



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF BRAZIL
FROM THE EAST 2 REGION
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Saturday, 16 November 2002

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I greet you all affectionately with the words of St Peter, the first Pope: "May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord" since you have also "obtained a faith of equal standing with ours in the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ" (II Pt 1,1-2), to kindle hope in the hearts of the men and women of our time.

I would like to thank you for the words and sentiments expressed by Cardinal *Serafim Fernandes de Araújo*, Archbishop of Belo Horizonte, on behalf of the entire Episcopate of Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo. I am glad to see how the love of Christ impels you to an intense and generous apostolate for the growth of the Kingdom of God in the communities entrusted to your care. This *ad limina* visit gives you the opportunity to express your pastoral anxieties and concerns as fully as necessary, both in the reports you have presented and in the personal conversations you have had with me. My meeting with you today, first of all, allows me to thank you in the name of the Church for your zeal in the work you carry out, and then to confirm you in the common mission of the Good Shepherd who provides for the People of God, especially families, pastures where they may find life and find it in abundance.

2. In the Letter I addressed to families in 1994, I said that the family is placed "at the centre of the great struggle between good and evil, between life and death, between love and all that is opposed to love. To the family is entrusted the task of striving, first and foremost, to unleash the forces of good, the source of which is found in Christ the Redeemer of man. Every family unit needs to make these forces their own so that ... the family will be *strong with the strength of God*"

(n. 23).

The basic cell of society and the "domestic Church" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 11), the family provides the first natural abode for the human and Christian development of the new generations, inculcating in them the Christian values of honesty and fidelity, diligence and confidence in divine Providence, hospitality and solidarity; today, therefore, it needs special support in order to resist the threat of disintegration coming from the culture of individualism.

3. In the course of my pontificate, I have insisted on the importance of the role played by the family nucleus in society. I also recall that during my first pastoral visit to Brazil I pointed out its influence in the formation of your culture (cf. *Homily at Mass for Families*, Rio de Janeiro, 1 July 1980, n. 4; *ORE*, 14 July 1980, p. 3). Certain values denote a tradition the Brazilian people acquired long ago, such as respect, solidarity, respect for privacy; they have a common origin in the faith lived by your ancestors. Brazilian women, in particular, have always had a unique and fundamental place of their own in the origin and life of every family. The bride brings to the marriage and the mother to the life of the family special gifts linked to her physiological and psychological make-up, character, intelligence, sensitivity, affection, understanding of life and attitude to it, but above all, to her spirituality and relationship with God that are indispensable in forging the men and women of the future. For every family community, she is the fundamental link of love and peace, and the guarantee of the future.

In recent decades certain social factors have undoubtedly led to the destabilization of the family nucleus. They were mentioned in Puebla Document: they are social (unjust structures), cultural (education and the media), political (domination and manipulation), economic (salaries, unemployment, having several jobs at the same time) and religious (secularization) (n. 572). Nor should it be forgotten that in some regions of your country, the lack of housing, hygiene, health-care structures and education contribute to the break-up of the family.

In addition to these factors the lack of moral values opens the door to infidelity and the dissolution of marriage. Civil laws that encourage divorce and threaten life by seeking to introduce abortion officially; birth-control campaigns which, instead of inviting responsible procreation by means of the natural rhythms of fertility, have led to the sterilization of thousands of women, especially in the North-East, spreading the use of contraceptive methods which are now revealing their most tragic results. The very lack of objective information, along with geographical uprooting, jeopardizes social coexistence and gives rise to the break-up of the family nucleus in its most essential elements.

This situation, despite the undeniable efforts of various pastoral initiatives and religious movements, that aim at recovering the Christian vision of the family, seems to continue their influence on the social reality of Brazil.

4. I am aware of your commitment to defending and promoting this institution which has its origin

in God and in his plan of salvation (cf. *Familiaris consortio*, n. 49). Today we are seeing a trend, very widespread in certain areas, which is tending to reduce its true nature. Indeed, there is no lack of attempts, in public opinion and in civil legislation, to make equivalent to the family mere *de facto* unions or to recognize as such same-sex unions. These and other anomalies lead us with pastoral firmness to proclaim *the truth about marriage and the family*. Not to do so would be a serious pastoral omission that would lead people into error, especially those who have the important responsibility of making decisions for the common good of the nation.

It is necessary to react vigorously to this situation, and, above all, with a constant and more *effective catechetical and educational instruction*, which will make it possible to motivate the Christian ideal of the faithful and indissoluble union of marriage, the true path to holiness and openness to life.

In this context, I recall once again the need to *respect the inalienable dignity of women*, in order to confirm their important role, both in the family and in society in general. Indeed, it is sad to observe that "women still meet forms of discrimination" (*Ecclesia in America*, n. 45) especially when they are victims of sexual abuse and male chauvinism. It is therefore necessary to sensitize public institutions, to be more effective in fostering family life based on marriage, and to protect motherhood with respect for the dignity of all women (cf. *ibid.*). Moreover, one can never insist enough on the irreplaceable value of the woman in the home: after giving birth to a child, she is the constant reference point for the human and spiritual growth of this new being. The mother's love is a precious gift in the family, a treasure in the heart that is cherished for ever.

5. We cannot forget that the family must witness to its own values among its members and before society. The duties that God asks it to carry out in history flow from his original plan itself and represent its dynamic and existential development. Husbands and wives must be the first to witness to the greatness of married and family life, based on the commitment to fidelity made before God.

Through the sacrament of marriage, *human love acquires a supernatural value*, enabling the spouses to participate in the redeeming love of Christ itself, and to exist as a living portion of the Church's holiness. This love, in itself, takes on the responsibility of helping to bring forth new children of God.

However, how can one learn to love and give oneself generously? Nothing is so conducive to loving, said St Thomas, as knowing oneself to be loved. It is really in the family, a communion of persons where love reigns that is freely given, generous and without self-interest, that the human being learns to love. The reciprocal love of the spouses is extended in their love for the children.

The family, more than any other human reality, is the place in which the person is loved for himself and in which he learns to live "the sincere gift of self". Thus the family is a school of love, as long

as it keeps its own identity: the stable communion of love between a man and a woman, founded on marriage and open to life.

I wanted to recall these principles, venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, since the disappearance of love, fidelity or generosity to the children, disfigures the family. The consequences are not long in coming: for adults, loneliness, for children, neglect; life becomes an inhospitable territory for one and all. I have recalled them, in a certain sense, to muster all the diocesan pastoral forces, so that they will not hesitate to help couples in difficulty, encouraging them appropriately to be faithful to their vocation at the service of life and the full humanity of man and woman on which the "civilization of love" is founded. To those who fear the demands that such fidelity might involve, the Pope says: do not be afraid of taking risks! "There is no difficult situation that cannot be adequately confronted when one cultivates a genuine atmosphere of Christian life" (*Address to the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Family*, 18 October 2002, n. 3; *ORE*, 30 October 2002, p. 3).

Moreover, greater by far than the evil that is active in the world is the effectiveness of the sacrament of Penance, the way to reconciliation with God and with one's neighbour.

Give a new impetus to the pastoral care of families, to an adequate preparation for marriage
6. In the 1994 Campaign for Fraternity, I observed once again with a certain apprehension the direction taken by the institution of the family in your homeland. I said on that occasion, "the climate of hedonism and of religious indifference, which is at the root of the disintegration of a large part of society, is spreading within it and is the cause of the break-up of many families".

For this reason I wish to invite all who are dedicated to the pastoral care of families in your dioceses to give a new impetus to the defence and promotion of the family institution, with an adequate preparation for this great sacrament, "with reference to Christ and the Church" (Eph 5,32). Through the teaching of the Church, offered in classes, in courses for engaged couples, in meetings with suitable married couples or with an expert priest, marriage will reinforce the faith, hope and charity of the spouses in the face of the new social and religious situation which they are called to confront.

The occasion is likewise favourable for a re-evangelization of the baptized, when they approach the Church to ask for the sacrament of Marriage. In this regard, attention is called to education, in school as well as further education, which, even if it has made significant progress in certain areas, lacks a corresponding development in the Christian life of the younger generations. In this area, ecclesial communities have to fulfil an important role by experiencing and witnessing to God's love so they will be able to express it effectively and deeply to those who need to know it. A pastoral proposal for the family in crisis presupposes, as a preliminary requirement, doctrinal clarity, effectively taught in moral theology about sexuality and the respect for life. The opposing opinions of theologians, priests and religious that the media promote on pre-marital relations, birth

control, the admission of divorced persons to the sacraments, homosexuality and artificial insemination, the use of abortion practices or euthanasia, show the degree of uncertainty and confusion that disturb and end by deadening the consciences of so many of the faithful.

At the root of the crisis one can perceive the rupture between anthropology and ethics, marked by a moral relativism according to which the human act is not evaluated with reference to the permanent, objective principles proper to nature created by God, but in conformity with a merely subjective reflection on what is the greatest benefit for the individual's life project. Thus a semantic evolution is produced in which homicide is called "induced death", infanticide, "therapeutic abortion", and adultery becomes a mere "extra-marital adventure". No longer possessing absolute certainty in moral matters, the divine law becomes an option among the latest variety of opinions in vogue.

We must, of course, thank God that the religious traditions of the family are firmly rooted especially in Minas Gerais, where there have been many vocations to the religious life and to the priesthood. However, without neglecting the other priorities of pastoral care - especially the vocations' apostolate and the guidance and formation of candidates for the priesthood - a generous effort is necessary in the vast area of the family apostolate, through catechesis, preaching, and personal counseling. In this perspective your ecclesial communities are encouraging the enrichment of ecclesial life in the State itself. To them too, I would like to convey my praise and encouragement for the evangelizing work they are realizing.

7. Lastly, my thoughts go to the cases of marriage annulments that are submitted for examination to your diocesan tribunals, and, when called for, to the Roman Rota.

In her fidelity to Christ, the Church cannot stop teaching in a persuasive way "the good news of the definitive nature of that conjugal love that has in Christ its foundation and strength (cf. Eph 5,25)" (*Familiaris consortio*, n. 20). "For this reason, the ecclesiastical judge, the authentic "sacerdos iuris" in the ecclesial society, cannot fail to be called to fulfil a true "officium caritatis et unitatis". How demanding, then, is your task and, at the same time, how great is its spiritual importance, since you become the real practitioners of a unique *diakonia* for every individual and even more for the "christifidelis" (*Address to the Roman Rota*, 17 January 1998, n. 2; *ORE*, 4 February 1998, p. 2).

In your concern to apply the norms for the process carefully, not only is the credibility of the revealed faith at stake, but also the peace of consciences. In some of your dioceses there has been an effort to organize the tribunals, and to reinforce the interdiocesan ones. I express the wish that in this delicate interdisciplinary process, fidelity to the truth revealed on marriage and on the family, interpreted authentically by the Magisterium of the Church, may always be the reference point and authentic incentive for a profound renewal of this sector of ecclesial life.

8. May the Holy Family, the icon and model of every human family, help each one of you to continue on your way in the spirit of Nazareth. Therefore, beloved Brothers in the Episcopate, pass on to the faithful entrusted to you the encouragement inherent in the fact that "even as he was at Cana in Galilee, *the Bridegroom in the midst of the bride and groom* as they entrusted themselves to each other for their whole life, so the Good Shepherd is also with us today as the reason for our hope, the source of strength for our hearts, the wellspring of new zeal and the sign of the triumph of the "civilization of love". Jesus, the Good Shepherd, continues to say to us: *Do not be afraid. I am with you. "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28,20)*" (*Letter to Families*, n. 18). May this certainty lead the spouses and those who help them to understand and put into practice the teaching of the Church on marriage, and may your episcopal ministry, venerable Brothers, be ceaselessly nourished on this, a certainty in which I strengthen you with my Apostolic Blessing that I willingly impart to you and extend to every member of your diocesan communities.