



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE THIRD GROUP OF BISHOPS
OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF BRAZIL
(NORTH EAST REGIONS I AND IV) ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

*Consistory Hall, Papal Summer Residence, Castel Gandolfo
Friday, 25 September 2009*

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

Welcome! With great pleasure I receive you in this house and I hope with all my heart that your *ad limina* visit will give you the comfort and encouragement that you are expecting. I thank you for the cordial welcome you have just addressed to me through Dom José, Archbishop of Fortaleza, testifying to the sentiments of affection and communion that unite your particular Churches to the See of Rome, and to the determination with which you have assumed the urgent mission to rekindle the light and grace of Christ on your people's paths through life.

Today I would like to speak of the first of these paths: the family based on marriage, "the intimate union of marriage, as a mutual giving of two persons... a man and a woman" (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 48). As a natural institution confirmed by the divine law, the family is ordered to the good of the spouses and the education of the offspring, and it is in them that it finds its crowning glory (cf. *ibid.*). All this is being called into question by forces and voices in contemporary society that seem determined to demolish the natural cradle of human life. Your reports and our individual conversations have repeatedly touched on this situation of the family under siege, whose life is drained by numerous battles; however, it is encouraging to perceive that despite all the negative influences the people of your North East Regions i and iv, sustained by their characteristic religious piety and a deep sense of fraternal solidarity, continue to be open to the Gospel of Life.

Since we know that the image and likeness proper to the human being can only come from God (Gn 1: 27), as happened in the Creation the generation and continuation of Creation with you and

with your faithful, *"I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man"* (Eph 3: 14-16). May the father and mother in every home, intimately fortified by the power of the Holy Spirit, continue united to be God's Blessing in their own family, seeking the eternity of their love in the sources of grace entrusted to the Church which is *"a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit"* (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 4).

However, whereas the Church compares human life with the life of the Blessed Trinity the first unity of life in the plurality of the Persons and never tires of teaching that the family is founded on marriage and on God's plan; much of the secularized world experiences the deepest uncertainty in this regard, especially since Western societies legalized divorce. The only recognized foundation seems to be sentiment or individual subjectivity which is expressed in the desire to live together. In this situation, the number of marriages is dwindling, because no one pledges their life on such a frail and inconstant premise, and so *de facto* unions and divorces are increasing. The drama of so many children who are deprived of the support of their parents, victims of uneasiness and neglect is played out in this instability, and social disorder spreads.

The Church cannot be indifferent to the separation of spouses and to divorce, facing the break-up of homes and the consequences for the children that divorce causes. If they are to be instructed and educated, children need extremely precise and concrete reference points, in other words parents who are determined and reliable who contribute in quite another way to their upbringing. Nor, it is this principle that the practice of divorce is undermining and jeopardizing with the so-called "extended" family that multiplies "father" and "mother" figures and explains why today the majority of those who feel "orphans" are not children without parents but children who have too many. This situation, with the inevitable interference and the intersection of relationships, cannot but give rise to inner conflict and confusion, contributing to creating and impressing upon children an erroneous typology of the family, which in a certain sense can be compared to cohabitation, because of its precariousness.

The Church is firmly convinced that the true solution to the current problems that husbands and wives encounter and that weaken their union lies in a return to the stable Christian family, an environment of mutual trust, reciprocal giving, respect for freedom and education in social life. It is important to remember that: *"the love of the spouses requires, of its very nature, the unity and indissolubility of the spouses' community of persons, which embraces their entire life"* (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1644). In fact, Jesus said clearly *"what therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder"* (Mk 10: 9) and added, *"whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery"* (Mk 10: 11-12). With all the understanding that the Church can show in these situations, there are no spouses of the second marriage but only of the first: this is an irregular and dangerous situation which it is necessary to resolve, in fidelity to Christ and with the help of a

priest, finding a possible way to save all those involved.

To help families, I urge you to propose to them with conviction the virtues of the Holy Family: prayer, the cornerstone of every domestic hearth faithful to its own identity and mission; hard work, the backbone of every mature and responsible marriage; silence, the foundation of every free and effective activity. In this way, I encourage your priests and the pastoral centres of your dioceses to accompany families, so that they are not disappointed or seduced by certain relativistic lifestyles that the cinema and other forms of media promote. I trust in the witness of those families that draw their energy from the sacrament of marriage; with them it becomes possible to overcome the trial that befalls them, to be able to forgive an offence, to accept a suffering child, to illumine the life of the other, even if he or she is weak or disabled, through the beauty of love. It is on the basis of families such as these that the fabric of society must be restored.

Dear Brothers, these are a few thoughts that I leave you at the end of your *ad limina* visit full of comforting information but also anxiety for the future features that your beloved nation could acquire. Work with intelligence and zeal, spare no effort in training active communities aware of their faith, to consolidate the features of the North Eastern population in accordance with the example of the Holy Family of Nazareth. These are my wishes which I strengthen with the Apostolic Blessing which I impart to you all, extending it to the Christian families and to the various ecclesial communities with their pastors, as well as to all the faithful of your beloved dioceses.

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