



PASTORAL LETTER
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Strengthening the Family

Many among us believe that the family is the jewel in the crown of the church and the country. The family is a primary human, social, economic and spiritual resource. I can never adequately express my appreciation towards a great number of families for their sense of dedication and spirit of sacrifice. The family is held in such high esteem that for many the worst which could happen to them is for trouble to crop up in the family. It is not seldom that when such unfortunate circumstances prevail, families join ranks to tackle the problem.

It is with a sense of joy that I would like to inform you about the latest initiative that the Church in Gozo has taken to help those families who are in need of a helping hand and understanding. Following the specific programmes laid on by the Diocesan Commission for the Family, catering for the betrothed and the newly married, we have lately inaugurated the Consultancy Unit for the Family. In the near future this Centre, which is located within the Ta' Pinu Complex, will offer spiritual, psychological, medical, legal and administrative consultancy. It is our hope that through this service, the Church would once again, help towards the strengthening of the family. This is yet another initiative in the series of initiatives taken throughout the years by the Church towards the consolidation of the family in the social fabric.

This Centre for the Family is providential, when one takes into consideration that in Malta throughout these past years a movement has slowly but surely sown doubts about what the family stands for, and its mission and function in society. The truth about the nature and identity of the family has become blurred. The less we have a clear definition of the family, the more confusion takes hold. As such no-one takes a stand against the family, but then much is said and done that effectively weakens the family as the fundamental cell of society. The introduction of divorce legislation in the Marriage Act in Malta is case in point. And not the only one either.

When faced by this threat, not all the families react in the same manner. There are those who remain passive, either because they are not aware of what is going on, or because they think that what is happening will not affect their lives. Others are convinced that they can safely get on with their lives, and do not care about what other families are going through presently, or in the future for that matter. There are others who divorce compassion from the

truth, and with the pretext of mercy forego certain fundamental values. There are others who feel that there is no need for them to do anything because there are others who are speaking out for the family, such as the Church, some religious society, or some other group like those who took the initiative to campaign against the introduction of divorce in Malta last year. There could be others who have lost heart. Each one of these reactions shows that either the family as a unit does not have adequate knowledge about its identity and role in society, or else that the family is demoralized.

Apart from a particular mission within its own ranks, the family has a social responsibility. The family is called to show solidarity with the poor and the marginalized. “Families therefore, either singly or in association, can and should devote themselves to manifold 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..In particular, note must be taken of ever greater importance in our society of hospitality in all its forms, from opening the door of one’s home and still more of one’s heart to the pleas of one’s brothers and sisters, to concrete efforts to ensure that every family has its own home, as the natural environment that preserves it and makes it grow” (*Familiaris Consortio* 44). Obviously the remit of the family goes beyond this.

Presently, owing to an individualistic mentality, instead of a “society of families”, a “society of individuals” is being promoted. As a consequence, the “rights” of the individual have upstaged the “rights” of the family. In the prevailing *milieu* it is imperative that the family regains its status as an institution. Just as individuals feel the need to coalesce to uphold their rights, the same goes for the families. The making of an authentically human society just cannot be the result of the endeavors of the families by themselves. The family has to have a political and public relevance. “Families should be the first to take steps to see that the laws and institutions of the state not only do not offend but support and positively defend the rights and duties of the family...families should grow in awareness of being “protagonists of what is known as “family politics””. (*Familiaris Consortio* 44). On the other hand, society, or better still the state, should acknowledge the family’s right, rooted in its original nature for a say in the public sphere (DH 5). From this follows the pressing need for families to unite, on the model of guilds/unions, to overcome the “individualistic ethic”, and feature as protagonists in the framing of a rightful family policy. Such guilds/unions could see to it that the enactments and regulations of parliament rightfully respect the natural rights of the primordial natural society which is the family.

Such family guilds/unions should not be “confessional”, because the family is a natural institution. The protection of the family is of universal value and import. The prevailing ambiguous state of affairs regarding the family makes such coordinated efforts needed more than ever. Christians have much to offer in this particular sphere. In fact, the Christian values of marriage and the family coincide with the natural and human values and perfect them.

It is certainly a positive note that we have several married couples and families who are seriously committed in the pastoral life of the Church, particularly in this area. This confirms

that, slowly but surely, we are moving away from the idea of the family as an “object”, to the family as a “subject” of the pastoral initiatives. Still, this is not enough. The pastoral involvement of the family should not confine itself to the limits of the parish, as this could mean that some have not as yet understood the social and public relevance of Christianity. This phenomenon could mean that the families have not as yet sufficient awareness of their vocation to be protagonists in society, on the cultural, social and political levels.

At present there are several issues which directly affect the family:

First of all, it is essential to have a clear and unambiguous definition of the family. By “family” we mean the natural society of persons built on the relationship between a man and a woman, founded on unbreakable marriage bond for their mutual union and love, and the procreation, upbringing and education of their children. Although this definition sounds “Catholic”, in fact it is founded on reason. Natural sciences confirm that this “model” of the family is the best asset of any society. This means that the “family” can never be used to mean a mere “legal” recognition of persons living under the same roof (household), or such similar arrangements. Once an agreement is reached on the definition of the family, we should move on to examine whether it is reflected in the laws, policies and economic regime of the nation.

Since it is widely accepted that the family is the primary and indispensable unit of society, it follows that the family be duly accorded a privileged status by the state. No other kind of relationship between persons should be identified with the family. It is an undeniable fact that within the political as well as the economic institutions, as in the media world, there are those who would label any unit made up of persons who have a relationship, as a “family”. This is misleading and extremely dangerous. In as much as persons living together should have their proper individual rights, just like any other individual, acknowledged and upheld by the state, it is the state’s duty to acknowledge the “family” *in se*, and to promote “family-friendly” politics, which should focus on the family as an indispensable social unit.

The family is the sanctuary where human life is conceived and matures. The absolute respect towards human life from its inception to its natural end, demands that not only abortion and euthanasia be outlawed, but also that the methods of conception should not themselves be a threat to human life or to its inherent dignity. Taken cognizance of the low birth-rate, it is pertinent to question whether our prevailing social *milieu* is conducive to families being generous with regard to life. Financial constraints, the precarious nature of work, the acquisition of a proper house etc. could be weighing in when young couples delay entering into marriage and start their own family. One should seriously consider whether the State should devote more attention to creating favorable conditions for married couples to have children. It is indeed timely that ways to strengthen the positive initiatives already in place be found so that the newly-formed married couples be supported. These measures should not be considered as *ex caritate* but *ex iustitia*, so that while work practices and conditions are family friendly, those families who are rearing their children are financially encouraged to do so. Alongside economic factors, other psychological and cultural motives, such as the precarious nature of the relationship, the couple’s unpreparedness for parenthood, the

uncertain future, may weigh down heavily on the newly-married. The State, the Church and the social partners have a grave responsibility and mission to support the newly-married to fulfill their commitment.

The parents have an exclusive right to educate their children according to their religious and ethical beliefs. This right has to be fully respected, especially with regard to those parents who do not have the opportunity to send their children to a school of their choice. It is fitting that the design and implementation of the curriculum respect this right. The parents are the fundamental educators of their children and schools should respect this right and support it. This also applies to the State in the drawing up of the National Minimum Curriculum.

It would be a pity were the “family” as a determining factor to disappear altogether in the drawing up of economic policies related to the so-called “free market”, just to pander to the an “individualistic” mentality, or in the name of maximization of efficiency of the public and private enterprise. The initiatives aimed at creating the conditions so that the parents who are raising their young could chose the right time for them to participate formally in the economic and social life, should be abetted. In this way it would not fall only upon the family to carry the burden which the adaptation to the economic structure brings with it. I can envisage also the role of the institutions to unite the social partners and the Government so that the much desired equilibrium between the consolidation of the family unit and the enhancement of the quality of life of the citizens is better reached. This should not remain a wish list, because in that case we would be closer to the situation where the human person and the family will be in view of work, and not the work will be in service to the human person and the family. This would weaken the family which would result in the weakening of the economy itself. The human person would be the loser.

When one takes into consideration the power of the media, it would not be amiss if the local media be more respectful of the family. The media should be instrumental in fostering the awareness of the positive experiences of family life, and the values which sustain it, such as unwavering fidelity, spirit of sacrifice, total commitment, patience, forgiveness and charity.

These are only some of the issues which call for renewed analyses followed concrete action because they affect directly the Maltese and Gozitan families, and if they are not seriously taken up could drastically weaken the family and national fabric. This is also a wake-up call for the families not to remain in the shade or be taken over by inertia, so that as is their right and duty, team up to intervene in the public sphere as protagonists to make their voice heard and defend the family. It is imperative that the family be acknowledged as a subject and interlocutor so that in continuous dialogue with the State, contributes to the consolidation of the common good.

This is an opportunity for those for whom the family is founded on marriage pact between a man and a woman, to institute such an association of families for the strengthening of the common good, where the family is respected and promoted as a fundamental good (value), and indispensable tool for the formation of future generations.

Since between 30th May and 3rd June, the Catholic Church is holding in Milan the VII Global Conference about the family with the theme: “Family, work and rest”, by means of this Pastoral Letter, I appeal to the local Church to follow this high profile event closely, and to offer prayers and sacrifice for the success of this Conference.

Following the Lord’s example, who before ascending to heaven commanded the apostles to go out in the whole world and preach the Good News to all, I entreat the Christian families to proclaim the Good news regarding the family to all families and to our society.

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