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**The Family:
Seedbed for National Renewal**

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I am very proud to be representing the Knights of Columbus at this meeting of the World Congress of Families; and am also very proud to be here with the brave people of Poland to talk about the importance of the family. Poland knows the very simple truth that is this: a nation has no future without healthy families that welcome children and educate them in cultural, ethical and religious values.

And since we are meeting in Poland, I thought it appropriate to ground my remarks in the thought of one of the most famous sons of this country, the Servant of God, Pope John Paul II. His many years of teaching about the family form a strong foundation for thinking about the family's role as the seedbed for national renewal. It was John Paul II who reminded us in 1981 that "the future of humanity passes by way of the family."¹

With the collapse of communism in Europe, a new danger threatens the existence of the family. That danger is an aggressive consumerism that has resulted in a collapsing birth rate and an anti-life mentality that pervades both a personal and societal way of thinking.

¹ Familiaris Consortio, No. 86.

The central crisis confronting the family in the West is a crisis of anthropology – a crisis of the proper understanding of the nature of human person. The problem consists of a faulty anthropology that detaches human freedom from the truth, and values the person in strictly individualistic and materialistic terms. This was the great error of Communism, and it now presents an enormous challenge to the consumer cultures of the West.

Indeed, the reduction of the family to its economic component has been the great temptation of the West.

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We know that the Industrial Revolution of the 18th century brought tremendous suffering to families as the economies of Europe underwent transformation from agriculture to manufacturing. The demands of the new industrial economy weakened the social fabric of the family. In the 19th Century, capitalism tended to undermine the family by valuing it only for its economic worth -- and then only as a source for labor.

The socialist response of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels only increased the assault on family life by insisting that **every** man and **every** woman join the labor force. Socialist theory sought an evolution of the family to the point where it would disappear. Its disappearance was seen as a necessary condition for the emergence of the free and emancipated socialist person.

At the same time that classical socialist theory was developing, John Stuart Mill, the great British philosopher and the father of classical liberal political theory, was proposing a view of marriage similar in many respects to that of Marx

and Engels. For Mill, marriage was seen as an institution of oppression that prevented the attainment of individual liberty and equality.²

These ideologies – classical socialism and classical liberalism – have left us with a cultural legacy that undermines the family even in our present day. In the past four decades we have seen many western democracies change their laws to accommodate divorce, abortion, euthanasia and same-sex unions. In most cases, this was done under the pretext of promoting a particular notion of freedom and liberation.

We all know that the steady attacks on the family in the name of freedom are having far-reaching consequences. Legal abortion results in two victims: the unborn child and the post-abortive woman who can suffer a lifetime of depression and anxiety related to her abortion experience. Divorce destroys countless marriages, and has far-reaching implications for children who are raised in shattered or blended homes. Same-sex relationships are becoming increasingly accepted as worthy of marriage in some Western countries. Young men and women increasingly chose to cohabitate rather than to marry. And even among couples who do marry, a contraceptive mentality often views children as no longer the welcome fruit of married life.

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According to the United Nations, the population of Europe has already passed through its peak and has now entered a steady and steep decline. The UN predicts that Europe's population will fall from a total of more than 731 million

² John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* reprinted in *The Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), pp. 173-175.

in 2007 to 626 million in 2050. In other words, in less than 50 years, the population of Europe will diminish by 105 million.³ Today, the birthrate in Europe is just 1.3 children per woman -- well below the 2.1 average considered to be the population replacement level.⁴ At the center of this “demographic winter” is a pervasive anti-life mentality.

In his 1981 Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul II reminded us that the root cause of the predominant anti-life mentality is the corruption of the very idea and experience of freedom. The error is when freedom is conceived not as the capacity to realize the truth of God’s plan for marriage and family, but as autonomous power of self-affirmation, often asserted against others, for one’s own selfish well-being.”⁵

Paradoxically, in the more developed countries, the subtext for the falling birthrates appears to be a lack of genuine hope for the future. John Paul II observed that in those nations with stronger economies there appears to be a “certain anguish and uncertainty about the future.” This uncertainty deprives married couples of the generosity needed for having and raising children. Thus, “new life is perceived not as a blessing, but as a danger from which one must defend oneself.”⁶

The modern family is caught in a struggle between freedoms that are in mutual conflict – a conflict articulated by St. Augustine as one between two loves:

³ United Nations, World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision, <http://esa.un.org/unpp/p2k0data.asp>.

⁴ *Talking Turkey*, in Investor’s Business Daily, Oct. 5, 2005, A16.

⁵ Familiaris Consortio No. 6.

⁶ Familiaris Consortio No. 6.

the love of God to the point of disregarding self, and the love of self to the point of disregarding God.⁷

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Of course, an anti-life mentality affects not only the natural family – it ripples out into the larger society. Euthanasia is becoming commonplace in an increasing number of nations. In the United States, the State of Oregon legalized physician-assisted suicide in 1997, and attempts to legislate it in other states persist. The Netherlands and Belgium became the first European countries to legalize the practice in 2002. “Suicide tourists” are known to make their last earthly stop in Switzerland.⁸ The Italian daily *Avvenire* perhaps summed up the situation best in a headline that read: “Euthanasia: The European Temptation.”⁹

The same arguments favoring freedom and personal autonomy that proved so successful in the debates regarding the legalization of abortion appear to be succeeding in advancing the cause of euthanasia.

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There is no doubt that the various forms of attacks on life often arise from difficult subjective circumstances that involve profound suffering, depression, and economic deprivation. The situation we find ourselves in today, however, goes beyond the merely subjective or personal dimension. The attacks against life are programmatic and exist at the societal and political level. It is here, said John Paul II, that a more sinister aspect is revealed -- that is, the tendency on the part

⁷ St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XIV, 28:CSEL 40, II, 56-57.

⁸ *Switzerland's Suicide Tourists*. *CBS Sixty Minutes II*, July 23, 2003.

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/02/12/60II/main540332.shtml>

⁹ Ricardo Cascioli, *Euthanasia, The European Temptation*, in *Avvenire*, Oct. 15, 2005, 3.

of opinion makers to “interpret the ... [attacks] against life as legitimate expressions of individual freedom, to be acknowledged and protected as actual rights.”¹⁰

In this regard, John Paul II spoke of a very real “conspiracy against life” that works its way outward – from the individual, to the family, and then to the international community. The conspiracy damages not only individual and group relationships, but goes far beyond, to the point of distorting relations between peoples and nations.¹¹

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Realizing the seriousness of the situation we find ourselves in, how do we set about making the family the seedbed for national renewal?

The root crisis confronting the family in the West is a crisis of anthropology – a crisis of the proper understanding of the nature of the human person. It is necessary to recapture the sense of the family situated within the context of a Christian anthropology -- which can be said to be the unique cultural patrimony of the West. When I say “Christian anthropology” I am referring to the Christian vision of the origin, nature and destiny of the human person. The human person is the *Imago Dei* – is made in the image of God. God creates man and woman in a mutual complementarity. He places them at the center of the created order. Thus, every social question is considered from starting point of the person.

An inadequate anthropology – that is, an improper understanding of the destiny of the person -- leads to a misguided notion of freedom which exalts the

¹⁰ Evangelium Vitae, No. 18.

¹¹ Evangelium Vitae, No. 12.

isolated individual in an absolute way. It also rejects the natural complementarity of man and woman. The consequence – as we have seen -- is the establishment of systems that benefit the strong at the expense of the weak.¹² These systems destroy the family by attacking the sense of solidarity and openness to others that is the very essence of family life.

For the family to become the seedbed for national renewal, we must recover the essential link between freedom and the truth. In *Evangelium Vitae* -- the Gospel of Life -- John Paul II warned that without recovering the link between freedom and the truth it becomes impossible to establish personal rights on a solid foundation. “The ground is laid,” he said, “for society to be at the mercy of the unrestrained will of individuals or the oppressive totalitarianism of public authorities.”¹³

Of course, the difficulty we face in recovering the essential link between freedom and the truth is the prevailing ethos of *postmodern* culture, whose hallmark is a relativistic interpretation of reality. One commentator recently noted that “relativism is the mainstream position for postmodern theory across a wide range of disciplines...”¹⁴

This “dictatorship of relativism”¹⁵ creates what Pope Benedict XVI once described as the “deepest poverty... the inability [to experience] joy, the tediousness of a life considered absurd and contradictory... [which] produces the

¹² *Evangelium Vitae*. Nos. 18-19.

¹³ *Evangelium Vitae*. No. 96.

¹⁴ Professor AC Grayling, quoted in *Relative Thinking*, *The Guardian*, Nov. 18, 2004
<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/politicsphilosophyandsociety/story/0,6000,1352513,00.html>

¹⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, Homily, Mass Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice, April 18, 2005.
http://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html

inability to love, produces jealousy, avarice – all the defects that devastate the life of the individual and of the world.”¹⁶

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John Paul II reminded us that the first and fundamental step in engaging a postmodern culture is forming every conscience about the incomparable worth of every human life.¹⁷ More than that, though, he taught that love is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.¹⁸ Love, in the form of a sincere gift of self, leads to human fulfillment and is the truest expression of human freedom. It is through this innate “vocation to love” that we discover our inherent dignity.

The “vocation to love,” however, is more than just an individual calling. The family has been established as an intimate community of life and love. The family itself is entrusted with the fundamental mission to **guard**, to **reveal** and to **communicate** love. It was this mission to which John Paul II referred when he famously challenged the family to “*become what you are*.”¹⁹

John Paul II outlined two tasks for the family to fulfill its mission to communicate love. First and foremost, the family must be a community of persons: of husband and wife, of parents and children – all of whom realize their true potential in relation with one another. The family is a school which enables men and women to grow to the full measure of their humanity. For children, the experience of being loved by their parents helps them become aware of their

¹⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *Address to Catechists and Religion Teachers*, Dec. 12, 2000
http://www.ewtn.com/new_evangelization/Ratzinger.htm

¹⁷ *Evangelium Vitae*, 96.

¹⁸ *Familiaris Consortio* No. 1 and 11.

¹⁹ *Familiaris Consortio*, 17.

own dignity. By learning what it means to love and to be loved, children learn what it actually means to be a person.²⁰

The secondary task of the family, and one that is essential if the family is to be the seedbed for national renewal, is working to create societal conditions that favor family life.

In 1981, John Paul II proposed a Charter of the Rights of the Family. The Charter was intended to defend the rights of the family against encroachments from the State.²¹ It included the following principles:

- The right of the family to raise children in accordance with its own traditions and religious values;
- The right of the family to be responsible for the education of its children;
- The right of the family to profess and propagate its faith; and
- The right of the family to be represented before political authorities.

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Because these rights must be recognized by the State, John Paul II called upon families to engage in *political intervention*: Families should be the first to take steps to see that the laws and institutions of the State not only do not offend, but [actually] support and defend the rights ... of the family."²² He called for a new "family policy" whereby families themselves would assume responsibility for transforming society.²³ Without vigilance in their efforts, he noted, families would become the first victims of injustices perpetrated by society.

²⁰ Centesimus Annus, 39.

²¹ Familiaris Consortio, 45.

²² Familiaris Consortio, 44.

²³ Familiaris Consortio, No. 44.

The family is uniquely situated to promote human dignity in the debates on national renewal. The family stands as the mediating institution that protects the vulnerable person from the power of the state. A society built around the family is the best guarantee against the state “drifting off course into an individualism or collectivism”²⁴ that would violate human dignity. This is because within the family the person is always the center of attention as an ends and never as a means.”²⁵ The family, more than any other institution, understands that the person is never “a ‘thing’ or an ‘object’ to be used, but [is] – a person endowed with conscience and freedom.”²⁶

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For its part, the State must come recognize that its own well-being is bound up in creating conditions for healthy family life.²⁷ Without strong families, local communities grow weak. It is within healthy families that moral values are taught and that the spiritual and cultural heritage of the nation is transmitted.²⁸

The State must also come to recognize that the family does not exist for the State, but that the State exists for the family. John Paul II insisted that the State recognize that “the family is a society in its own original right.” The family must take priority as the first human society that precedes all others.²⁹ The State, therefore, has a serious obligation to adhere to the principle of subsidiarity. That is to say, public authorities should never take away from the family the functions which the family can best accomplish by itself. At the same time, public

²⁴ Compendium, 213.

²⁵ Compendium, 213.

²⁶ *Christifideles Laici*, 5.

²⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, 47.

²⁸ Compendium, 213.

²⁹ *Letter to Families, Gratissimam Sane*, 7.

authorities have an obligation to positively favor the family and to ensure it has the assistance it needs to fulfill its unique responsibilities.³⁰

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Let me conclude by reiterating that the State must recognize the unique identity of the family as community of life and love founded upon marriage between a man and a woman. Only through recognizing the priority of the family over every other interest group will the spiritual and cultural legacy of the nation be guaranteed.

Families also have an important responsibility – they must acknowledge the mission entrusted to them – that is, to live out their “vocation to love” – and thus to safeguard the dignity of the person from encroachment by the State.

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As we gather here in Poland we remember the great defender of the family, our beloved John Paul II. He watches us from the window in the Father’s house. It is past time we take seriously the challenge he presented to us so many years ago: “Families, *become what you are!*”

Thank you. And may God continue to bless the brave people of Poland.

³⁰ Familiaris Consortio, 45.