



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO TOGO, IVORY COAST, CAMEROON,
CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC, ZAIRE, KENYA AND MOROCCO

MASS FOR FAMILIES

HOMILY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

Bamenda Airport (Cameroon)

Monday, 12 August 1985

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,
Praised be our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!*

In his name we are gathered *to reflect on the theme of the family) and to celebrate the mystery of love and life.*

I greet the Bishops present here, from Cameroon and from other countries. A special greeting to the priests and the men and women religious: those from Cameroon itself and those who have come from other parts of the world to serve the Church here!

I express my appreciation to the civil authorities for their presence. I am deeply grateful for the generous welcome I have received from everyone.

I greet all for you, brothers and sisters in Christ, especially the lay people from the Archdiocese of Bamenda, from the Diocese of Buea and from the Diocese of Kumbo. My visit is meant for this Ecclesiastical Province, and for all who are here today in a spirit of friendship and good will. I would like to meet each one of you, and to listen to the words of your hearts. I know that you are happy to receive the Successor of Peter in your midst, and that you are closely united to the See of Peter. May this always be a sign of our total acceptance of the Gospel of Christ!

1. Today Jesus speaks to us in the Gospel, saying: “Have you not read that *he who made them from the beginning made them male and female?*” (*Matth.* 19, 4). Herein lies one of the most profound truths regarding *God’s plan* for the human race. *Male and female* complement each other *as qualities* of persons having unique physical, psychological and spiritual gifts that make up the individuality of each one.

He who made them is God, our Creator, the Blessed Trinity from whom all good things come: “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good” (*Gen.* 1, 31). Among the “good things” which he made, the institutions of marriage and the family exist “from the beginning”. This is the theme of our liturgical celebration: *God’s plan for marriage and the family “from the beginning”*.

Marriage is the covenant about which Saint Paul speaks to us: “This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and to the Church” (*Eph.* 5, 32). *The marriage covenant*, which unites a man and a woman in an unbreakable bond of life and love, *reflects the new and everlasting covenant which unites God and his People* “in Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom who loves and gives himself as the Saviour of humanity, uniting it to himself as his body (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II *Familiaris Consortio*, 13).

2. The Pharisees ask Christ a question about marriage: “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” (*Matth.* 19, 3). This question goes to the heart of the marriage covenant. Is married love a *unique bond which implies unity and indissolubility*? Or is it a lesser bond which can be changed or broken according to circumstance? The answer given by Jesus is a direct reference to God’s plan as it is evident from the beginning”. “The two (man or woman) shall become one flesh” (*Matth.* 19, 5). No matter what other considerations have arisen in the course of time, “from the beginning” it has always been true that what God has joined together man must not put asunder.

The answer which Christ gave to the people of his time he continues to give to all people in every age, and in all countries and continents. He gives it again here today in Cameroon. This answer says that *marriage is a permanent and unbreakable covenant between a man and a woman*. As such, *marriage is also the “sacrament” of Christ’s unchanging love for his Church*.

For the *specific context of Africa*, the Bishops of this continent, gathered at Yaoundé in 1981, expressed this important aspect of Christian marriage in a recommendation of the Sixth General Assembly of the Symposium of the Episcopal Conference of Africa and Madagascar: “Having become new creatures, African Christians will live their marriage and family covenant as a sacramental manifestation of the union of Christ and the Church, transforming these basic human realities from within”. Yes, it is in Christ’s love that married couples and families share when their life is rooted in the grace of the Sacrament of Marriage.

3. Christ’s reference to “the beginning” leads us back to the Book of Genesis, from which the first

reading of this Eucharistic celebration is taken. “Then God said: ‘Let us make man in our image . . .’ so God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; *male and female he created them*” (*Gen. 1, 26-27*). The original image is the image of eternal God, *the communion of the Most Blessed Trinity*, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The image of God in man reaches a particular richness in *the communion of persons* existing between a man and a woman within the marriage covenant, a communion which God has willed “from the beginning”. Married life affirms human dignity through a special interpersonal relationship. Whenever married life and family life are hurt through personal selfishness or damaged through material and social inadequacies, it is the fundamental dignity of human beings, dynamically oriented to grow in the image of God, that is dishonoured. Both men and women are called to live in dignity: both reflect equally the likeness of God.

The words of the Responsorial Psalm apply to each of God’s sons and daughters: “What is man that you should keep him in mind, mortal man that you care for him? Yet you have made him little less than a god; with glory and honour you crowned him, gave him power over the works of your hand, put all things under his feet” (*Ps. 8, 4-6*). These words extol the dignity of every human being. The image of God who is love is deeply reflected in the permanent and unbreakable communion of life and love which is marriage. Many of your traditions and customs emphasise *the dignity of marriage and family life in African society*.

The Second Vatican Council recognised that the Church is enriched by “the treasures hidden in the various forms of human culture” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 44). The Church therefore respects and promotes what is most noble in these social customs. At the same time, fulfilling her mission to make known “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (*Eph. 3, 8*), the Church calls upon all societies *to uphold the wisdom that is “from the beginning”* and in this way to defend and strengthen the dignity of all God’s children.

Your Bishops are zealously facing *the important task of “incarnating” the Gospel message in African life and culture*. In bringing the Church’s teaching on marriage and the family - a teaching that is universal and permanent in its validity - to bear on the realities of African traditions, your Bishops and the Holy See work together, sustained by a shared desire to remain ever faithful to Christ and to the living tradition and Magisterium of the Church. If the Church in Africa remains united in the same doctrine and in a concerted response to the challenge of inculturation, she will be strong and effective in guiding married couples and families to live according to God’s plan in truth and holiness of life.

4. The Responsorial Psalm points to another aspect of man’s unique dignity. God calls on man to be responsible *with him* for the whole of creation: “You gave him power over the works of your hand” (*Ps. 8, 6*). In fact, as the Book of Genesis indicates, God invites man and woman as a married couple *to share in his own creative work*: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it” (*Gen. 1, 28*). The transmission of life, so highly valued in your African traditions, and the

love which you have for your children - are these not a special part of the “glory and honour” which the Psalm attributes to man? Yes, your glad acceptance of your children as God’s gift to you stands to your glory and honour!

But today there is a powerful *anti-life mentality*. It is more widespread in developed nations, but it is also being transmitted to the developing nations as if it were the compulsory path to development and progress. On this point I would like to repeat what I wrote in the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*: “The Church firmly believes that human life, even if weak and suffering, is always a splendid gift of God’s goodness. Against the pessimism and selfishness which cast a shadow over the world, the Church stands for life: in each human life she sees the splendour of that “Yes”, that “Amen”, who is Christ himself. To the “No” which assails and afflicts the world, she replies with this living “Yes”, thus defending the human person and the world from all who plot against and harm life” (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II *Familiaris Consortio*, 30).

5. This does not mean that the Church fails to recognise the grave problems posed by population growth in some parts of the world, or the difficult situations sometimes facing couples in the responsible transmission of life. With respect to the moral aspect of these serious questions, I wish to express particular *encouragement to your Bishops, priests, religious and lay leaders* who are responding to the recommendation of “Familiaris Consortio” to make a more decisive and more systematic *effort to make the natural methods of regulating fertility known, respected and applied*” (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II *Familiaris Consortio*, 35).

In a letter to priests, Archbishop Verdzev has emphasised “our duty and our grave obligation to proclaim the integral teaching of the Church on Responsible Parenthood through systematic catechises, and to help our Christians to live that teaching. For how can our Christians live according to that teaching if they have never heard it?” (*Epistula Archiepiscopi Verdzev ad Sacerdotes*, die 12 iul. 1982). The good work being done by the Family Life Association of Cameroon at the parish, diocesan and provincial levels can also help many couples to live their sacramental union in fullness and harmony.

6. The family is *a special community of persons*. In the family, parents are bound to each other by the marriage covenant; children are God’s special gift to *parents*, to society and to the nation. The joy that you experience in your children is like the joy that Jesus felt when he called them to be near him: “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven” (*Luc.* 18, 16). To *the children* and to the young people of Cameroon I would like to say that Jesus calls you to love your families. Strengthen them with your joy and trust and obedience! It is up to you to help make your families centres of love, peace and holiness!

Traditionally, *the extended family* has played an important part in strengthening family life and in deciding the way family questions are faced and resolved. Where changing economic and social conditions tend to weaken the constructive role of the extended family, the whole Christian

community, as a community of human and spiritual solidarity, eager to observe the Gospel commandment of love, should feel impelled to offer concrete support to families in need, and to promote in public life adequate programmes of assistance and subsidiarity.

But the actual members of the family, especially the parents, are mainly responsible for the quality of family life. Some of the *important virtues required for a happy and holy family life* are listed in the text of Saint Paul's Letter to the Colossians which we have heard read in the Liturgy of the Word: "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another, and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (Col. 3, 12-13). The revealed word of God teaches us that the path to all human well-being is *the path of forgiveness and love!*

Dear families of Cameroon: I wish to leave you this message: learn to build your family life on love! Do not give in to *the forces which weaken and destroy the unity, stability and happiness of your families*. Do not follow the path of selfish materialism and consumerism which have produced so much suffering in other parts of the world and which you too are now beginning to experience. Do not listen to ideologies which allow society or the State to take over the rights and responsibilities which belong to families (Cfr. IOANNIS PAULI PP. II *Familiaris Consortio*, 45).

Families of Cameroon: make every effort to preserve *the spiritual and ethical values of marriage and family life*. They are the only effective safeguards of the dignity of the individual. These values are necessary if your society is to offer conditions of justice and progress to all its citizens.

"And above all these, put on love" (Col. 3, 14). Within this love, the relationships of authority and obedience, of education and learning, of freedom and responsibility, which make up such a great part of the daily life of families, will find their natural expression. Through compassion and kindness and patience, and the willingness to sacrifice oneself for the good of others, may your families live in a climate of love like *the family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph!*

7. At this point I appeal to the civil authorities of all Africa, and to all who have public responsibility for family life: I ask them to work to ensure the implementation of the *Charter of the Rights of the Family* which the Holy See has drawn up on the basis of the fundamental rights inherent in the family as a natural and universal society. The Charter reflects the values which are already enunciated in the declarations of the various International Organisations with competence in this field: values which are inscribed in the conscience of every man and woman.

The Church wishes to collaborate with all those whose task it is to formulate and implement family policy. The Church's intention and mission is to serve the family and proclaim to this generation and to the generations to come God's plan that exists "from the beginning". The future of society is threatened wherever the family is weakened. The well-being of individuals and of society is

safeguarded where customs, laws, and political, social and educational institutions contribute to the strengthening of marriage and the family. *For the good of mankind the family must be defended and respected.*

8. And now, in union with the entire Church in Cameroon I wish to say to each family what Saint Paul wrote to the Colossians: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body" (*Col. 3, 15*).

May this wish become our fervent prayer during this Eucharistic celebration, which we offer to the Father in union with Christ his Son. May peace - the peace of Christ - be upon all the families of Africa and of the whole world!

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