



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE 19th PLENARY ASSEMBLY
OF THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE FAMILY**

*Clementine Hall
Monday, 8 February 2010*

*Your Eminences,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

At the beginning of the 19th Plenary Assembly of the [Pontifical Council for the Family](#) I am glad to greet you with my cordial welcome! This year the institutional event sees your Dicastery particularly renewed. Not only does it have a new Cardinal President and Bishop Secretary but also several Cardinals and Bishops on the Administrative Committee and some new Officials and married couple Members, as well as numerous new consultors. As I warmly thank those who have finished their service at the Pontifical Council and those who are still contributing their invaluable work to it, I invoke upon everyone abundant gifts from the Lord. My grateful thoughts go in particular to the late Cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo who led your Dicastery for 18 years with passionate dedication to the cause of the family and of life in today's world. Lastly, I would like to express to Cardinal Ennio Antonelli my warmest gratitude for his cordial words on behalf of you all and for having wished to illustrate the topics of this important Assembly.

The activities of the Dicastery today fit between the Sixth World Meeting of Families celebrated in Mexico City in 2009, and the Seventh, scheduled to take place in Milan in 2012. While I renew my gratitude to Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera for the generous work of his Archdiocese for the preparation and realization of the Meeting in 2009, I express from this moment my affectionate gratitude to the Ambrosian Church and to her Pastor, Cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi, for his willingness to host the Seventh World Meeting of Families. In addition to arranging these extraordinary events, in order to increase knowledge of the fundamental value of the family for the

life of the Church and of society, the Pontifical Council is carrying ahead various initiatives. They include the project "The Family, a Subject of Evangelization", with which it intends to prepare a collection from across the world of valid experiences in the different contexts of the pastoral care of the family, so that they may serve as inspiration and encouragement for new initiatives. They also include "The Family, a Resource for Society", with which the Council aims to introduce into public opinion the benefits that the family brings to society, to its coherence and to its development.

Another of the Dicastery's important tasks is the compilation of a *Vademecum* for preparation for Marriage. My beloved Predecessor, Venerable John Paul ii, said in his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* that this preparation is "more than ever necessary in our times", and that it must be "seen and put into practice as a gradual and continuous process. It includes three main stages: remote, proximate and immediate" (n. 66). With reference to these instructions, the Dicastery proposes to outline properly the features of the three states of this formation process and the response to the vocation to married life. Remote preparation concerns children, adolescents and young people. It involves the family, the parish and school, places in which they are taught to understand life as a vocation to love, which is subsequently specified in the form of marriage or of virginity for the Kingdom of Heaven, but is always a vocation to love. In this stage, furthermore, the meaning of sexuality must gradually emerge as a relational capacity and a positive energy to be integrated into authentic love. The proximate preparation concerns engaged couples and must become a journey of faith and Christian life which leads to deeper knowledge of the mystery of Christ, of the Church and of the meaning of grace and responsibility in marriage (cf. *ibid.*). Its duration and the way in which it is undertaken will necessarily differ according to situations, possibilities and needs. However, it is to be hoped that it will offer a course of catecheses, as well as accounts of experiences in the Christian community. All this should provide for the interventions of the priest and of various experts, as well as the presence of animators, the guidance of a few exemplary couples of Christian spouses, dialogue with the future spouses individually and as a group, and an atmosphere of friendship and prayer. In addition, it is necessary to take pains to ensure that on this occasion the engaged couple revive their personal relationship with the Lord Jesus, especially by listening to the word of God, by receiving the Sacraments and above all by taking part in the Eucharist. It is only by making Christ the centre of their personal life and their life as a couple that authentic love and self-giving to others is possible: "He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing", Jesus reminds us (Jn 15: 5). The immediate preparation takes place just before the marriage. In addition to the examination of those to be married as prescribed by Canon Law, preparation may include catechesis on the Rite of Marriage and its meaning, spiritual retreats and guidance. These aim to guarantee that the celebration of marriage is perceived by the faithful and particularly by those who are preparing for it as a gift to the entire Church that contributes to her spiritual development. It is also right that Bishops promote the sharing of significant experiences and offer incentives for serious pastoral commitment in this important area. They should pay special attention to ensuring that the vocation of the spouses becomes an enrichment for the

whole Christian community and especially in today's context a missionary and prophetic witness.

Your Plenary Assembly has "The Rights of the Child" as its theme. This was chosen with reference to the 20th anniversary of the Convention approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989. Following Christ's example, the Church down the centuries has encouraged the protection of the dignity and rights of minors and has taken care of them in many ways.

Unfortunately in various cases some of her members, acting in opposition to this commitment, have violated these rights: conduct which she does not and will not fail to deplore and condemn. The tenderness and teaching of Jesus, who saw children as a model to imitate in order to enter the Kingdom of God (cf. Mt 18: 1-6; 19: 13-14), have always constituted a pressing appeal to foster deep respect and care for them. Jesus' harsh words against those who cause one of these little ones to sin (cf. Mk 9: 42), engage everyone always to adhere to this degree of respect and love. Thus the Convention on the Rights of the Child was accepted favourably by the Holy See since it contains positive statements on adoption, health care, education, the protection of the disabled and the defence of little ones against violence, neglect and sexual or labour exploitation.

In its Preamble the Convention describes the family "as a natural environment for the growth and wellbeing of all its members and of children in particular". Indeed, it is precisely the family founded on the marriage between a man and a woman that can give children the greatest help. They want to be loved by a mother and a father who love each other, and they need to live and grow together with both their parents, because the maternal and paternal figures are complementary in the raising of children and the development of their personality and identity. It is therefore important that everything possible be done to enable them to grow up in a united and stable family. To this end, it is necessary to urge spouses never to lose sight of the profound reasons and sacramentality of the conjugal covenant and to strengthen it by listening to the word of God and by prayer, constant dialogue, reciprocal acceptance and mutual forgiveness. A family environment that is not serene, the separation of the parental couple, particularly with divorce, is not without consequences on the children. On the other hand, supporting the family and promoting its true good, its rights, its unity and its stability is the best way to protect the rights and authentic needs of minors.

Venerable and dear Brothers and Sisters, thank you for your visit! I am spiritually close to you and to the work you carry out in favour of families and I cordially impart the Apostolic Blessing to each one of you and to all who share in this precious service to the Church.

