastime. Further, in 1994 the Contract with America questioned not just specific government policies but the very meaning and purpose of government itself. The "family issue" figured prominently in the 1996 presidential race. Ironically, the two issues of family and government are usually treated separately as different matters related only when people choose to address both.

Catholic social teaching, however, regards questions of the family and the government as inseparable because the two depend upon each other. John Paul II's *Letter to Families*, written as these concerns were coming into the public forum in the United States, examines the respective roles of family and state.

He maintains that the family and the government are intrinsically tied not only to each other, but also to the very nature of the human person.

The Holy Father issued the *Letter* in February of 1994 to commemorate the United Nations' International Year of the Family. As such, it is tempting to pass over it as diplomatic, written only to demonstrate the Pope's approval of this UN initiative. The Pope shows from the outset, however, that he intends more than a simple greeting since he bases the letter on the very words that have defined his pontificate: "*man is the way of the Church*" (*Redemptor Hominis* 14). He couples these words with the assertion that "the family is the first and the most important path that man walks" (§2; all references to the *Letter to Families*, unless otherwise noted). In fact, because the family touches the very definition of man it is at the heart of John Paul's apostolic mission.

The crowning theme in the *Letter to Families* is John Paul's discussion of the family's role in building "the civilization of love." The Pope considers the building of the civilization of love to be essential to the Church today. In fact, "it is difficult to imagine a statement by the Church, or about the Church, that does not mention [it]" (§13). "Civilization of love" refers to a culture that has as its basis "a correct scale of values: *the primacy of being over having, of the person over things*" (*Evangelium Vitae* 98). Such a civilization answers the spiritual and moral needs of the human person and promotes his fulfillment. It represents the goal of the Church's social teaching, the task "given to mankind ... to be carried out with the help of divine grace" (§ 15).

The *Letter* contends that the family is the fundamental source and support of a civilization of love because the family preserves the proper understanding of the human person. To show this, John Paul II examines the nature of the family itself. Indeed, he firmly grounds the entire document in a philosophy of being and asserts that the family's role in a civilization of love flows from its being. The family in fact has a dual role: passive and active. In a passive way, the family establishes the criteria necessary for the civilization of love and in an active manner, promotes it.

## WHAT THE FAMILY IS

The family as such is fundamental to the civilization of love. As the principle “*agere sequitur esse*” (“action follows being”) maintains, the action of the family follows from its being. Thus, the Holy Father emphasizes the nature of the family, what the family is. In *Familiaris Consortio*, he states that “when children are born ... the married couple becomes a family in the full and specific sense” (FC 69), thus demonstrating that even prior to childbirth the married couple is a family. In Centesimus Annus (1992), he speaks of “*the family founded on marriage*, in which the mutual gift of self by husband and wife creates an environment in which children can be born and develop their potentialities” (CA 39). According to his teaching, therefore, a married couple and children constitute a family.

Further, the Letter shows that marriage has its roots in the very being of the human person, who reaches his fulfillment in the marital covenant. Its first chapter examines how the human person, at the moment of creation, “is marked by [a] primordial duality” that generates the “qualities of communion and complementarity” (§6). The marriage of a man and woman fulfills this complementarity and communion. The family is thus “a community of persons whose proper way of existing and living together is communion” (§7). The Pope’s description of the family as a community of persons designates two elements essential to the marital covenant and, therefore, to the family: persons and communion.

First of all, “persons” are not just individuals, but individuals in relation, living together and with others. The person is marked by the communal dimension, capable of going beyond himself to the other in order to make, as John Paul II is fond of saying, a “sincere gift of self” (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 24). As such, the Pope observes that “*only persons are capable of living ‘in communion’*” (§7). More importantly, “only ‘persons’ are capable of saying” the words of marital consent. Only persons “are able to live ‘in communion’ on the basis of a mutual choice which is...fully conscious and free” (§8).

Secondly, “communion” refers to the marital covenant in which a man and a woman “give themselves to each other and accept each other” (*Gaudium et Spes* 48). This reciprocal selfgiving “reveals the spousal nature” of communion (§ 11). Furthermore, in order to be true, this gift of self “must be lasting and irrevocable” (§ 11).

There are, then, three elements of the marital covenant and, therefore, of the family: persons, the sincere gift of self, and in dissolubility. Thus does the Pope ground his reflections in the family’s nature and, therefore, in the very being of the human person. From this understanding of what the family is flow the family’s two roles in building the civilization of love.

## THE FAMILY’S PASSIVE ROLE

The family has a passive role in society, a role closely related to its being. The family deserves recognition and protection of its defining characteristics and requires particular actions and policies from society. In this way, the family’s needs form part of the Church’s social teaching. As such, without doing anything, and simply by virtue of being an institution willed by the Creator, the family generates certain criteria necessary for building a civilization of love.

The passive role of the family derives from the Church’s teaching that the family exists before the state. John Paul II examines more profoundly this traditional teaching. He asserts that “the ‘communion’ of the spouses gives rise to the ‘community’ of the family,” a “community of persons” that is the “first human society” (§7). While echoing the Church’s constant teaching, he reveals that the very being of the human person is the basis of such priority. The human person as such tends toward spousal communion and towards the society of the family, prior to the foundation of any state. As a result, “each of these ‘greater’ societies is at least indirectly conditioned by the existence of the family” (§ 17). The Pope stresses the ties of the state and the nation to the family by asserting an “almost organic link existing between the *family and the nation*” and a “somewhat similar” link with the state (§17).



*A young John Paul II with his mother, Emilia Wojtyla*

The family, therefore, is neither simply a partner with nor merely an important element of the state. Rather, it is the *sine qua non* and model of society, indeed of every human community. John Paul II says with conviction that the “family is a community of persons and the smallest social unit. As such it is an institution fundamental to the life of every society” (§ 17).

Because of its precedence, the family makes two demands on society. The first arises from the family’s identity. Since the family is part of man’s very nature and the cornerstone of any human society, it “expects a recognition of its identity” (§ 17). Further, the Pope so closely ties the family to the being of the human person that no society can violate the integrity of the family and retain the proper understanding of man. The culture that distorts the family distorts not only man but also itself.

The family’s right to its own identity entails that society must neither condone nor accept any union or practice that violates this identity. A family is defined as a union between a man and a woman, an indissoluble covenant open to procreation. This means, for instance, that no society may place a homosexual union on equal footing with marriage. Moreover, protection of the family’s identity also demands society’s rejection of divorce and contraception. In this way, the right of the family to its identity creates specific criteria expected from societies, nations, and states for building a civilization of love.

The family’s second expectation from society involves the “acceptance of its status as a subject in society” (§ 17). Although this expectation concerns the family as a subject, it nonetheless remains in the passive realm, for it addresses what is done for not by the family. The Pope argues that because the family is a subject in society, it possesses certain rights: “This affirmation of the family’s sovereignty as an institution and the recognition of the various ways in which it is conditioned naturally leads to the subject of family rights.... Its ‘status as a subject’... gives rise to and calls for certain proper and specific rights” (§17). Specifically, the Holy Father cites the right to education, responsible procreation, property, and work (§17). Beyond these he refers to the *Charter of the Rights of the Family*, which claims the family’s right to religious freedom, political and social activities, an adequate family policy, and decent housing, among others. Such demands from the subjectivity of the family constitute further specific criteria for a civilization of love.

Of the four rights mentioned in the *Letter*, the Pope examines in detail only the right to education. The family’s right to education involves two responsibilities of the state which are tied to the Letter’s expression of subsidiarity. First enunciated by Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno*, the principle of subsidiarity holds that those functions best accomplished by “lesser and subordinate bodies” should be left to them by the “larger and higher collectivity” (QA 79). The *Letter* explicitly applies subsidiarity to the family: “Whenever the family is self-sufficient, it should be left to act on its own; an excessive intrusiveness on the part of the State would prove detrimental, to say nothing of lacking in due respect, and would constitute an open violation of the rights of the family” (§ 17).



With regard to the family’s right to education, subsidiarity demands that the state first recognize the “prevailing right” of the parents to educate their children. “*Parents are the first and foremost important educators of their own children, and they also possess a fundamental competence in this area: they are educators because they are parents*” (§ 16). Subsidiarity means, in short, that the state must leave the matter of education to the family. Thus the Pope reinforces the Church’s traditional teaching on subsidiarity and the right to education.

Yet, while recognizing the state’s obligation to avoid undue interventions, John Paul II also argues that subsidiarity “implies the legitimacy and indeed the need of giving assistance to the parents” (§16). Here the Pope emphasizes the positive side of subsidiarity. Applied to the family’s right to education, this means that “in those situations where the family is not really self-sufficient ... the state [has] the authority and duty to intervene” (§17). The family needs assistance “especially in matters concerning ... schooling and the entire gamut of socialization” (§ 16). The Pope does not ask the state to take over the family’s role but to serve the family by helping it with what is properly its own responsibility.

Thus subsidiarity works in two directions. It restrains the state from taking on those responsibilities belonging to the family and, at the same time, admits the need for the state to assist smaller bodies. The state must

both respect the family by leaving it alone and serve the family by helping it realize its full potential. A tension exists here that is not unfamiliar to current debates: where does legitimate service end and “excessive intrusiveness” begin? The Pope seeks to ease this tension by stating:

the principle of subsidiarity is ... at the service of parental love... It thus complements paternal and maternal love and confirms its fundamental nature, inasmuch as all other participants in the process of education are only able to carry out their responsibilities *in the name of the parents, with their consent* and, to a certain degree, *with their authorization* (§16).

By its passive, subsidiary role, the family establishes not only what society and the state may not do, but also what they must do. For example, where the family is not self-sufficient, the state should help it by providing schooling, health care, social benefits, and employment security (§17). Therefore, this tension between subsidiarity’s negative and positive dimensions serves the family. At the same time, the family’s subjectivity maintains the necessary balance between these dimensions. A state which does not recognize the family’s subjectivity will likely violate subsidiarity by either unjust intervention or neglect of the family.

Therefore, the family has a passive yet essential role in building the civilization of love. The family forms the state because it is prior to the state. Such priority in turn demands that the state recognize the family’s identity and subjectivity. Thus the family produces, by virtue of its being, the criteria necessary for a civilization of love.

## THE FAMILY’S ACTIVE ROLE

The Pope also describes the family’s role in society as an active one. The work and activity of the family contribute to society and to the building of the civilization of love. It is important to note that “active” in this sense does not denote direct social action or efforts to influence state policy. Rather, the family’s “active” role consists in the performance of those functions peculiar to the family. As was the case for its passive role, the basis for the family’s active role is its being: the family actively promotes a civilization of love by fully being what it is. Perhaps the most natural activity to the family is education.

For this reason, the *Letter* affirms that the family furthers the civilization of love principally by educating its members. Education “depends on the civilization of love, and in great measure, contributes to its upbuilding” (§16).

That education is proper to the family can be seen in the correlation between the purpose of education and the nature of the family. According to John Paul II, the goal of education is to enable individuals to be fully human, to help them make the sincere gift of self (§ 16). The family is by nature uniquely suited to prepare individuals to find “fulfillment through the sincere gift of self,” above all because every person comes from a family (§ 16). Since “*a person goes forth from the family in order to realize in a new family unit his vocation in life,*” it is incumbent upon the family to imbue in children the qualities necessary for building the civilization of love (§2). The family must strive “so that the individual born and raised in it will be able to set out without hesitation on the road of good” (§5).

Moreover, the family possesses in a unique manner those characteristics that encourage its members to make a sincere gift of self. The family is naturally fitted to educate because it “is indeed more than any other human reality—the place where an individual can exist ‘for himself through the sincere gift of self’” (§ 11).

The Pope’s description of the educational process also shows that the family is naturally suited for this mission. Education, by which one learns how to make the sincere gift of self, comes only by way of another’s sincere gift of self. It is “before all else *a reciprocal offering on the part of both parents*” (§ 16). Thus it follows that the very institution based on “the reciprocal giving of self” naturally possesses the ability to teach the same (§11). Indeed, according to the Pope, education begins not with parental advice or the first day of school, but at the highest moment of the husband and wife’s self-giving: at the very conception of the child. It continues in the womb, when “the mother, even before giving birth, *does not only give shape to the child’s body, but also, in an indirect way, to the child’s whole personality*” (§16). The father’s role in the unborn child’s education is to continue the gift of self made in marriage by becoming “willingly involved as a husband and father in the motherhood of his wife” (§ 16). In short, the parents possess the qualities necessary to educate their offspring, for they alone have made the sincere gift of self, ratified in the conjugal act and em-

bodied in the child.

The raising of children continues the educational process, in which both parents participate and to which they both give themselves. In fact, education is simply the logical extension of the marital covenant and therefore properly belongs to the family.

Further, in the education of its members, the family teaches the virtue of honor and the correct understanding of the common good. Both honor and the common good promote the sincere gift of self, and are thus essential to a civilization of love. First of all, the Pope sees honor as much more than simple deference or obedience. Rather, honor is “the affirmation of the person,” “an acknowledgment of the individual simply because he is an individual, ‘this’ individual” (§ 15). Honor recognizes that the individual is a relational, personal being.

Moreover, the Holy Father locates honor in the “organic structure of the family” and demonstrates how the mutual “process of exchange” in education “reveals the fundamental meaning of the fourth commandment” (§16). The commandment to honor one’s father and mother is not simply a legal prescription but “deals with the family and its interior unity-its solidarity” (§ 15). Honor expresses the communion between generations. For honor, far from being a commandment only for children, also implies the honor owed by parents to children and by each family member to every other member. This mutual honor is “essentially an attitude of unselfishness. It could be said that it is ‘a sincere gift of person to person’” (§15). Again, the Pope returns to the importance of the sincere gift of self for the civilization of love and the existence of that trait in the family. Yet this time he describes it as honor.

While careful to avoid a utilitarian interpretation, the Pope asserts the value of honor for the family itself and for society. First of all, honor brings to the family “the good of ‘being together’,” which in turn strengthens the family’s identity as a “single communal subject” (§15). Honor, then, is useful not only for the family itself but also for society. Societies, nations, states, and international organizations “possess a proper subjectivity to the extent that they receive it from persons and their fami-

lies” (§ 15, emphasis added). It follows that honor in the family promotes, by strengthening the family’s subjectivity, the civilization of love.

The Holy Father also examines the “importance of the fourth commandment for the modern system of human rights” (§ 15). He bases his concept of rights on the principle that the human person deserves more than a simple recognition of juridical rights. He deserves honor. The problem with the modern age, the Pope determines, is not a lack of juridical declarations on human rights, but an alienation of the individual.

Here John Paul II opposes the Enlightenment concept that the individual can somehow fulfill himself. Such a position leads to the view that human rights belong to an isolated individual and not to someone relational, or honorable. The Enlightenment legacy has brought us to the point at which each man stands on his own in front of the state, since his rights are his alone and involve no one else.



*“The family teaches the virtue of honor and the correct understanding of the common good.”*



The nature of the family, however, resists the Enlightenment view of the human person by compelling us to see individuals as relational and, therefore, deserving honor. In turn, honor moves us beyond a mere juridical recognition of rights to a love of the individual “simply because he is an individual, ‘this’ individual.” Over and against the modern view of rights, the Pope declares that all human rights “are ultimately fragile and ineffective if at their root they lack the command to ‘honor’” (§ 15).

Related to this discussion of honor and the alienation of the individual is a further consideration of subsidiarity. Immediately after his discussion of subsidiarity in *Quadragesimo Anno*, Pius XI examines the importance of vocational groups for achieving and maintaining harmony between the various levels of society (*QA* 84-87). These mediating groups act as a buffer between the individual and the state to prevent the hostile opposition of the two. The family has a crucial role in this mediation.

Since the family cultivates honor and reveals the human person as relational and not simply individual, it checks the tendency to view him as alone before the whims of the state. Furthermore, inasmuch as it is the

first society, the family is the first mediator between the individual and the state. Without the shelter and mediation given by the family, the individual finds himself exposed to the state's demands. In sum, the family further supports the principle of subsidiarity, since it fosters the right view of the human person and mediates the power of the state.

Finally, the family actively promotes the civilization of love by teaching its members how to understand the common good. The family develops a proper understanding of the common good, which each member then contributes to society. Since the marital covenant defines the family, its fulfillment constitutes the family's common good. The gift of self begun at the exchange of marital vows is completed and the common good of the spouses attained, when husband and wife "mutually give and receive each other in the unity of 'one flesh'" (§10). Further, the child conceived in that act "gives itself to its parents by the very fact of its coming into existence," and thus includes itself in the mutual self-giving of the marriage (§ 10). As a result, three persons-father, mother, and child-fulfill the marital vows and attain the common good by their respective gift of self. In short, the family finds the common good in the birth of a child. As the Pope says, "*in the newborn child is realized the common good of the family*" (§ 11).

John Paul II concludes that not only is every newborn child a common good, but also that "*man is a common good: a common good of the family and of humanity, of individual groups and of different communities*" (§ 10). That "*the common good of the whole of society dwells in man*" can only be understood, however, by the "logic of the sincere gift of self" (§ 10). Therefore, it is primarily the family, as the society based on the gift of self, that reveals man as a common good. In sum, the family "engenders a particular responsibility for the common good ... constituted by man, by the *worth of the person*, and by everything which represents the *measure of his dignity*" (§ 12). Without the family, this common good cannot exist. And without

this common good, the civilization of love cannot exist.

In the final analysis, it is precisely this embodying and fostering of the "gift of self" that makes the family so central to the civilization of love. For John Paul II, the Second Vatican Council's declaration that "man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self" is more than a simple appeal for altruism. Rather, it is a statement of the very essence of the human person.

The problems that the Pope confronts in his *Letter to Families* are the product not of a good thing gone bad, but of a philosophy that is intrinsically wrong, for it considers the individual to be fulfilled by himself and not by the gift of self. In short, the Holy Father opposes the modern fallacy that the human person is sufficient in himself.

The family, then, which depends on and promotes the gift of self, must engage in the daunting task of resisting false conceptions of man. In this regard, the Pope is clear. He does not locate the root of today's societal difficulties in economics or politics. Rather, he detects the source of present problems in an erroneous philosophy of man. Further, he sees no better way to combat that error than through the family. He counters the individualism, materialism, and rationalism of the modern world by his teaching on the nature of the family. For the family is, demands, and promotes the gift of self-that is, the human person-and therefore the civilization of love. As John Paul II said in his Easter message of 1994:

The vocation of the family is to rediscover, together with Christ, this truth about the human person. The vocation of the family is to incarnate this truth in the living form of that unique and unrepeatably human community made up of parents and children, a community of love and life, a community of generations.

