
“Family, Become What You Are!”



This was the theme of the 32nd Meeting of the Bishops of the Church in America, which was attended by members of the Canadian, American, Caribbean, and Latin American bishops' conferences. Following are excerpts of the final declaration affirming the fundamental value and importance of the family.

CHALLENGES

In this new millennium, the whole American Continent is undergoing profound questioning about the fundamentals of society in general and its foundational unit, the family, in particular. Families and family members are confronting ever growing challenges. Even though the vast majority of couples continue to choose to marry and have children, marriages are often delayed, less stable and more likely to break up. This lack of stability affects both children and adults. Making a commitment to live together for life is too often today seen as astonishing. Given this cultural and social context, in which so much of the future seems uncertain, many young couples hesitate about starting a family. The demands of modern-day life impose considerable burdens on parents. It is worrisome to see families, no matter how flexible they may be, so overloaded with work, stressed, burdened with financial worries and cut off from the support of the extended family. Unemployment and job instability lead to insecurity and constitute a heavy burden on family life. The market economy, financial fluctuations and speculation often have a negative impact on employment and buying power, while more and more children become victims of systemic poverty.

LOVE IS SERVICE

Nonetheless, the family endures. It remains the privileged place where human beings are formed and where children discover the mission that God entrusts to them in the world and in the Church. The family is the oldest social structure of all humanity. The American continent, from the forests of northern Canada to the Argentinian Patagonia, comprises a vast cultural diversity. Together we affirm the fundamental value and importance of the family. At the heart of every people and culture, the family is also "*the way of the Church*". Marriage is the lifelong union of a man and a woman. When a family is founded on a marriage, its life unfolds around God's eternal covenant. The family becomes a temple of love and a community of the baptized, called to be transformed by God through service to life. With Jesus, a path is laid out for us and God shows us the way: love is service and humanity's gift to the world.

MESSENGER OF LOVE

As the "domestic Church", the family has the mission of being the *foremost educator of children*. Despite all its difficulties, the family reflects God's tenderness, faithfulness and mercy. It opens doors to the Redeemer. It becomes a messenger of the compassionate love of Christ, for children first of all but also for humanity at large. All that is needed is for parents to let God's living Spirit be at the center of the family. When God is frequently mentioned, when the story of Jesus' life is told with enthusiasm, and when each opportunity for prayer is celebrated, children will gently but surely develop a life of intimacy with God. The family truly is a "*house of God*". The Church considers the family as a *sanctuary of life*. By welcoming children as gifts of God, a family fulfills its mission as the foundational unit of society and the Church. Through words that teach and by daily gestures of kindness, tenderness and forgiveness, parents cultivate in their children the authentic freedom of God's sons and daughters. Thus children grow in "respect for others, a sense of justice, cordial openness, dialogue, generous service", promoting justice, peace and solidarity. This is the task God gives Christian parents, often helped by grandparents who can be so vital in the transmission of faith and values.

BEARER OF LIFE

Even when a family is wounded or weakened by one of its members, the family is still – both for the children and their parents – the primary place for them to find welcome, renewal, emotional security and love. It can continue to be this as long as it is surrounded and supported by close family members and other families who are aware of the need to be in solidarity. In God's plan, the family is always a giver of life, of life in abundance (John 10.10), even in its vulnerability. It is in the family itself that we can find the 'good news' of a love that overcomes fear and brings hope to the world.

FAMILY LIFE: A MYSTERY

Difficulties, exhaustion, conflicts and daily worries are part of the life of all families. When parents – despite their troubles, and despite their imperfections and weaknesses – choose kindness over aggression, tenderness over violence, forgiveness over bitterness, the family proclaims the victory of love, the victory of the Cross. When this happens, family members become witnesses to the incredible news of Jesus Christ, in whom love triumphed over death, once and for all. Such is the mystery of family life – human beings who transform the world by living the life of Jesus, a full life that fulfills the deepest hopes. Not only is this a challenge and an adventure, it is the "Good News"! As we recall that marriage and the family are good news; we realize that they are manifestations of the gratuitous love of God, which shows itself through the love of spouses and in the joy of the gift of children. In this way they become a source of joyful news for the parents and the community. We want to encourage couples to receive the sacrament of matrimony and to build a family life according to the plan of Jesus. We want to help them become aware that they are a true domestic church where each member is invited to become a living witness of the gospel of life in the church and in society. It is the desire of the Catholic Church to be present and accompany couples from the time they begin their marriage preparation and continuing throughout all the phases of life. In order for this to be possible, we see the necessity of preparing the bishops and all pastoral ministers: priests, religious and lay, to accompany these couples and these families. We must also call upon teams of professional lay persons to help us in this work. In this new millennium, it is true that the family is navigating rough seas. Couples and families today carry tremendous burdens. However, when they choose to persevere and to live in faith and hope, they create a privileged space for human beings to be born and to grow in unconditional love. Fathers, mothers and children reveal God to each other and to the world – the One who accompanies us in our daily lives, who fills us beyond all measure, and who is with us *"every day until the end of time"* (Matthew 28.20).

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