

FAMILIES IN FOCUS**The Family at the Heart of Human Development****Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia****President of the Pontifical Council for the Family****Mister Prime Minister****Your Eminence****Civic Leaders****Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is a particular pleasure to take part in this Forum on the family because it has such a close connection with the recently concluded Synod on the Family in Rome. And let me take this opportunity to thank Cardinal Péter Erdő, Archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest, Primate of Hungary and General Relator of the Synod, for his wise conduct of the sessions and for the successful outcome of the Assembly. I think it is very important to emphasize the connection between this Forum and the Synod. While there is a difference in their scope, both events show that the family is a crucial reality in the life of peoples, including European peoples. With that background, I would like to propose to you a brief reflection on the following theme: the family at the heart of human development.

The second individualist revolution

More than a few scholars have emphasized that development, as we know it in Europe, owes much to the family, an institution whose roots date back through the thousands of years that have gone before us. One example is sufficient. It is Cicero's famous affirmation that "Familia est principium urbis et quasi seminarium rei publicae." The Second Vatican Council was on the same wave length when it said that the family is, "Scola quaedam uberioris humanitatis" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n.52). And today I believe we

can share the statement of a French scholar, Xavier Lacroix, who has said that “the destruction of the family is the number one problem in society today.” Without going into detail, it does appear that the crisis in Europe is not just an economic one. It is related as well to the fragility of family ties, to our low birth rate, to the aging of the population, and more. These are the objects of this Forum’s study. If a country does not have a strong family fabric that produces healthy relationships, no proposed politico-economic solution has any chance of success, and measures taken to ensure “growth” are destined to failure. Support for the family, therefore, means regenerating human and social capital. Unfortunately, the data on families in Europe are not encouraging¹.

The situation appears paradoxical. On the one hand family ties are given great respect, to the point of calling the family the key to happiness. The family is considered by a majority of the populations of Europe to be the place of safety, refuge, and the protection of life. On the other hand, the family is the place where every weakness is encountered: relationships break down, failed families are ever more numerous, and one of the parents is absent. We see that families disappear, break up, restructure, so much so that we can

¹ The Madrid Family Policy Institute has presented statistics that show that in member states of the European Union the number of marriages is in continual decline despite increases in the general population. This trend applies to both religious and civil marriages although marriages celebrated in Church tend to last longer. EUROSTAT statistics (May 2014) reveal that in recent decades the number of marriages per 1,000 population has declined by 28. Over almost four decades, marriages per 1,000 population has gone down 3.1, in line with a general reduction in marriages of 39%. Likewise, because of a general weakening of marriage ties, the divorce rate has doubled (one every thirty seconds), going from one divorce every year per 1,000 population in 1970 to two per one thousand in 2010 (with the highest rates in Latvia, Lithuania and Denmark and the lowest in Ireland, Italy, Malta and Greece). In addition, for decades in the majority of European countries the age of first marriages has increased. In 1980, it was 26 for men and 23.3 for women; in 2003 it was 30 for men and 27.7 for women. In East Europe marriages take place earlier (23-25 in Moldova and Albania); in Italy later (34 for men and 31 for women). One result is that the first child arrives later, thus, together with current low-birth statistics for European countries, this phenomenon accentuates the effects of the so-called “European demographic winter.” What is more, population growth in Europe among traditional ethnicities is significantly lower than in continents like Asia, Africa and North and South America. Even in Poland, where Catholic values prevail (approximately two-thirds of the population attends Mass regularly) the birth rate is only 1.23 children for every woman, among the lowest in the region. Experts at the BBC calculate that ten percent of women in many European countries reach forty-five years of age without having had a child. According to Catherine Hakim, a sociologist at the London School of Economics, the number of women who have not given birth will double in many countries, reaching 20% or even, in Germany, 30%. Couples are less hesitant to admit that they prefer a different life style and in any case they prefer to put off creating a family until they have finished their studies and started a career. Likewise, the effect of abortion is not to be underestimated. Every year there are 1.2 million abortions in Europe, accounting for one out of every five pregnancies (European Network of the Family Planning Institute, IPF). The number of children born out of wedlock (2 million) to unmarried couples or single mothers is increasing. In some countries their number is greater than those born within marriage: in Sweden, 55.4%; in Denmark, 45.4%; in France, 45.2%, and in the United Kingdom 42.3%. In Greece and Italy respectively, 4.9% and 14.9%. Given that the population of Europe has decreased by half a million in the last six years, it is estimated that by 2050 the population of the United States could equal that of much Europe.

indeed say, with the French scholar I mentioned above, that “the destruction of the family is the number one problem in society today.” Moreover, there is the idea of increasing number of different kinds of families. It has become normal to think that individuals can “be a family” in endless new ways: we hear that now every type of “living together” can be called a family – just as long as there is love. In that optic, the family is not negated, rather, it is grouped with new ways of life and relational experience that are *apparently* compatible with it but that in reality destroy it. And scientific data now reveal a sort of cycle of discouragement with respect to the family².

A well-known French philosopher, Gilles Lipovetsky, uses the term “*second individualist revolution*” to describe a culture that turns societal institutions toward an affirmation of the ego. Giuseppe De Rita, an Italian sociologist, uses the expression “ego worship,” a new religion on whose altars are sacrificed even the most intimate affections. Society seems to have become just a great conglomeration of individuals where “I” has become more important than “we”-- and more important than society itself, and the rights of the *individual* prevail over those of the *family*. It is understandable that in such circumstances it seems normal to prefer cohabitation over marriage, and individual independence over mutual interdependence. And it seems that nothing can be realized except on the ashes of the family that, in a strange reversal becomes, not “the basic cell of society,” but rather the “basic cell of the individual.”

² In one English newspaper (“Metro” May 18, 2012), an article listed thirty-five types of households: “married couple with own children, married couple with step-children, married couple with foster or adopted children, married couple with own children and step-children, married couple with own children, step-children and adopted or foster children, married couple with own children and adopted or foster children, unmarried heterosexuals with own children, unmarried heterosexuals with step-children, unmarried heterosexuals with adopted or foster children, unmarried heterosexuals with step-children and own children, unmarried heterosexuals with own children and adopted or foster children, unmarried heterosexuals with adopted or foster children and step-children, heterosexual unmarried mother with own children, heterosexual unmarried mother with step-children, heterosexual unmarried mother with adopted or foster children, heterosexual unmarried mother with own children and step-children, heterosexual unmarried mother with own children and adopted or foster children, heterosexual unmarried father with own children, heterosexual unmarried father with own children and step-children, lesbian couple living together with own children, lesbian couple in a civil union with own children, lesbian couples in a civil union with own children and step-children, unmarried lesbian with own children, homosexual couple with own children, homosexual couple with adopted or foster children, homosexual couple in a civil union with own children, homosexual couple in a civil union with adopted or foster children, single homosexual male with own children, bisexual with own children, transsexual with own children, grandparents with own grandchildren, grandparents with own grandchildren and step-children, grandmother with own grandchildren, grandmother with adopted or foster grandchildren, grandfather with own grandchildren”.

But when the family becomes weak, society becomes weak too. Everywhere we see that the principal means of survival is no longer “being together” but rather avoidance of the other and staying separate. We are witnessing a true crisis of the various forms of societal communities heretofore recognized, including the family. The collapse of the family would lead to a “no-family” society, with all its consequences for societal cohesiveness.

The family as a resource for society

It has thus become urgent to restore cultural dignity and centrality to the family in contemporary society in all its manifestations: politics, the economy, community, religion. This is true because as a matter of fact, and notwithstanding the difficult circumstances it is encountering today, the family is and remains society’s most important resource, as is shown by research carried out in several countries (Argentina, Brasil, Chile, USA, Spain, Italy, Poland, Mexico) under the auspices of the Pontifical Council for the Family³. Data gathered about three types of familial circumstances (mother-father-children, childless couples, and one parent-one child) show the unique power of the first type. It is and remains the preeminent *source of life for society*. The research clearly shows that calling into question or weakening this type of family means turning individuals into persons in need of assistance rather than free actors who generate and regenerate the human and social capital necessary for a healthy society.

Research also shows that getting married is already in itself a value added for individuals and society. The marriage bond improves the quality of couple relationships and has important consequences for all. Simple cohabitation is shown to be not the same as matrimony: in it relations are more unstable and it results in greater uncertainties in the life of children. Divorce (or not getting married at all) increases the risk of children failing in school. To the contrary, stability in family relationships is recognized as a significant

³ P.P. Donati – P. Sullins, *The Conjugal Family. An Irreplaceable Resource for Society*, Città del Vaticano 2015.
P.P. Donati (a cura di), *Famiglia risorsa della Società*, Bologna 2012.

good, without which all members of a family are at risk. As just one point, a healthy family environment adds to life expectancy.

Research also shows that a mother-father-children family contributes more to a healthy work environment than work contributes to family stability. In other words, the world of work “exploits” the family as a resource but does not take sufficient account of the needs of the family. The family is in a sense the primordial economic enterprise. The family, for example, is where savings originate. There is a real need to harmonize family life, especially where children are involved, with the world of work, and to rethink the relationship between work and family.

Lastly, the family is where relationships of trust, cooperation and reciprocity begin—within in the family itself and with relatives, neighbors, friends and associations. The family weaves a social fabric that would be impossible without it.

The family must not be left alone.

Dear friends, many other thoughts could be developed with respect to the family, but I would like to close my presentation by emphasizing that the family must be *accompanied*. It cannot be left alone. By its very existence it is responsible for a number of socially indispensable tasks (for example, care for children and their education, concern for the sick and the elderly, support for the proper functioning of society through work and taxes, and protection for the weak and assistance to those threatened by economic crisis and uncertainty). In addition, the family is often a sort of flag to rally around in times of opposition and conflict, whether political or ideological or even religious.

The time has come for individuals and organizations that support and defend the family to demonstrate by their actions that they are committed to a reality that is not just an idea: On the one hand we must recognize the changed circumstances in which today’s families live, and that they have to deal with every day. On the other hand, we must show concretely that we want to do everything we can to support it, facilitate it and make it more effective in its delicate and worthy social tasks. Much has to be done in this regard by government, by civil society and by the Church.

With respect to the Church, Pope Francis has given extraordinary witness: during the past two years he has asked all the Local Churches to pay great attention to family life. And at the end of the recently held Synod he asked the Bishops of the Church to continue to walk through life together with their people and to stay close to all families, wounded families in particular. It is my hope that his request will be honored and bear much fruit. And I am pleased to praise this assembly for the vision and enthusiasm with which it is dealing with the future of Europe, so closely linked to the future of the family.