



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE
«FOYERS DES EQUIPES DES NOTRE-DAME»***

Thursday, 23 September 1982

Dear Brothers and Sisters.

You have chosen as the light to enlighten your pilgrimage to Rome the Lord's word: "If you knew the gift of God".

You have been well inspired. This urgent and joyous question pervades the Bible and reaches us all: "If you knew the gift of God!". If you knew, you who are looking for water, propelled by an earthly thirst, if you knew the inexhaustible spring! It is near you, but will you recognize it?

Christian spouses, this question concerns you as well. You certainly know this, you who constantly work to go back to the source of your love and grace within your Equipés, under the patronage of Our Lady, the mother of fair love.

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE COVENANT**

I. From the beginning, God's gift to man has been life and love. And this gift, this grace, expresses itself in the graceful countenance of a woman, Eve, the mother of the living —an imperfect image, but all the same the image of the new Eve, Mary, full of grace. Adam's joy, with his hope fulfilled, bursts forth: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23). Both are rapturous about life and love shared when their first son is born: "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord!" (Gen 4:1). And yet they do not suspect the breadth or the depth of God's gift (cf. Eph 3:18-19).

This grace, this gift of love and life, is only a first stage. The Lord wants to bind himself to humanity, "to be in harmony" with it. He makes a covenant with his Chosen People: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt... you shall have no other gods before me" (Ex 20:2-3). But this covenant is neither a simple contract nor a political alliance: as the Lord engages his word and his life in it, so it calls for love and tenderness. *The covenant expresses itself through the sign of marriage*. The prophets explore this mystery of the Covenant across the stormy history of the fidelity of the Lord and the infidelities of his People, at times even through their own conjugal life (cf. Hosea 2:21- 22), and Jeremiah goes so far as to foretell a new Covenant (31:31).

And in fact, "when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman..." (Gal 4:4). Christ espouses the human condition in the womb of the Virgin Mary. "The Word is made flesh". An indestructible covenant, for nothing will ever again be able to separate man and God, united forever in Jesus Christ (cf. Rom 8:35-38). It is once more in terms of nuptials that the mystery is told: Jesus performs his first sign at the marriage at Cana (cf. Jn 2:11); then the Gospel gives us to understand that he is the true bridegroom (cf. Jn 3:29. Eph 5:31- 32). Jesus sees his love through to the end (cf. Jn 15:13. 13:1); he seals the Covenant in the blood of his cross and "gives up his spirit (Jn 19:30) to the Church, his Bride.

The Church appears thus as the completion of the Covenant: fulfilled by the gift of God, she is the loved and fertile wife who begets new children until the end of time. The "universal sacrament of salvation" (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 45:1 and 42: 3: cf. also *Lumen Gentium*, 1:1 and 48), she will lead humanity gradually, by the Word and by the sacraments, to live fully the gift of God in the Covenant which he offers us.

MARRIAGE **AND THE EUCHARIST**

2. The celebration and fulfilment of the Covenant thus take place in the sacraments. This is distinctively true when we speak of the Eucharist, (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5), yet marriage, "intimately bound" to the Eucharist (*Familiaris Consortio*, 57), is connected in a particular way to the Covenant. The old Covenant expressed itself in the sign of human marriage, *but the reality of Christian marriage is inhabited, transfigured, by the New Covenant*.

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, dedicated to the family, following the Synod of 1980, I emphasized the necessity of "discovering and deepening this relationship" (no. 57). Your pilgrimage to Rome gives me the opportunity to open up some paths of investigation for you to explore.

COMMUNION

The Eucharist makes the Covenant accessible to us, as it makes accessible both the gift and him

who gives himself: the perfect sacrament of the Covenant, the Eucharist is the mystery of communion, of unity, with respect for each individual: "He who eats my flesh and drinks by blood abides in me and I in him" (Jn 6:56). "As... I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me" (Jn 6:57). It reveals the communion of the Father and Son in the Holy Spirit, drawing in the faithful, who thus find themselves in communion with one another (1 Cor 10:17). For in the flesh of Christ the work of communion in the spirit is accomplished: "But whoever is joined to the Lord, becomes one spirit with him." (1 Cor 6:17).

The fulfilment of the Covenant in the Eucharist is echoed in the conjugal alliance. Is not the sacrament of marriage also a communion in which unity in the flesh leads to the communion of the spirit? Like Christ's Covenant, the conjugal covenant leads the spouses to live faithfully "in tenderness and mercy" and "in justice and in right" (Hosea 2:21). "Marriage of the baptised thus becomes the real symbol of the new and eternal Covenant, sealed in the blood of Christ. The Spirit, which the Lord pours out, gives them a new heart and makes the man and the woman capable of loving one another as Christ has loved us" (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 13). "It is in this sacrifice of the new and eternal Covenant that the Christian couple finds the flowing spring which inwardly models and constantly vivifies their conjugal covenant" (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 57). From the Lord, they learn to love "to the end", giving and pardoning. And as he himself lives out an indissoluble Covenant, they will learn from him to be flawlessly faithful to their word and to their chosen life.

Not only does the Covenant inspire the life of the couple, it fully portakes in that life, injecting its own energy in the lives of the spouses: it "models" their love from within: they love one another not only *as* Christ loved, but mysteriously, *with* the very love of Christ, as his Spirit is given to them... in the measure in which they let themselves be "modelled" by him (cf. Gal 2:25; Eph 4:23). At Mass, through the ministry of the priest, the Spirit of the Lord makes the body and blood of the Lord from bread and wine; in and through the sacrament of marriage, the Spirit can make the very love of the Lord from conjugal love: if the couple let themselves be transformed, they can love with the "new heart" promised by the New Covenant (cf. Jer 31:31; *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 20).

"Call of the body and of the instinct, strength of feeling and of affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of the will" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 13), by the gift of the Lord man's love can be totally illuminated by the Source of love and can really show forth the new and eternal Covenant which shines in him.

We are certainly very far here from a simple instinctive impulse or a simple temporary accord tied to immediate interests to which many people today tend to reduce this gift of the Lord which is love!

SACRIFICE

3. I have said: "If the couple let themselves be transformed," because the gift proposed by God

can only be realized by consent: since the beginning, it comes up against refusal and pride. The ever-reborn endeavours of a Christianity without sacrifice are destined for failure: they collide with the reality of sin. Christ's mission is man's fulfilment only in his death and resurrection. The Eucharist reminds us incessantly that the blood of the new Covenant is "poured out . . . for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28). The Covenant is sealed in the blood of the Lamb.

There is nothing astonishing then in the fact that the sacrament of marriage sets the couple on a path where they will encounter the cross. The cross within the couple, the sacrifice by each of his selfishness, refusals, weaknesses, deceptions call for pardon; it causes ruptures. There is the cross of children, of their limits, their failures, their disloyalties. There is the cross of barren homes. The cross of those whose faithfulness to the Covenant incites mockery, sarcasm, or even persecution. We do not live in an innocent world! Love, like every human reality, needs to be saved, ransomed. But the frequent participation in the Eucharist permits the couple to make of their trials a way of communion, a participation in the sacrifice of the Lord, a new way of living the Covenant, and, beyond the cross, beyond all of the forms of death which mark their existence, to find happiness: *Christian marriage is a Passover.*

THANKSGIVING

4. The sacrifice of the Lord leads marriage to the resurrection and to the gift of the Spirit. It emerges in thanksgiving and in praise of the Father. This is indeed the original meaning of the word "Eucharist", where we take the "cup of blessing" (1 Cor 10:16). The blessing of the covenant of Adam and Eve is concluded in the blessing of the new Adam and the new Eve. Immersed in the Covenant of Christ and the Church (cf. Eph 5:23 ff.), the conjugal covenant emerges as well into joy, gratitude, and thanksgiving. In this sense equally each Christian family is called to become a "little Church", a place where praise and adoration resound (cf. Eph 5:19). There, the couple practice their Priesthood, the priesthood of the baptized. Families of the Equipes Notre-Dame, you have contributed to the regaining of the honour of Prayer in the home, and you have thus rendered an appreciable service. Recognition, thanksgiving and joy founded not on illusion, but on the truth of the gift of pardon, have a role to play in the world as well: crouched over what it conquers, the world risks losing the sense of gratuity. It closes itself off from gratitude, from thanksgiving, from the sources of joy, forgetting that to give thanks is not only "worthy and just", it is also "salutary"!

TO BUILD THE CHURCH

5. I have just told how the Equipes serve the Church in their prayer. I want to insist on the ecclesial dimension of your conjugal vocation. The new and eternal Covenant is offered to the "multitude" (Mt 26:27). As personal as is the Eucharistic encounter of each Christian, it concerns the entire Body. "The Church makes the Eucharist but the Eucharist makes the Church". Beyond differences of race, of nation, of sex, of class, the Eucharist transcends boundaries; the Eucharistic Body of Christ builds his Mystical Body which is the Church. The celebration of the new and eternal Covenant gives solidity to the Christian assembly: it "becomes a body" in the Body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 10:17). But far from closing it off in a high chamber, the Eucharist makes it burst forth to the four corners of the world. The Spirit of the risen Christ assures « the same time both the Communion and the Mission (cf. Acts 1:13, 2:4; Mt 28:18–20).

"In the Eucharistic gift of charity the Christian family finds the foundation and the soul of its 'communion' and its 'mission': the eucharistic bread makes of the different members of the family community a single body..." and at the same time feeds "missionary and apostolic dynamism" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 57). Sacrament of the Covenant, the domestic Church that is the family will live the communion intensely—a communion not at all turned in on itself, but rather entirely open to its mission. The Church's cell, open to other communities, the family is not a chapel, a cenacle. This is why you must take care to work closely with your bishops and the ministers of the Church, beginning with your parish priests.

Your vocation as builders of the Church begins with a generous gift of life (even in the Church, many families are no longer aware that "children are the greatest gift of marriage" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 50). The vocation continues in the multiple activities which each couple undertakes according to its own vocation, from catechism to liturgical animation to apostolic action in all its forms. Each family will learn to discern its own vocation adapting its tastes, talents, and its means to the needs and the appeals of the Church and the world. For indeed the most urgent missionary service goes beyond the boundaries of the Church. This old world (*Familiaris Consortio*, 6) no longer believes in life, in love, in faithfulness, in pardon; it needs signs of the new and eternal Covenant, which will show it authentic love, faithfulness all the way to the Cross, and the joy of life, and the strenght of pardon; we must teach it again the value of a word given and kept, in a life offered. Through the faithfulness of the couple, the world will be able to discern the faithfulness of the living God.

UNTIL HE COMES

6. The Eucharist, finally, announces and makes ready for the return of the Lord and the definitive fulfilment of the Covenant. The Eucharist is food for the way: it readies us for a time when it itself will no longer be necessary because "we shall see him as he is" (1 Jn 3:2). Far from leading us to scorn time as it passes, the Eucharist teaches us to make the eternal from the temporal, but at the same time it saves us from becoming weighed down by the present, reminding us of our condition as nomads on this earth (Heb 11:9-11; Phil 5:20; 1 Pet 2:11). The people of the Covenant, we are also the people of the Passover, of the Way. We are making our way towards the City of God, towards the heavenly Jerusalem, where we will be fulfilled by the gift of God.

This eschatological perspective of the Eucharist is reflected in marriage. Marriage bears the mark of the ephemeral: "For the form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor 7:51). Nevertheless, the body is more than the body, it is the sign of the spirit which inhabits it (see General Audience of 28 July 1982); Christian marriage is more than the flesh. "Love is more than love" (Paul VI, address to the Equipes Notre-Dame, 4 May 1970, no. 6). Transfigured by the Spirit, love builds on eternity because "love never ends" (1 Cor 15:8). But at the same time an authentic conjugal love, though filled with tenderness and faithfulness, stops short of fixing an unseemly adoration on the spouse: it moves from the conjugal covenant to the divine Covenant and from the image to its Source. This

is why it is acknowledged as inseparable from another sign of the Covenant: celibacy "for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 19: 12; cf. General Audience of 50 June 1982). This reminds us all that *the perfect gift of God is not a creature, however beloved, but the Lord himself*. "for your Maker is your husband" (Is 54:5). The true Bridegroom of the final wedding is Christ, and the Church is the Bride (cf Mt 22:1-14). Consecrated virginity, sign of the world to come (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 16), rings out as a call to the heart of all Christian families. It is neither fear nor repulsion but the call of a greater love (cf. General Audience of 21 April 1982). I have been anxious to recall that, in this sense "the Church... has always defended the superiority of celibacy in relation to marriage" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 16), even though this is misunderstood today. This is to tell you what importance the Church attaches to a certain climate in Christian families which fosters the blossoming, in freedom and in joy, of the call to leave everything for Christ.

PROGRESSION

7. "If you knew the gift of God!". You will not have enough time, brothers and sisters, in all of your married life, to explore the immeasurable gift which God has given you in your sacrament of the Covenant. The Church will not have enough time on its earthly way to explore the gift of God, "the breadth and length, the height and depth... of the love of God which surpasses all knowledge" (Eph 3:18-19). All the more reason to begin right now, at home, in your Equipes, and as a Church.

Yet this reminder of God's ambition for the marriage of his children could overwhelm you: how should you take up such a mission among today's men and women?

You are right to recognize your limits: humility is the first step towards saintliness. But nonetheless, you must not belittle God's ambitions for you; how could love subsist if it did not reflect the holiness of its source, faithfully and fruitfully? "If Christian marriage can be compared to a very high mountain which puts the couple in the immediate neighbourhood of God, we must recognize that to climb this mountain takes a great deal of time and effort. But would this be a reason to destroy or to lower the mountain?" (Homily at Kinshasa, 5 May 1980, no. 1).

The gap which you perceive between the Father's expectation of you and your poor responses should not paralyze you; rather, it should make you more dynamic. You know from experience that a true mother does not become an accomplice to her children's refusals to eat, to work, or to love! Without either weakness or severity, she urges them to advance on the road of life; she is demanding in a tender and merciful way. And you know also from experience that a loving father does not condemn his children because they grow slowly! In my apostolic exhortation I spoke not of the "graduality of the law", for the demands of the creation and the redemption concern us all from today forward, but rather of the graduality of the "pedagogical path of growth" (no. 9). Must we not think of our entire Christian life in terms of progression?

In each of the domains where you come up against obstacles—in love and its expressions, in its

reluctances and renewal, in the difficult problems of the regulation of births—in order to arrive at conjugal relations which are "controlled and respectful of the ends of the matrimonial act" (my address to the members of CLER, 5 November 1979) and in order to maintain always an absolute respect for human life, and even for your role in the Church and in the world. I refer you to what Paul VI said to you in his famous address in 1970: "the progression of the couple, like all human life, has stages, and the difficult and painful phases... have their place as well. But it is necessary to say this clearly: never should fear or anguish invade souls of good will, for is the Gospel not good news for all families, and a message which, even if it is demanding, is nonetheless deeply liberating?" (no. 15).

Your spiritual battles, and even your regret of your sins, confided in the Lord in the Sacrament of Reconciliation (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 58), have still a role to play: they can make you more compassionate towards your brothers and your sisters who are afflicted by all sorts of trials, by the desertion of the spouse, by loneliness or uncertainties; your own battles can help you to assist these brothers, without renouncing whatsoever the vocation of couples to saintliness, and to help them get back on their path.

MAY YOUR LIGHT SHINE

8. These last reflections have not taken us away from the Eucharist, rather, they bring us back to it: is not the Eucharist sustenance for those who walk? Is it not the encounter with him who is the Truth and the Life, as well as the Way? (cf. Jn 14:6).

Then, dearly loved brothers and sisters, live in the heart of the sacrament of the Covenant, your marriage nourished by the Eucharist and the Eucharist illumined by your sacrament of marriage; the future of the world depends on it. At the same time, despite your limitations and weaknesses, may your light shine humbly and strongly before your fellow men. Men of our time crowd around so many polluted springs! May your entire life lead them to the well of Jacob; may your life as a couple and as a family inquire of them: "If you knew the gift of God!" May they, in seeing your lives, catch sight of the Lord's enthusiastic "yes" to authentic love! May your entire life make them hear Christ's call: "If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water'" (Jn 7:37-38).

May Our Lady help you to accept the gift of God and to give it to men as she has done!

And I, with all my heart, to each of your families, to all of the members of the Equipes Notre-Dame and especially to those who are undergoing trials, as well as to the priests and nuns who are accompanying you in your reflections, give my Apostolic Blessing.

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