



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

TO THE PARTICIPANTS

IN THE ECCLESIAL DIOCESAN CONVENTION OF ROME *Basilica of St John Lateran*

Monday, 6 June 2005 Dear Brothers and Sisters, I very willingly accepted the invitation to introduce our Diocesan Convention with a Reflection, first of all because it gives me the chance to meet you, of having direct contact with you, and then too, because I can help you acquire a deeper understanding of the sense and purpose of the pastoral journey the Church of Rome is making. I greet with affection each one of you, Bishops, priests, deacons, men and women religious, and in particular you lay people and families who consciously take on those duties of responsibility and Christian witness that have their root in the sacrament of Baptism and, for those who are married, in the sacrament of Marriage. I cordially thank the Cardinal Vicar and the couple, Luca and Adriana Pasquale, for their words on behalf of you all. This Convention and the guidelines it will provide for the pastoral year are a new stage on the journey begun by the Church of Rome, based on the Diocesan Synod, with the "City Mission", desired by our deeply loved Pope John Paul II in preparation for the Great Jubilee of 2000. In that Mission all the components of our Diocese - parishes, religious communities, associations and movements - were mobilized, not only for a mission to the people of Rome, but to be themselves "a people of God in mission", putting into practice John Paul II's felicitous expression: "The parish must seek itself outside itself" and find itself, that is, in the places where the people live. So it was that during the City Mission thousands of Christians of Rome, mainly lay people, became missionaries and took the word of faith first to the families in the various districts of the city, and then to the different workplaces, hospitals, schools and universities, and the environments of culture and leisure time. After the Holy Year, my beloved Predecessor asked you not to stop on this journey and not to lose the apostolic energies kindled or the fruits of grace gathered. Therefore, since 2001, the fundamental pastoral policy of the Diocese has been to give the mission a permanent form, and to impress a more decidedly missionary approach on the life and activities of the parishes and of every other ecclesial situation. I want to tell you first of all that I fully intend to confirm this decision: indeed, it is proving to be more and more necessary. There are no alternatives to it in a social and cultural context in which many forces are working to distance us from the faith and from Christian life. For two years now the missionary commitment of the Church of Rome has focused above all on the family. This is not only because today this fundamental human reality is subjected to a multitude of problems and threats and is therefore especially in need of evangelization and practical support, but also

because Christian families constitute a crucial resource for education in the faith, for the edification of the Church as communion and for her ability to be a missionary presence in the most varied situations of life, as well as to act as a Christian leaven in the widespread culture and social structures. We will also continue along these lines in the coming pastoral year, and so the theme of our Convention is "Family and Christian community: formation of the person and transmission of the faith". The assumption from which it is necessary to set out, if we are to understand the family mission in the Christian community and its tasks of forming the person and transmitting the faith, is always that of the meaning of marriage and the family in the plan of God, Creator and Saviour. This will therefore be the focus of my Reflection this evening and I will refer to the teaching of the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (Part II, nn. 12-16). Marriage and the family are not in fact a chance sociological construction, the product of particular historical and financial situations. On the other hand, the question of the right relationship between the man and the woman is rooted in the essential core of the human being and it is only by starting from here that its response can be found. In other words, it cannot be separated from the ancient but ever new human question: Who am I? What is a human being? And this question, in turn, cannot be separated from the question about God: Does God exist? Who is God? What is his face truly like? The Bible gives one consequential answer to these two queries: the human being is created in the image of God, and God himself is love. It is therefore the vocation to love that makes the human person an authentic image of God: man and woman come to resemble God to the extent that they become loving people. This fundamental connection between God and the person gives rise to another: the indissoluble connection between spirit and body: in fact, the human being is a soul that finds expression in a body and a body that is enlivened by an immortal spirit. The body, therefore, both male and female, also has, as it were, a theological character: it is not merely a body; and what is biological in the human being is not merely biological but is the expression and the fulfilment of our humanity. Likewise, human sexuality is not juxtaposed to our being as person but part of it. Only when sexuality is integrated within the person does it successfully acquire meaning. Thus, these two links, between the human being with God and in the human being, of the body with the spirit, give rise to a third: the connection between the person and the institution. Indeed, the totality of the person includes the dimension of time, and the person's "yes" is a step beyond the present moment: in its wholeness, the "yes" means "always", it creates the space for faithfulness. Only in this space can faith develop, which provides a future and enables children, the fruit of love, to believe in human beings and in their future in difficult times. The freedom of the "yes", therefore, reveals itself to be freedom capable of assuming what is definitive: the greatest expression of freedom is not the search for pleasure without ever coming to a real decision; this apparent, permanent openness seems to be the realization of freedom, but it is not true. The true expression of freedom is the capacity to choose a definitive gift in which freedom, in being given, is fully rediscovered. In practice, the personal and reciprocal "yes" of the man and the woman makes room for the future, for the authentic humanity of each of them. At the same time, it is an assent to the gift of a new life. Therefore, this personal "yes" must also be a publicly responsible "yes", with which the spouses take on the public responsibility of fidelity, also guaranteeing the future of the community. None of us, in fact, belongs exclusively to himself or

herself: one and all are therefore called to take on in their inmost depths their own public responsibility. Marriage as an institution is thus not an undue interference of society or of authority. The external imposition of form on the most private reality of life is instead an intrinsic requirement of the covenant of conjugal love and of the depths of the human person. Today, the various forms of the erosion of marriage, such as free unions and "trial marriage", and even pseudo-marriages between people of the same sex, are instead an expression of anarchic freedom that are wrongly made to pass as true human liberation. This pseudo-freedom is based on a trivialization of the body, which inevitably entails the trivialization of the person. Its premise is that the human being can do to himself or herself whatever he or she likes: thus, the body becomes a secondary thing that can be manipulated, from the human point of view, and used as one likes. Licentiousness, which passes for the discovery of the body and its value, is actually a dualism that makes the body despicable, placing it, so to speak, outside the person's authentic being and dignity. The truth about marriage and the family, deeply rooted in the truth about the human being, has been actuated in the history of salvation, at whose heart lie the words: "God loves his people". The biblical revelation, in fact, is first and foremost the expression of a history of love, the history of God's Covenant with humankind. Consequently, God could take the history of love and of the union of a man and a woman in the covenant of marriage as a symbol of salvation history. The inexpressible fact, the mystery of God's love for men and women, receives its linguistic form from the vocabulary of marriage and the family, both positive and negative: indeed, God's drawing close to his people is presented in the language of spousal love, whereas Israel's infidelity, its idolatry, is designated as adultery and prostitution. In the New Testament God radicalizes his love to the point that he himself becomes, in his Son, flesh of our flesh, a true man. In this way, God's union with humankind acquired its supreme, irreversible form. Thus, the blue-print of human love is also definitely set out, that reciprocal "yes" which cannot be revoked: it does not alienate men and women but sets them free from the different forms of alienation in history in order to restore them to the truth of creation. The sacramental quality that marriage assumes in Christ, therefore, means that the gift of creation has been raised to the grace of redemption. Christ's grace is not an external addition to human nature, it does not do violence to men and women but sets them free and restores them, precisely by raising them above their own limitations. And just as the Incarnation of the Son of God reveals its true meaning in the Cross, so genuine human love is self-giving and cannot exist if it seeks to detach itself from the Cross. Dear brothers and sisters, this profound link between God and the human being, between God's love and human love, is also confirmed in certain tendencies and negative developments that have weighed heavily on us all. In fact, the debasement of human love, the suppression of the authentic capacity for loving, is turning out in our time to be the most suitable and effective weapon to drive God away from men and women, to distance God from the human gaze and heart. Similarly, the desire to "liberate" nature from God leads to losing sight of the reality of nature itself, including the nature of the human being, reducing it to a conglomeration of functions so as to have them available at will to build what is presumed to be a better world and presumed to be a happier humanity. Instead, the Creator's design is destroyed, and so is the truth of our nature. Even in the begetting of children marriage reflects its divine model, God's love for man. In man and woman, fatherhood and

motherhood, like the body and like love, cannot be limited to the biological: life is entirely given only when, by birth, love and meaning are also given, which make it possible to say yes to this life. From this point it becomes clear how contrary to human love, to the profound vocation of the man and the woman, are the systematic closure of a union to the gift of life and even more, the suppression or manipulation of newborn life. No man and no woman, however, alone and single-handed, can adequately transmit to children love and the meaning of life. Indeed, to be able to say to someone "your life is good, even though I may not know your future", requires an authority and credibility superior to what individuals can assume on their own. Christians know that this authority is conferred upon that larger family which God, through his Son Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit, created in the story of humanity, that is, upon the Church. Here they recognize the work of that eternal, indestructible love which guarantees permanent meaning to the life of each one of us, even if the future remains unknown. For this reason, the edification of each individual Christian family fits into the context of the larger family of the Church, which supports it and carries it with her and guarantees that it has, and will also have in the future, the meaningful "yes" of the Creator. And the Church is reciprocally built up by the family, a "small domestic church", as the Second Vatican Council called it (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 11; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, n. 11), rediscovering an ancient Patristic expression (cf. St John Chrysostom, *In Genesim Serm.* VI, 2; VII, 1). In the same sense, *Familiaris Consortio* affirms that "Christian marriage... constitutes the natural setting in which the human person is introduced into the great family of the Church" (n. 15). There is an obvious consequence to all this: the family and the Church - in practice, parishes and other forms of Ecclesial Community - are called to collaborate more closely in the fundamental task that consists, inseparably, in the formation of the person and the transmission of the faith. We know well that for an authentic educational endeavour, communicating a correct theory or doctrine does not suffice. Something far greater and more human is needed: the daily experienced closeness that is proper to love, whose most propitious place is above all the family community, but also in a parish, movement or ecclesial association, in which there are people who care for their brothers and sisters because they love them in Christ, particularly children and young people, but also adults, the elderly, the sick and families themselves. The great Patron of educators, St John Bosco, reminded his spiritual sons that "education is something of the heart and that God alone is its master" (*Epistolario*, 4, 209). The central figure in the work of educating, and especially in education in the faith, which is the summit of the person's formation and is his or her most appropriate horizon, is specifically the form of witness. This witness becomes a proper reference point to the extent that the person can account for the hope that nourishes his life (cf. I Pt 3: 15) and is personally involved in the truth that he proposes. On the other hand, the witness never refers to himself but to something, or rather, to Someone greater than he, whom he has encountered and whose dependable goodness he has sampled. Thus, every educator and witness finds an unequalled model in Jesus Christ, the Father's great witness, who said nothing about himself but spoke as the Father had taught him (cf. Jn 8: 28). This is the reason why prayer, which is personal friendship with Christ and contemplation in him of the face of the Father, is indispensably at the root of the formation of the Christian and of the transmission of the faith. The same is, of course, also true for all our missionary commitment, and particularly for the pastoral

care of families: therefore, may the Family of Nazareth be for our families and our communities the object of constant and confident prayer as well as their life model. Dear brothers and sisters, and especially you, dear priests, I am aware of the generosity and dedication with which you serve the Lord and the Church. Your daily work forming the new generations in the faith, in close connection with the sacraments of Christian initiation, as well as marriage preparation and offering guidance to families in their often difficult progress, particularly in the important task of raising children, is the fundamental way to regenerating the Church ever anew, and also to reviving the social fabric of our beloved city of Rome. Continue, therefore, without letting yourselves be discouraged by the difficulties you encounter. The educational relationship is delicate by nature: in fact, it calls into question the freedom of the other who, however gently, is always led to make a decision. Neither parents nor priests nor catechists, nor any other educators can substitute for the freedom of the child, adolescent or young person whom they are addressing. The proposal of Christianity in particular challenges the very essence of freedom and calls it to faith and conversion. Today, a particularly insidious obstacle to the task of educating is the massive presence in our society and culture of that relativism which, recognizing nothing as definitive, leaves as the ultimate criterion only the self with its desires. And under the semblance of freedom it becomes a prison for each one, for it separates people from one another, locking each person into his or her own "ego". With such a relativistic horizon, therefore, real education is not possible without the light of the truth; sooner or later, every person is in fact condemned to doubting in the goodness of his or her own life and the relationships of which it consists, the validity of his or her commitment to build with others something in common. Consequently, it is clear that not only must we seek to get the better of relativism in our work of forming people, but we are also called to counter its destructive predominance in society and culture. Hence, as well as the words of the Church, the witness and public commitment of Christian families is very important, especially in order to reassert the inviolability of human life from conception until its natural end, the unique and irreplaceable value of the family founded on marriage and the need for legislative and administrative measures that support families in the task of bringing children into the world and raising them, an essential duty for our common future. I also offer you my heartfelt thanks for this commitment. I would like to entrust to you a last message concerning the care of vocations to the priesthood and to the consecrated life: we all know the Church's great need of them! First of all, prayer is crucial in order that these vocations be born and reach maturity, and that those called will always continue to be worthy of their vocation; prayer should never be lacking in any family or Christian community. However, the life witness of priests and men and women religious and their joy in having been called by the Lord is also fundamental. Equally so is the essential example that children receive in their own family and the conviction of families themselves that for them too, the vocation of a child of theirs is a great gift from the Lord. Indeed, the choice of virginity for the love of God and the brethren, which is required for priesthood and for consecrated life, goes hand in hand with the estimation of Christian marriage: both, in two different and complementary ways, make visible in a certain way the mystery of God's Covenant with his people. Dear brothers and sisters, I consign these thoughts to you as a contribution to your work in the evening sessions of the Convention, and later, during the coming pastoral year. I ask the Lord to give you courage and

enthusiasm, so that our Church of Rome, each parish, religious community, association or movement, may participate more intensely in the joy and labours of the mission; thus, each family and the entire Christian community will rediscover in the Lord's love the key that opens the door of hearts and makes possible a true education in the faith and people's formation. My affection and my Blessing go with you today and in the future.

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