

Genuine school of love

Bishop Alvaro del Portillo's commentary on the Pope's letter to families.

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As soon as the UN declared that 1994 would be the International Year of the Family, John Paul II voiced his desire that the Church too should play her part in this celebration. The Pope has reiterated this intention in a number of ways and now it finds expression in this Letter, which he

has wished to address to the families of the world.

This document, rich in content and sizeable in length, describes the fundamental features of the family as an institution. Any reader endowed with the wisdom that the experience of life provides will immediately recognize the accuracy of the description. The Holy Father's teachings on the family act as sources of light and can serve as directives for this International Year.

“Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it,” the Pope has written in *“Redemptor Hominis”* (no. 10). Now he is pointing out that man only reaches his fullness through true

love, whose essence lies in the sincere gift of self, because there is no love without sacrifice.

But how are we to learn how to love, to give ourselves generously? What most moves us to love, St. Thomas used to say, is to know that we are loved. And it is precisely in the family – a communion of persons where unconditional, disinterested and generous love reigns – where we learn how to love. The mutual love between the spouses is prolonged in the love for their children. The family is in fact – “more than any other human reality” – the place where man is loved for his own sake and where he learns to live “a sincere self-giving”(no. 11).

The family is indeed a school of love, provided it keeps true to its identity: a stable community of love between a man and a woman, built upon marriage, and open to life. When

love, or faithfulness, or generosity regarding children fail, the family becomes disfigured. And the consequences are not long in coming: the adults are left in loneliness; the children, abandoned; for all, life becomes an inhospitable no man's land. So, John Paul II concludes, "no human society can run the risk of permissiveness on fundamental questions regarding the essence of marriage and the family!" (no. 17). These words are not prophetic – they describe the facts.

The Holy Father is appealing to all families –including those in difficulties – to be faithful to their vocation to serve life and the full humanity of man, the foundation of a "civilization of love." To those fearful of the demands of such faithfulness, the Pope says: "Do not be afraid of the risks! The forces of God are far more powerful than your difficulties! Immensely greater than the evil that

is at work in the world is the effectiveness of the sacrament of Reconciliation!” (no. 18).

The memory of the day of prayer and fasting for peace in Yugoslavia is still fresh and the Holy Father is once again referring to the need to pray, and specifically to pray in the family and for the family. The family is a praying community, a community that turns to God, in whom it finds its joy, its strength for difficult moments, and the energy it requires to carry out the exalted and difficult mission of fatherhood and motherhood. It is moving to see how much the Pope expects from the prayer of families. The Holy Father refers as well to the need to recognize the irreplaceable value of the woman’s work in the home: “The ‘fatigue’ of the woman who, after having given birth to her child, nurses it, cares for it, and looks after its education, especially in the early years, is so great that it cannot

be compared with any professional work.” This work “deserves to be recognized, financially too”(no. 17), even though we all know that a mother’s love in the home is a gift that cannot be repaid, a treasure which we keep always in our hearts.

Reference is also made to the problem of unemployment, which is seen not as a simple statistical fact, but as a real threat to the stability of so many homes. The Pope’s reflections are a call to responsibility for those who run the economy and social development.

The Holy Father has often affirmed that he considers the family as a ‘principal protagonist in the building up of peace,’ peace for which Pope John II is pleading ever more earnestly. Peace in the family will bring about peace in the world. In the Basilica of St. Peter, before an image of the Blessed Virgin – Mother

of Fair Love, Queen of Peace and Lady of Perpetual Succor – a candle burns symbolizing the prayers of Christians for peace. May this Letter of the Holy Father enkindle a light in the hearts of many men and women, and make them find in the family the happiness they so much long for.

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