

**PROMOTE SOLID FAMILY LIFE  
AS A MODEL FOR UNITED CHURCH LIFE**

On Saturday, 22 May, the Holy Father met in His Private Library with members of the fifth group of the Bishops' Conference of the United States of America coming from the Churches in Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas (Region X) for their *ad limina* visit to Rome.

The Pope spoke to the Bishops about the holiness of family life and of the importance of placing "strong emphasis on marriage as a Christian vocation to which couples are called to give them the means to life it fully...". He also called it "fundamental that Christian marriage be comprehended in the fullest sense and be presented both as a natural institution and a sacramental reality".

The following is the Holy Father's Address to the American Bishops.

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. It is with great joy that I welcome you, the Bishops from the Ecclesiastical Provinces of San Antonio and Oklahoma City, on the occasion of your visit *ad limina Apostolorum*. I am grateful that during the last few months I have had the pleasure of meeting so many Bishops from your Country, which is home to a large and vibrant Catholic community. "We give thanks to God always for you all... remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in Lord Jesus Christ" (I Thes 1:2-3). These visits not only strengthen the bond between us, but they also offer a unique opportunity for us to look more closely at the good work already accomplished and the challenges still facing the Church in the United States.

In my last talks I discussed themes related to the *munus sanctificandi*. In particular, I looked at the universal call to holiness and the importance of loving communion with God and one another as the key to personal and communal sanctification. "God created man in his own image and likeness: calling him to existence through love, he called him at the same time for love" (*Familiaris Consortio*, n. 11; cf. Gn 1:26-27). These essential relationships are based on God's love and act as the point of reference for all human activity. *The vocation and responsibility of every person to love grants us not only the ability to cooperate with the Lord in his sanctifying mission but also gives us the desire to do so*. Accordingly, in this my final reflection on the sanctifying office, I wish to concentrate in a special way on one of the cornerstones of the Church itself, namely, the complex of interpersonal relationships known as the family (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 11).

**Christian marriage: a natural institution, a sacramental reality**

2. Family life is sanctified in the joining of man and woman in the sacramental institution

of holy matrimony. Consequently, it is fundamental that Christian marriage be comprehended in the fullest sense and be presented both as a natural institution and a sacramental reality. Many today have a clear understanding of the secular nature of marriage, which includes the rights and responsibilities modern societies hold as determining factors for a marital contract. There are nevertheless some who appear to lack a proper understanding of the intrinsically religious dimension of this covenant.

Modern society rarely pays heed to the permanent nature of marriage. In fact, the attitude towards marriage found in contemporary culture demands that the Church seek to offer better pre-marital instruction aimed at forming couples in this vocation and insist that her Catholic schools and religious education programs guarantee that young people, many of whom are from broken families themselves, are educated from a very early age in the Church's teaching on the sacrament of matrimony. In this regard, I thank the Bishops of the United States for their concern to provide a correct catechesis on marriage to the lay faithful of their dioceses. *I encourage you to continue to place a strong emphasis on marriage as a Christian vocation to which couples are called and to give them the means to live it fully through marital preparation programs which are "serious in purpose, excellent in content, sufficient in length and obligatory in nature"* (*Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops*, n. 202).

### **Love present in family life is a model of Church relationships**

3. The Church teaches that the love of man and woman made holy in sacrament of marriage is a mirror of God's everlasting love for the creation (cf. Preface of Marriage III). Similarly, *the communion of love present in family life serves as a model of the relationships which must exist in Christ's family, the Church*". "Among the fundamental tasks of the Christian family is its ecclesial task: the family is placed at the service of the building up of the Kingdom of God in history by participating in the life of and mission of the Church" (*Familiaris Consortio*, n. 49). In order to ensure that the family is capable of fulfilling this mission, the Church has a sacred responsibility to do all she can to assist married couples in making the family a "domestic church" and in fulfilling properly the "priestly role" to which every Christian family is called (cf. *Ibid.*, n. 55). A most effective way to accomplish this task is by assisting parents to become the first preachers of the Gospel and the main catechists in the family. This particular apostolate requires more than a mere academic instruction on family life; it requires the Church to share the hurts and struggles of parents and families, as well as their joys. Christian communities should thus make every effort to assist spouses in turning their families into schools of holiness by offering concrete support for family life ministry at the local level. Included in this responsibility is the satisfying task of leading back many Catholics who have drifted away from the Church but long to return now that they have a family.

### **Youth ministry: an essential dimension of diocesan programs**

4. The family as a community of love is reflected in the life of the Church. Indeed, the Church may be considered as a family – God's Family gathered as sons and daughters of our heavenly Father. Like a family, the Church is a place where its members feel free to bring their sufferings, knowing that Christ's presence in the prayer of his people is the greatest source of

healing. For this reason, the Church maintains an active involvement at all levels of family ministry and especially in those areas which reach out to youth and young adults. *Young people, faced with a secular culture which promotes instant gratification and selfishness over the virtues of self-control and generosity, need the Church's support and guidance.* I encourage you, along with your priests and lay collaborators, to have youth ministry as an essential part of your diocesan programs (cf. *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops*, n. 203; *Pastores Gregis*, n. 53). So many young people are seeking strong, committed and responsible role models who are not afraid to profess and unconditional love for Christ and his Church. In this regard, priests have always made and should continue to make a special and invaluable contribution to the lives of young Catholics.

As in any family, the Church's internal harmony can at times be challenged by a lack of charity and the presence of conflict among her members. This can lead to the formation of factions within the Church which often become so concerned with their special interests that they lose sight of the unity and solidarity which are the foundations of ecclesial life and the sources of communion in the family of God. To address this worrisome phenomenon *Bishops are charged to act with fatherly solicitude as men of communion to ensure that their particular Churches act as families, so "that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another"* (I Cor 12:25). This requires that the Bishop strive to remedy any division which can exist among his flock by attempting to rebuild a level of trust, reconciliation and mutual understanding in the ecclesial family.

### **Promote sanctification through devotions of popular piety**

5. My Brother Bishops, as I conclude these considerations on family life, I pray that you will continue your efforts *to promote personal and communal sanctification through devotions of popular piety.* For centuries the Holy Rosary, Stations of the Cross, prayer before and after meals and other devotional practices have helped to form a school of prayer in families and parishes, acting as rich and beautiful supplements to the sacramental life of Catholics. A renewal of these devotions will not only help the faithful in your Country grow in personal holiness but will also act as a source of strength and sanctification for the Catholic Church in the United States.

As your Nation marks in a special way the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, I leave you with the words of my illustrious Predecessor, Blessed Pope Pius IX: "We have, therefore, a very certain hope and complete confidence that the most Blessed Virgin will ensure by her most powerful patronage that all difficulties be removed and all errors dissipated, so that our Holy Mother the Catholic Church may flourish daily more and more throughout all the nations and countries, and may reign 'from seas to sea from the river to the ends of the earth'" (*Ineffabilis Deus*). I invoke the intercession of Mary Immaculate, Patroness of the United States, who untainted by sin unceasingly prays for the sanctification of Christians, and I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of strength and joy of Jesus Christ.