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The Family as a Resource for Society

**The 20th anniversary of the United Nations International Year of the Family
The 30th anniversary of the Holy See's Charter of the Rights of the Family**

It is an honor and a pleasure to address you in this Event being conducted under the auspices of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in preparation for the Twentieth Anniversary of the International Year of the Family. I offer my sincere thanks to His Excellency, the Most Reverend Francis A. Chullikatt, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, for all he has done to make this Event possible.

As the Department has emphasized, the Anniversary is an *“opportunity to refocus on the role of families in development; take stock of recent trends in family policy development; share good practices in family policy making; review challenges faced by families worldwide and recommend solutions.”*

As well, I am in agreement with Resolution 2012/10 adopted by ECOSOC that stresses the need *“for undertaking concerted actions to strengthen family-centered policies and programs as part of an integrated, comprehensive approach to development”*; and that invites States, civil society organizations and academic institutions *“to continue providing information on their activities in support of the objectives of and preparations for the twentieth anniversary.”*

That's the reason why we are here.

As you all know, this is a particularly important time for the whole Catholic world.

Our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI has announced that on February 28th he will retire from his ministry as Supreme Pastor of the Church. This is the first time, in the more than 2000 years of the Church, that a pope has done so of his own free will; and it shows the great spiritual stature of His Holiness. Realizing that age has weakened him significantly, he is stepping aside to a life of prayer and preparation for his eternal reward so that the Church can choose a new successor of Peter who will guide it in fulfilling its mission at this crucial moment in human history.

The Holy See nevertheless considers it very important to speak to the world whenever possible, particularly about the core issues of life and human relationships, so notwithstanding the loss we feel as a Church, we would not miss this opportunity for me to address you as President of the Pontifical Council for the Family.

The family in fact is the fundamental unit of human society. It is where the generations meet, love, educate, support each other and pass on life from age to age.

This understanding of the family has been embraced by all cultures throughout history. With good reason the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes that: *“(1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to*

found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution. (2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses. (3) The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.”

Likewise, the Holy See, recognizing that attention to the family and its rights is crucial in the formulation of government policies, thirty years ago promulgated its *Charter of the Rights of the Family* to reaffirm the importance of that institution and to strengthen the family’s unique role in society.

The Preamble to the Charter reads: “*The rights of the person, even though ... expressed as rights of the individual, have a fundamental social dimension which finds an innate and vital expression in the family.*” And therefore, “*based on marriage, that intimate union of life in complementarity between a man and a woman which is constituted in the freely contracted and publicly expressed indissoluble bond of matrimony and is open to the transmission of life,*” the family should be protected and promoted by society and by the State.

Thus, in the Charter, the common experience of humankind finds an explicit and forceful documentary affirmation.

For this reason, I would like speak about the family as the fundamental resource of society, the source of social capital and the birthright of all humanity. Indeed the stability of any society depends *pari passu* on the stability of the families from which it springs.

Today, however, the family is threatened on many sides, and its extinction is prophesied time and again. Nevertheless it continually exhibits a vigor much greater than that of the many forces which have tried to eliminate it as a relic of the past and as obstacle to the emancipation of the individual and the creation of a more free, egalitarian and happy society.

But I can tell you now, without any hesitation, that in all our research the family--mother, father and children--notwithstanding the many attacks to which it is subject—comes first in the hearts of the world’s peoples; and studies show that the great majority of young people look forward happily to marriage as a lifelong faithful union with their husband or wife.

And the fact that the family comes first in the hearts of the people is further proof that it is the foundation of society itself, and indeed that it is the primary and the richest of humanity’s resources

Unfortunately, that vision is opposed by cultural currents that for example consider it impossible to love someone forever. But when I hear things like that, I ask myself how can a young man profess, with great enthusiasm, undying love for his favorite sports team but can’t do the same for his wife! Clearly something is wrong!

To provide what I hope are some useful guideposts, I would like to expand my discussion to four separate areas, drawing on certain sociological studies promoted by the Pontifical Council for the Family.

First, the couple and marriage. The fact of getting married constitutes an added value for persons and for society, in that the marriage contract enhances the quality of the relationship of the couple and has important positive consequences (biological, psychological, economic and social) for children and adults. Simple cohabitation is not equal to marriage because it renders relations unstable and creates major uncertainty in the lives of children. Divorce itself (or the choice of single parenthood) increases the risk of school failure for children. The stability of family relations is a precious good, and when it is lacking, all members of the family are at risk. In particular, marriage stability is decisive for the successful socialization of children. Divorce, as well as birth outside marriage, increases the risk of poverty for children and mothers. Stepfamilies, reconstituted families and blended families experience many problems with respect to relations between the new parents and the children of their former unions.

On the other hand, marriage, between a man and a woman, generates benefits that other forms of “living together” do not. Those other forms are just not the same as marriage.

Second, Intergenerational Concerns. Natural families experience solidarity between generations much more frequently and more deeply than other forms of life in common. Children who live with their own biological parents enjoy better physical and psychological health, and experience more trust and hope in life, in comparison with those who live in other contexts. For example, adolescent children of married couples are at less risk of developing deviant behaviors (including abuse of alcohol and drugs) than those living with single parents, unmarried couples or separated couples.

The analysis of three different family structures, intact two-parent families, blended families and single-parent families, demonstrates the greater fragility of the latter two patterns. In blended families following separation, the parents have major difficulties in developing their educational role and are more often in disagreement with each other as regards educational themes. Single parents or those separated or divorced are characterized by major distrust of external social contexts and develop a privatized vision of the family. Children of divorced parents exhibit increased incidence of major psychological illnesses and states of anxiety.

Even worse, studies show that children raised without a father account for a very high percentage of the homeless, of adolescents who commit homicides, of adolescent suicides and of incarcerated youth. This last data gives serious grounds for caution when we speak of alternative “families.” All too often, decisions, even legislative decisions, seem to be made without taking into account the tragic consequences that might result.

Third, Family and Work. It is crucial to remember that the family constitutes an incredibly rich resource for the world of work, much more than the world of work benefits the family. In other words, the world of work “exploits” the family-resource and does not take sufficiently into account the demands of family life. It is enormously difficult for families, especially those with children, to harmonize family and professional life. As a consequence, the world of work, recognizing the importance of the family to human society, should organize itself in a way that puts the needs of the family first.

In that context, and particularly during times of high unemployment, the actions of government as they affect families must be examined carefully. The welfare state is characterized by family

assistance programs principally intended to address situations where the family is broken, unstable or lacking in internal resources. In these cases the state attempts in effect to be a substitute for the family, or at least for some missing element of the family. But by substituting itself for the family, the welfare state produces a kind of vicious circle where instead of strengthening family relationships, it weakens them even further, and thus creates increased need for government assistance. Increased need leads to crisis, however, because it gives rise to expectations that the government cannot hope to meet, firstly because financial resources are never unlimited, but more importantly because government cannot itself function as a family, only as an agency. It thus becomes clear how important it is for government programs not only to promote family “mainstreaming” but more importantly for the government to have a correct understanding of the family when formulating public policy and to respect subsidiarity, which should be a guiding principle in any governmental action.

Fourth, Family and Social Capital. Free and democratic political and economic processes are possible only where there is a strong social fabric, where the public and civil sphere requires and rewards basic human values, promotes the common good and ensures the circumstances in which families can be created and thrive.

But when speaking of social fabric, it is important to remember that, in the words of Alexis de Tocqueville, “*modern democracy needs a solid and stable family.*” This means that not only does the family benefit from a strong social fabric, but as it builds and strengthens relationships it is also the creator of primary social capital. Thus, using Adam Smith’s terminology, the family, as the creator of the fabric that it needs, can be regarded as an important source of “the wealth of nations.”

These four considerations bring us to a very clear, very precise conclusion: the natural family (marriage, father, mother, children) is and remains a vital resource for society.

Some may say that the family has changed over the centuries, but we must also realize that, whatever circumstances families may encounter on an empirical level, the family’s constitutional genome does not cease to be the source and origin of society. Without this ‘social genome,’ society would lose the quality and power of the family as a living organism (the fundamental cell) which, rather than being a burden on society, constitutes the primary vehicle for the humanization of persons and social life.

Moreover, the fact that the family is a primary school of love and gratitude is manifested in a particular way in families where weak and disabled members are present, because the person in difficulty requires a special organization of family life. Families in such circumstances develop specific virtues that can be called empowerment and resilience. Such virtues bring with them social advantages that the family with disabled or dependent members offers to society. As a matter of fact, the effort that these families undertake for the rehabilitation and social inclusion of their disabled or dependent member in all spheres of society, from school to work, reflects a humanizing belief in the possibility of social inclusion and human solidarity, in particular with regard to the weakest and most marginalized. These families provide domestic care for the seriously disabled, thereby activating the virtues that family members practice in being caregivers, each according to his or her specific capabilities. Another example of families that clearly generate benefits for all of society can be found in those that adopt children or act as foster

parents.

Dear friends, in contemporary debate there is much discussion of different types “families” in the plural, and disagreements are fairly marked, but on one point I believe that all are in agreement: the natural family progression—marriage, mother, father, children—is the one in which our humanity is best and most surely realized and the one which—while no one in other circumstances is to be marginalized or denied solidarity—society is called on to regard most highly.

In ECOSOC Resolution 2012/10 Member States are encouraged to implement effective national policies, strategies and programs to address family poverty, social exclusion, work-family balance and intergenerational solidarity. Everyone who cares about the family should welcome all these goals, but all efforts undertaken to reach them should reflect commitment to and respect for the family as human society’s foundation, source and protection.

And I would add that the Holy See’s Charter of the Rights of the Family, which I want not only to commemorate but also to promote among all nations, can well serve as a model for the tools to be used as those goals are pursued.

Thank you for your attention.