



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II  
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE FIRST CONGRESS FOR  
THE FAMILY OF AFRICA AND OF EUROPE**

*Thursday, 15 January 1981*

1. I AM VERY HAPPY to receive this morning the participants in so important an event as the first Congress for the Family of Africa and of Europe, which you are attending here in Rome at the Faculty of Medicine of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart. I greet you all with heartfelt affection and I express to you my esteem and appreciation.

Your Congress comes soon after the recent Synod of Bishops, which set out to specify “the role of the Christian family in the modern world in accordance with *the eternal plan concerning life and love*”<sup>[1]</sup>.

With regard to respect for human life, which has been the principal subject for your consideration, the Synod “openly confirmed the validity and clear truth of the prophetic message contained in the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, a message profound in meaning and pertinent to modern conditions”, while at the same time it made an appeal that the “biblical and ‘personalistic’ reasons for the teaching be continually clarified with the aim of making the whole of the Church’s teaching clear to all people of good will and better understood day by day”<sup>[2]</sup>.

I find it truly encouraging to see you here for this congress, following on a similar one for the family of the Americas. You are a group of experts in various fields and from different walks of life: bishops and theologians, philosophers and medical experts, as well as many religious and laity who are working “in the field”; and you have come together to seek the best manner of placing the enriching teaching of Christ at the service of couples who wish to live out the authentic vision of the human person and of human sexuality.

A special word of thanks is due to Sister Doctor Anna Cappella, who in the midst of so many other

duties, has had to bear the greatest responsibility for the organization of this impressive Congress. I know also that many of the delegates present, especially those from almost twenty African countries, have been chosen and sponsored in various ways by their Episcopal Conferences and ecclesiastical authorities. I appreciate the sacrifices that this has involved and I wish to thank your bishops for this sign that they give of the priority of the family apostolate in their pastoral activity.

2. I have carefully studied the content of the programme of your Congress. I wish to recall for you the words that I addressed recently to the members of the College of Cardinals concerning the very questions that you are considering. These words sum up my own pastoral programme concerning the family: a theme which must receive priority today, if the Church is to render an authentic service to our tormented world; and I repeat them to you today, as the representatives of the families of Africa and of Europe: “In the face of contempt for the supreme value of life, which goes so far as to ratify the suppression of the human being in the mother’s womb; in the face of the disintegration of family unity, the only guarantee for the complete formation of children and young people; in the face of the devaluation of clear and pure love, unbridled hedonism, the spread of pornography, *it is necessary to recall emphatically the holiness of marriage, the value of the family and the inviolability of human life.* I will never tire of carrying out this mission, which I consider cannot be deferred”[3].

This is the message that I have taught clearly on the occasion of my pastoral visits to the nations of Africa and Europe. It is the message that I direct to each of you, who come from various parts of these two continents, but are united by your desire to follow the authentic teaching of Christ concerning the family and concerning human life. Your contribution to the development of your own culture, your own society and your own nation depends greatly on the manner in which you live your vocation as families and to the extent that you help other families to do likewise. I stressed this point in addressing the families of Kenya, when I said: “The strength and vitality of any country will only be as great as the strength and vitality of the family within that country. For this reason Christian couples have an irreplaceable role in today’s world. The generous love and fidelity of husband and wife offer stability and hope to a world torn by hatred and division. By their lifelong perseverance in life-giving love they show the unbreakable and sacred character of the sacramental marriage bond. At the same time, *it is the Christian family that most simply and most profoundly promotes the dignity and worth of human life from the moment of its conception*”[4].

3. It is only in this broad context of God’s design for the family and for the creation of new life that one can consider the more specific question of the regulation of births. The wisdom of the Creator has enriched human sexuality with great values and a special dignity[5]. The vocation of Christian couples is to realize these values in their lives.

Perhaps the most urgent need today is to develop an authentic philosophy of life and of the transmission of life, considered precisely as “procreation”, that is, as discovering and collaborating with the design of God the Creator.

The design of the Creator has provided the human organism with structures and functions to assist couples in arriving at responsible parenthood. “In fact, as experience bears witness, not every conjugal act is followed by new life. God has wisely disposed natural laws and rhythms of fecundity which, of themselves, cause a separation in the succession of births”[6].

The plan of the Creator is impressed not only on the human spirit. How sad it is to note that the spirit of so many men and women has drifted away from this divine plan! For so many men and women of our time new life is looked on as a threat and something to be feared; others, intoxicated with the technical possibilities offered by scientific progress, wish to manipulate the process of the transmission of life and, following only the subjective criteria of personal satisfaction, are prepared even to destroy newly conceived life.

The Christian vision and attitude must be quite different: inspired by objective moral standards based on an authentic and embracing vision of the human person, the Christian stands in awe of all the laws that God has impressed on the body and spirit of man. Your task as Christian experts is to discover, understand better and treasure these laws, and to assist couples and all men and women of good will to *appreciate the life-giving faculty* which God has given them in trust, to be used according to his design.

Seen in this profound context of God’s design for marriage and of the vocation to married life, your task will never be reduced to a question of presenting one or other biological method, much less to any watering down of the challenging call of the infinite God. Rather your task is, in view of the situation of each couple, to see which method or combination of methods best helps them to respond as they ought to the demands of God’s call.

Your task then is above all to lead the men and women of our time to that true communion of life, love and grace which is the rich ideal of Christian marriage, appreciating the essential inseparability of the unitive and procreative aspects of the conjugal act.

In his Encyclical [Humanae Vitae](#), referred to so often during the recent Synod as “a prophetic Encyclical”, Paul VI noted that he believed “that people of our day are particularly capable of grasping the deeply reasonable and human character of this principle”[7].

It is our task, as *apostles of human life*, to assist the men and women of our time to arrive at this authentic vision through a solid and consistent *catechesis of life*.

Upon all of you in your efforts I invoke the grace and strength of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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[1] Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Homilia in Xystino sacello habita VI exuente Synodo Episcoporum*, 3, die 25 oct. 1980: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, III, 2 (1980) 967.

[2] *Idem.* 8, *I.c.*, p. 970.

[3] *Eiusdem Allocutio ad Sacrum Cardinalium Collegium*, 13, die 22 dec. 1980: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, III, 2 (1980) 1774.

[4] *Eiusdem Homilia Nairobiæ, in magnis hortis v. d. Uhuru Park, habita*, 7, die 7 maii 1980: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, III, 2 (1980) 1201.

[5] Cfr. *Gaudium et Spes*, 49.

[6] Pauli VI *Humanae Vitæ*, 11.

[7] *Ibid.*, 12.

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