

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

IN THE YEAR OF THE FAMILY

- Introduction - Challenges of the new evangelization - Difficulties at the present day - the Pope's letter to families - The great mystery - The genealogy of the person - Formation and animation of the marriage covenant - Sexual education - Preparation for marriage - Don Bosco's charism and the family - The Holy Family of Nazareth.

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My dear confreres,

In recent months I have been able to see for myself the goodness shown us by the Lord in various parts of the world. In some places he is helping us to begin with great drive and energy – as for instance in different countries of the former Soviet Union. In others he is giving growth and strength to our fidelity to Don Bosco with courageous creativity – as in Paraguay, Argentina, Brazil, Spain and Italy, from which I have just returned. Long journeys of animation and communion have been involved, some of them dedicated to Team Visits which, in Argentina and Brazil, have revealed the extraordinary quality of the first roots laid down by Don Bosco himself with far-sighted decisions and noble courage.

Whether one looks to the future (as in Russia) or contemplates the development of the seed sown

in earlier times (in Latin America, Spain and Italy), one has a vivid feeling of the Lord's predilection, and we give thanks to the Risen Christ ascended into heaven who continually sends upon us the Holy Spirit with his power and creativity, with his unique plan of saving truth for shedding light on the epoch-making changes involving the New Evangelization.

The Congregation in the world is clearly experiencing the action of the Holy Spirit. He is preserving its vivacious charismatic nature through renewal and enterprising beginnings, as though Don Bosco were living at the present day in the various geographical situations so as to respond generously to the requirements of needy youth. At least this is how it has seemed in the countries I have recently visited.

Together with this vitality of growth, the Spirit is leading us to an ever better understanding of the mystery of the cross, and to feel ourselves disciples of Christ with in our hearts even a readiness for martyrdom.

With feelings of intense solidarity we are accompanying in spirit our confreres of Rwanda and are following with distress but also with hope the terrible lot of the Rwandese people, and especially the young; and we ask the Holy Spirit to show us soon some practical way in which we can help and establish a new presence in that beloved country.

Let us all feel called to pray, to renew ourselves, to share in their sacrifices, and to give our collaboration.

Challenges of the new evangelization

As you know, dear confreres, in society and in the Church we are at present in the *Year of the Family*. I have wondered what exactly this means for us. And I feel that I must invite you to reflect with me on its importance and on the demands it implies for our educative and pastoral renewal.

Why did the United Nations Organization proclaim 1994 the *International Year of the Family*? It was surely to emphasize the fact that the question of the family is a fundamental one for every State.

The Church has welcomed the initiative with joy and has given to it official adherence: on the feast of the Holy Family of 1993 (26 December) at Nazareth, in a solemn celebration presided over by a Papal Legate, the Church announced its association with this enterprise which is so vital for the ecclesial community in the world.

In the past months we have witnessed many activities which have concentrated our attention on the family at the present day, and many salesian provinces have realized praiseworthy initiatives in this connection.

Will this somewhat general sensitization be sufficient? The matter of the family is too important for us to allow it to finish with the ending of this particular Year. We must rather consider 1994 as a window opening onto vast horizons which touch on the relevance of our charism and suggest many new and urgent aspects of our mission of New Evangelization.

It is opportune therefore that we consider seriously how this theme of the family impinges deeply on our process of renewal. It will help us to

feel ourselves more deeply "at the heart of the Church"¹ and more solidly united "with the world and its history".² The Holy Spirit has raised us up among the People of God with a specific task of pastoral work for the young. We know very well, and we have said it on several occasions, that no authentic pastoral work for the young is possible without a practical and interrelated pastoral work for the family.

¹ C 6
² C 7

We have to ask ourselves: can an educator at the present day form the person of his youngsters without deepening, clarifying and reliving family values? Is a new evangelization possible in the Church without taking up in depth and in new ways the themes of sexuality, marriage and conjugal life?

Difficulties at the present day

Much is heard nowadays about broken families, even though the breakdown is generally short of total. It is true that a glance around us reveals a sad situation. The crisis strikes us the more when we think back to our own families of years ago, replete with Christian love, overflowing with life and witnessing to wisdom in simplicity. Certainly times have changed and there is need to rethink the manner of married life, provided always that the perennial nature of the family be not destroyed.

If we look at certain new forms of living together, at the elastic nature of the marriage bond so much emphasized in the mass media, at the alarming fall in the birth-rate, at the permissive mentality concerning abortion, at the continual in-

crease of "orphans with living parents", and even the legal recognition of homosexual couples, it is not difficult to understand why there is reluctance to define or describe an official concept of the family for legal or social use: many people do not accept that the family is founded on the conjugal love of a man and a woman united in indissoluble marriage as a sanctuary of life. But if the family loses its identity it can be no longer considered as the fundamental cell of society.

The GC23 recalled that: "At the present day many families in different contexts are passing through a grave crisis marked by a weakening of internal bonds and an exaggerated desire for autonomy. Many young people are suffering the consequences of this kind of family breakdown, caused by infidelity, superficial relationships, divorce, distress, alcoholism and drugs. A growing number of people are psychologically unprepared to be fathers or mothers, and are incapable of showing affection for their partner or their children. Situations like these create in many young people serious consequences which appear as an enormous affective inadequacy, insecurity, maladjustment, and the risk of aberrancy".³

³ GC23 55

The doors are being opened unfortunately to a modern view which is false, with a dangerous permissiveness, ethical distortions, transitory cohabitation, sexual licentiousness, lack of educative responsibility, etc., with the grave loss of the so-called "rights of the family" which are strictly linked with "human rights". We are witnessing, in consequence, a social decadence with irreparable negative effects; there is reason to fear the realization of a post-Christian era, i.e. a social situation of paganism which, after twenty centuries of the Gos-

pel, is abandoning the light and grace of Christ. It brings to mind spontaneously that gloomy page of St Paul in his letter to the Romans: "God has left them to their own irrational ideas and to their monstrous behaviour; and so they are steeped in all sorts of depravity; they are rude, arrogant and boastful, enterprising in sin..."⁴ The apostle presents a dire description of pagan Rome in ancient times, but even today there are many environments (and unfortunately they are increasing in number, especially when the specific function of the family is rejected) in which living conditions are disgraceful and inhuman: an "anti-civilization".

⁴ Rom 1,24 ff.

These modern difficulties highlight the urgent need to take remedial measures; the family must remain the vital horizon of every individual; its crisis implies a loss of humanity in the world. Rightly "the Church considers serving the family to be one of her essential duties. In this sense both man and the family constitute 'the way of the Church'"⁵.

⁵ John Paul II, *Letter to families* (LF), 2

At the present day we are witnessing a growing clash between the Vatican and the United Nations Organization on this matter. What is at stake is the presentation of the final document of the 3rd Conference on Population and Development, due to open in Cairo on 5 September next.

On the part of the Pope and the Apostolic See there has been a sequence of public interventions and initiatives with a severe criticism of the draft of the final document. The Pope has written: "It is for me a cause of great concern"; "there is a tendency to promote an internationally recognized right to abortion on demand"; "the vision of sexuality, which inspires the document, is totally individualistic"; "marriage is ignored as though it were a relic

of the past"; "the family cannot be manipulated...".

If in the Conference at Cairo the ideas of the preparatory Committee prevail, a style of life will be made legal which is far from the Gospel, a style that will facilitate contraception, abortion, free unions, and homosexuality, all in direct conflict with the renewal of the family according to the Gospel.

We Salesians must follow this "cultural" contest with a pastoral heart, and be able to strongly defend the family in line with Christ's truth and the demands of our prophetic duty as educators.

Unfortunately a strong crisis of truth is emerging, especially of the truth of salvation: "modern rationalism does not tolerate mystery. It does not accept the mystery of man as male and female, nor is it willing to admit that the full truth about man has been revealed in Jesus Christ".⁶

It will be well for us, therefore, to look again briefly at the Christian truth concerning the family.

The Pope's letter to families

On 2 February, feast of the Presentation of the Lord, Pope John Paul II addressed an invaluable letter (of some one hundred small pages in length) to "families": it begins in fact with the affectionate expression "Dear Families!".

In it the Pope takes up with courage, depth and clarity the complex problems at present causing worry and distress to families, and puts forward a vigorous summary of Christian truth in their regard. It is indispensable that we apply its rich content to our awareness as educators. We need to read again and study this letter. There is no sense

⁶ *ibid* 19

in hiding behind the usual excuses; too many documents, not conducive to reflection, complexity in style, not addressed directly to us.

The family is certainly one of the *new frontiers* of evangelization and is deeply linked, as we have already said, with the mission to the young and the poor inherent in our charism. Moreover in the letter itself the Holy Father specifically appeals to us: "to religious families and consecrated persons, to movements and associations of the lay faithful":⁷ the theme of the family is of the greatest importance for all, and is so in a particular way for educators in the faith.

⁷ *ibid* 23

Striking is the declaration of high responsibility expressed in the text by the Pope himself: "I speak with the power of Christ's truth to all people of our day, so that they will come to appreciate the grandeur of the goods of marriage, family and life; so that they will come to appreciate the great danger which follows when these realities are not respected, or when the supreme values which lie at the foundation of the family and of human dignity are disregarded".⁸

⁸ *ibid* 23

He assures us that the Christian doctrine on the family is a real "treasure of the Church"; it is "the great revelation: the first discovery of the 'other' person"; it is "placed squarely at the centre of the New Covenant; and he notes with astute pastoral vision that *"the family is at the centre of the great struggle between good and evil"*. That is where the truth of Christ shines out in all its brilliance, and there too the falsehood of error can bring about the darkness of night.

We have before us, therefore, a letter of particular importance, which offers to those charged with education in the faith the principal guidelines

for a new evangelization (and hence for a new education).

But let us have a look at these fundamental elements. We can deduce them from the letter itself in a concentrated and stimulating form, which brings us back to meditate directly and with greater attention on the precise words of the Pope. The doctrine is well known and is presented also in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) but, gathered together synthetically as it is around the present theme, it becomes a "*Gospel of the family*" for people of today in a practical aspect of their lives which is found precisely "at the centre of the great struggle between good and evil".

The great mystery

It is symptomatic to note that from the beginning of either the creation or redemption of man, the family is to be found; and in contemplating it we come to a true understanding of what man is and in what his mystery consists.

The Pope's letter speaks of *mystery* not only in reference to the individual man, but also and basically in reference to the family. It is the "great mystery" of which St Paul speaks in the Letter to the Ephesians.⁹ The Apostle gives a new slant to the argument, still founded on Adam and Eve in line with the tradition of the Old Testament, but with a particular relationship to the spousal love of Christ for his Church.

"The Church cannot therefore be understood as the Mystical Body of Christ, or the universal sacrament of salvation", comments the Holy Father,

⁹ Eph 5,32

“unless we keep in mind the ‘great mystery’ involved in the creation of man as male and female and the vocation of both to conjugal love, to fatherhood and to motherhood. The ‘great mystery’, which is the Church and humanity in Christ, does not exist apart from the ‘great mystery’ expressed in the ‘one flesh’ (cf. Gen 2,24; Eph 5,31-32), i.e. in the reality of marriage and the family”.¹⁰

¹⁰ LF 19

A deeper analysis of the Christian doctrine of the family leads also to a response to the fundamental question: what is man?

The *mystery* from which we set out is God, not simply as the supreme being attainable by reason, but in the intimacy of his divine essence and life attained by faith through revelation. For us “mystery” does not mean an enigma or problem, but the finest, most intense, most enlightening, most fascinating truth, so great that we cannot contemplate it directly to exhaust its treasures, but without which all reality remains obscure for us.

This supreme truth is the Love of the Three in One, far richer and more abundant than anything we can deduce from metaphysical reflection on the supreme Being. It is to this intimate divine reality that the “image” and “likeness” of human reality is compared:¹¹ something original in an absolute sense which transcends the analogy of “subsistent being” to rise to an analogy of “trinitarian love”.

¹¹ cf. Gen 1,26

But God does not have a body; he is pure spirit; he is life. The human characteristics proper to masculinity and femininity, of fatherhood and motherhood, are expressions of his mystery manifested in analogical and complementary form in man and woman: “God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them”.¹²

¹² Gen 1,27

“No living being on earth except man”, says the Pope, “was created ‘in the image and likeness of God’. Human fatherhood and motherhood, while remaining biologically similar to that of other living beings in nature, contain in an essential and unique way a *likeness to God* which is the basis of the family as a community of human life, as a community of persons united in love”.¹³

¹³ LF 6

This duality of origin – masculine and feminine – requires a conjugal covenant in love, totally directed to the fullness of life: “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it”.¹⁴

¹⁴ Gen 1,28

This mystery at the origin of Adam and Eve is taken up and perfected by the second Adam (Christ) and the second Eve (Mary and the Church). Here the ‘bridegroom’ is God made man who loves the Church “to the end”,¹⁵ and the bride is the Church which continues to regenerate humanity with the *sacramental gift* of new life, especially through Baptism and the Eucharist which are “the fruits of the love with which the Bridegroom has loved us to the end, a love which continually expands and lavishes on people an ever greater sharing in the supernatural life”.¹⁶

¹⁵ cf. Jn 13,1

¹⁶ LF 19

We are led to the conclusion that the great mystery consists in considering the family as a particular sharing in the divine love to be deepened in the sexual dimension of individuals, in the conjugal covenant of marriage, and in the fruitfulness of the gift of life lived in line with a responsible fatherhood and motherhood. Rightly the Pope speaks of a “civilization of love” which begins from the deep renewal of families and constitutes precisely the “heart and centre” of such a civilization.

To this end we must be convinced that “there is no true love without an awareness that God is

Love, and that man is the only creature on earth which God has called into existence 'for its own sake'; otherwise true love in the family and society will never be achieved. "Created in the image and likeness of God, man cannot fully 'find himself' except through the sincere gift of self. Without such a concept of man, of the person and the 'communion of persons' in the family, there can be no civilization of love; similarly, without the civilization of love it is impossible to have such a concept of person and of the communion of persons".¹⁷

¹⁷ LF 13

Without Christian truth the door is opened (indeed it has been already thrown wide) to an "anti-civilization" which destroys true love "in its various expressions, with inevitable consequences for the whole of life in society".

The genealogy of the person

The letter of the Pope introduces us to the fundamental theme of the mystery of every man: that of his *being a person*. "The genealogy of the person", he tells us, "is inscribed in the very biology of generation".¹⁸ We know, as we are assured by the Catechism of the Catholic Church, that "every spiritual soul is created immediately by God – it is not 'produced' by the parents – and also that it is immortal".¹⁹ On the other hand "the unity of soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the 'form' of the body: i.e. it is because of its spiritual soul that the body made of matter becomes a living, human body; spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature".²⁰

¹⁸ LF 9

¹⁹ CCC 366

²⁰ CCC 365

²¹ cf. GS 14

The body of man represents the highest perfection of the material world²¹ and "shares in the dignity of the 'image of God': it is a human body precisely because it is animated by a human soul".²²

²² CCC 364

The person is constituted by everything that is human, which certainly also includes sexuality (the male-person and the female-person), but is characterized by a dimension of transcendence which refers it directly to God-who-is-Love because it is made in his image and likeness.

And so the fatherhood and motherhood of parents, though evidently rooted in biology, rise above it because of the spiritual quality that proceeds from the soul. Human generation is different from every other generation on earth: it is "the continuation of creation".²³

²³ LF 9

In human fatherhood and motherhood God himself is present; and so, says the Pope, "the genealogy of the person is inscribed in the very biology of generation. Like his parents, the new human being is also *called* to live as a person: he is called *to a life in truth and love*. This call is not only open to what exists in time, but in God it is also open to eternity. This is the dimension of the genealogy of the person which has been revealed definitively by Christ, who casts the light of his Gospel on human life and death and thus on the meaning of the human family".²⁴

²⁴ LF 9

Rightly then did Vatican II declare in crystal clear terms that man "is the only creature on earth that God has wanted for its own sake!"²⁵

²⁵ GS 24

"To be man", male or female, is the fundamental vocation of every person, which exists for itself even though inscribed at the same time in the family and society. Every child is the crowning of

married love and a precious gift for the family; it crowns the vibrant desire of the parents; but they must want the child in the same way that the Creator wants it, "for its own sake": "the genealogy of the person", repeats the Pope, "is thus united with the eternity of God and only then with human fatherhood and motherhood, which are realized in time".²⁶

26 LF 9

From this mysteric vision of the family, important consequences evidently follow for the person of the child, for the parents and family, for Society and for the Church.

And here we come face to face with a whole field of practical educational and evangelizing activities, which call for deeper thought on some aspects of our apostolic commitment in a period of new evangelization.

We can concentrate our attention on three aspects linked with pastoral work for the family; they are three aspects of a delicate nature which touch explicitly on our mission and to which, in my opinion, we have not always given sufficient attention in our educative and pastoral commitments. They certainly constitute a frontier of the new evangelization and the new education.

They are: the formation and animation of the matrimonial covenant between married couples; the sexual education of the young; preparation for marriage in educative pastoral work.

Formation and animation of the marriage covenant

It falls to us for various reasons (parishes, associations of cooperators and past-pupils, conditions

of activities with lay collaborators, etc.) to be concerned with the evangelization of various groups of married couples; we cannot avoid the animation of their marriage covenant in line with the Gospel. It is a matter of their daily life. We are called to offer them an apostolic service by concerning ourselves with their problems, especially concerning the education of their children.

At the basis and foundation of every family there is the marriage pact by which a man and a woman "mutually surrender themselves to each other"²⁷ in a profound matrimonial covenant of service to life. Their mutual love is confirmed and perfected by the respective fatherhood and motherhood which makes them collaborators in the wonderful creative power of God. The marriage covenant implies the full and complete mutual gift of themselves to each other. Unfortunately we know by experience that this sublime plan of the Creator has been wounded by the selfishness of sin. And so in the course of history sexuality, marriage, the family and the education of children have all suffered great deviations and decadence.

In this year of the family the Church calls upon us to be evangelizers of the marriage covenant.

The Gospel of Christ proclaims explicitly that the self-giving of husband and wife to each other is so profound and intimate that it involves "the indissoluble character of marriage as the basis of the common good of the family".²⁸

Marriage is a "communion of persons" open to the "generation of persons"; "only persons are capable of living in communion".²⁹

This communion is oriented in marriage to the fatherhood and motherhood rooted in the biology of male and female, but humanized and raised up

²⁷ GS 48

²⁸ LF 7

²⁹ LF 7

by the spiritual breath of their souls and launched towards even more sublime objectives by faith in God's saving plan, as we may contemplate in the Holy Family of Nazareth.

We Salesians have been talking for some time now about our lay project, and the coming General Chapter (GC24) will take up this precise theme. When we look at lay people we are thinking, without any doubt, also of a good number of families. I have in mind, for example, the parents associations attached to our works, the mothers who engage in catechetical work, and among the Cooperators the many young couples who have formed (e.g. in Spain) the special groups of "Hogares Don Bosco", which are 'fireside' groups animated by our confreres for the growth and deepening of the human and Christian values of their marriages; and then there is all the pastoral work to be carried out in our numerous parishes.

Rightly does the Pope declare, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, speaking of the contribution of Religious in favour of the family: "I would like to add a most pressing exhortation to the heads of institutes of consecrated life, to consider – always with substantial respect for the proper and original charism of each one – the apostolate of the family as one of the priority tasks, rendered even more urgent by the present state of the world".³⁰

³⁰ FC 74

Our programmes of ongoing formation must include in an appropriate manner this aspect of the new evangelization; the need for it is felt everywhere.

"In our own time", says the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "in a world often alien and even hostile to faith, believing families are of primary

importance as centres of living, radiant faith. For this reason the Second Vatican Council, using an ancient expression, calls the family the *Ecclesia domestica* – the domestic Church. It is in the bosom of the family that parents are ‘by word and example the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children. They should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each child, fostering with special care any religious vocation’”.³¹

³¹ CCC 1656

The family is included in the essential tasks of the Church’s mission: it is indeed “the way of the Church”. It is the first school of man; husband and wife are educators precisely because they are parents; fatherhood and motherhood represent a task, a responsibility and a right which is both cultural and spiritual. God who creates a person for his own sake, then entrusts him in fact and to the full extent to the family.

And it is there “that the father of the family, the mother, children and all members of the family exercise the *priesthood of the baptized* in a privileged way ‘by the reception of the sacraments, prayer and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life, and self-denial and active charity’. Thus the home is the first school of Christian life and ‘a school for human enrichment’. Here one learns endurance and the joy of work, fraternal love, generous – even repeated – forgiveness, and above all divine worship in prayer and the offering of one’s life”.³²

³² CCC 1657

The mutual relationships between husband and wife, and with the children, “are inspired and guided by the law of ‘free giving’. By respecting and fostering personal dignity in each and every one as the only basis for value, this free giving takes the form of heartfelt acceptance, encounter and dialogue, disinterested availability, generous service

and deep solidarity".³³

³³ FC 43

In the marriage covenant is found the first and most propitious environment for "humanization and personalization", collaborating in this way in the building of the Church and society. In the Synod of 1980 the Bishops asked the Pope that the Apostolic See take on the work of drawing up a "Charter" of the rights of the family. The Holy Father accepted the request,³⁴ and the Charter, with 12 articles, was published in 1983... It is a document with very practical guidelines, especially at the level of those responsible for society, and is well worth reading again today. In presenting it, the Apostolic See addressed "a particular appeal to all the members and institutions of the Church to give clear testimony to Christian convictions concerning the indispensable mission of the family, and ensure that parents and families receive the necessary support and encouragement to fulfil the task entrusted to them by God".³⁵

³⁴ FC 46

³⁵ *Oss. Rom.* 25.11.1983

In our salesian tradition there is a characteristic family atmosphere that qualifies us as experts in the communion of persons. We can think of the "family spirit" on which each of our houses must be modelled as regards affection, welcoming reception, and sharing: "In an atmosphere of mutual trust and daily forgiveness, the need and joy of sharing everything is experienced, and relationships are governed not so much by recourse to rules as by faith and the promptings of the heart."³⁶

³⁶ C 16

We must consider this genial aspect of our spirit not as a treasure to be kept hidden, but as a valuable gift to be shared with others. Not only will this be of benefit to large numbers of families, but we ourselves shall be enriched by values, even of a new and cultural kind, that are developing in the better

families.

Unfortunately it can happen not infrequently that, independently of the will of one of the partners and of the preparation they have received, a family finds itself in a painful and far from ideal situation. Our experience of the common life, of patience and forgiveness, can help those concerned to handle such situations so as to reach the best possible results, without distancing themselves from the Gospel and from the Church.

This is a delicate pastoral task that is by no means rare. It is a question of saving persons in danger of shipwreck.

Sexual education

One of the fruits of the Synod of 1980, dedicated to the family, was an emphasis on the urgent need for evangelizing the sexual education of the young: "Faced with a culture that largely reduces human sexuality to the level of something commonplace", writes the Pope in the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, "since it interprets and lives it in a reductive and impoverished way by linking it solely with the body and with selfish pleasure, the educational service of parents must aim firmly at a training in the area of sex that is truly and fully personal: for sexuality is an enrichment of the whole person – body, emotions and soul – and it manifests its inmost meaning in leading the person to the gift of self in love".³⁷

We must recognize that a simply biological interpretation of sex becomes partial and reductive, since it leaves aside the fundamental unity of the

³⁷ FC 37

person and of his integral advancement as being the image and likeness of God. The Christian perspective puts at the vertex of the perfection of the person the ability to love, overcoming selfishness and the deviations of eroticism. Authentic sexual education must be clearly included in the fuller education to love as the gift of oneself. Certainly there is a whole delicate field in the biological and psychological areas of sex that are very important and must never be considered taboo, but which are not genuinely human if considered only at animal level.

Sexuality is a dynamism pervading and operating in the whole of the integral male and female being; the human person is totally sexual, even though sexuality is only one of its constituent aspects. Sex characterizes the ego of every human individual and has an influence on his development as a primordial force, especially for bringing the formation of personality to true love, even to the level of self-giving in the form of oblation.

In any case, when we think of the aspect of "image and likeness" of God we have to remember that the analogy implies an incalculable distance, and hence must be applied with proper criteria: God by his love *creates* what is good; man, on the other hand, when he loves is aroused and attracted by what is good, in the many levels in which it may be observed.

Fortunately the Word of God became man and has taught us the self-sacrificing love of man as an image of God. But if there is one field where the tragedy of sin has sown ruin, it is precisely that of love. Hence the importance and urgency of an accurate sexual education with respect to the formation to love of every person.

Here arises also the delicate problem of coeducation, now accepted in many cultures – a manner of educative activity more complicated from a pedagogical standpoint. The two sexes, complementary as they are one to the other, require that persons be formed according to the specific requirements of each sex on the one hand, and on the other that a type of reciprocity be cultivated in them which strengthens and makes possible the growth of sexuality in line with the specific dignity of the persons.

Experience shows that this will not be effective without a youth spirituality: love, sexuality, spirituality are all intimately united in the process of education to the faith. And here must necessarily be included education to vocation which, in whatever state of life, is precisely a concrete formation to love as self-giving.

In *Familiaris consortio* the Holy Father, speaking of sexual education, declares: “In this context *education for chastity* is absolutely essential, for it is a virtue that develops a person’s authentic maturity and makes him or her capable of respecting and fostering the ‘nuptial meaning’ of the body. Indeed Christian parents, discerning the signs of God’s call, will devote special attention and care to education in virginity or celibacy as the supreme form of that self-giving that constitutes the very meaning of human sexuality”.³⁸

Seen in this integral perspective, sexual education unites and makes concrete various aspects of the formation to the faith which belongs to our mission and tradition. We may recall how many recommendations the GC23 gave us when speaking of education to love. It would be well worth reading over again the section on *Education to love*

³⁸ FC 37

(nn. 192-202). Consider, for instance, n. 195: "The Salesian who is diligent about his educational activity in fostering the maturing process of young people, feels today a *special commitment to educating them to love*. He is convinced that the mystery of Christ and the events of his life provide the full and normative revelation of true love. The typical experience of Don Bosco and the educative and spiritual content of the preventive system guide him towards some simple but efficacious methods".³⁹

³⁹ GC23 195

There are some who have pointed out, somewhat pedantically, that all the concern shown by Don Bosco for purity in adolescents and older boys would not have the same priority at the present day. This is a serious mistake! Because of the cultural changes there has been unfortunately some scaling down in this regard; but it is indispensable to revise and recover it, in harmony certainly with cultural evolution. If in formation to purity we speak competently of sexual education in the integral sense in which the Pope speaks of it, including it in youth spirituality for the growth of the person in self-sacrificing love, I believe we would bring about in an updated manner a revival of Don Bosco's insistence on a central aspect of the good of young people.

The new evangelization concerning sexual education, concerning formation to friendship, concerning the custody of the heart, concerning the proper evaluation of marriage and of virginity or celibacy, constitutes for young people the most valid service of education to love; it shows day by day throughout the process of education, that every human person is a "call", and that the sexual drive is not something taboo but a dynamic thrust willed by God in the overall context of the grandeur and

dignity of the person.

Well does the Catechism of the Catholic Church recognize that "sexuality affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul. It especially concerns affectivity, the capacity to love and to procreate, and in a more general way the aptitude for forming bonds with others".⁴⁰

⁴⁰ CCC 2332

Preparation for marriage

The extension of the period of youth has introduced into our works of education (oratories, parishes, hostels, lay associations, etc.) a more detailed attention to preparation for marriage. Even before the stage of engagement and apart altogether from such aspect, the formation of the person to love, which is the essence of all education, should be a guiding factor in the educative plan for a good preparation for marriage.

Since marriage is the ordinary vocation of the majority of our young people, this is an aspect of vocational pastoral work to be considered alongside vocation to the consecrated life, even though in a different way and with different emphasis.

For the development of every vocation a good and constant formation to love is indispensable. Love, in fact, is a fundamental and innate dynamism, but it can be easily turned aside to the detriment of the person; instead of a self-sacrificing gift it can easily develop into selfishness, dominance, craving and passion. The disaster provoked by sin has caused damage especially in the field of love, which it has made the realm of selfishness.

Now marriage is a communion of love between

two persons, a man and a woman; it is directed to the common good of their permanent matrimonial covenant and to the fostering and growth of life through procreation.

Marriage is not an institution of purely human origin; "it does not depend on human decision alone, for God himself is the author of marriage and has endowed it with various benefits and with various ends in view: all of these have a very important bearing on the continuation of the human race, on the personal development and eternal destiny of every member of the family and of the whole human race".⁴¹

⁴¹ GS 48

From this authoritative description it is immediately evident that marriage far surpasses the merely biological context and the drives of instinct and passion; it is a reality which involves the whole of the person to lead it to a giving of self without any selfishness and open to profound responsibilities in direct relationship with life and society. If one thinks also of its value as a sacrament of the Church, its importance and dignity becomes even more manifest.

It is clear therefore that preparation for marriage takes a long time of serious dedication, and involves a commitment in the vast areas of the pedagogy of vocation.

All vocational maturing is dedicated to education to love or, in other words, to the committed gift of oneself for others, in sacrifice, in inculcating joy, in being able to forgive, in solidarity, in the cultivation of great ideals avoiding the temptations of hedonism, in overcoming discouragement, in the courage of repentance, in initiatives of greater communion, etc.

It is a question, as you can see, of the education

of a Christian vocation with a common basis in all the baptized and with characteristic values to be assured. The gift of self is a goal to be reached either in matrimony or in celibacy for the Church: "Both the sacrament of Matrimony and virginity for the Kingdom of God", says the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "come from the Lord himself. It is he who gives them meaning and grants them the grace which is indispensable for living them out in conformity with his will. Esteem of virginity for the sake of the kingdom and the Christian understanding of marriage are inseparable, and they reinforce each other".⁴²

⁴² CCC 1620

And so in youth pastoral work there are specific values to be developed by intensifying the daily spirituality so much recommended by the GC23.

It must be kept in mind, however, that although the Christian vocation must be cultivated for all, there are important differences to be followed up and developed with appropriate pedagogical concern: the difference arising from the male or female sex, the specific preparation for marriage and the pedagogy of celibacy, discernment of the various vocational possibilities, the different stages of maturing in love (e.g. the period of engagement or the decision already made for a specific vocation of ecclesial consecration).

What it is important to emphasize here is that concern for a true preparation for marriage must not lessen the care given to other vocations, but neither must the importance given to the promotion of celibate vocations make us neglect or diminish the preparation for marriage. In insisting on the specific content of formation to love, it will not be difficult to find a healthy balance in the educative programme.

The point on which we need to insist, for a practical renewal in a greater exchange between pastoral work for youth and for the family, is to place firmly at the centre of educational planning a programme for continued initiatives for the development and strengthening of self-donation, linked with the demands of sexual and vocational differences. Hence once again the urgent need to incorporate in all educative activity an authentic youth spirituality, including also an adequate ascetical pedagogy and a practical sense of personal resilience and of reconciliation with God. It should be kept in mind that the presence in the life of youth of various forms of egotism militates, in fact, against a valid education to love. In the last analysis it must be recognized that a better preparation for marriage demands that in our educative activities (and not only in parishes) we must give priority to a whole concrete programme of youth spirituality.

In this delicate commitment too we have to consider many realistic and new requirements: together with the fundamental doctrine and the attractive Christian ideals of married love, young people need to be prepared in a practical manner to face and overcome the frequent crises that can arise between couples, so much stressed by the mass media.

Don Bosco's charism and the family

It may be enlightening to recall some reflections on the deep and vital sense of continuity which exists, in our history and in personal experience, between life in one's own family and life in the Congregation.

Many of us have existential experience of this, and have felt precisely a kind of continuity of atmosphere, of kindness, of spontaneity, even though in different ways, between the "house" of our parents and the salesian "house"; it fostered a kind of mutual relationship between religious community and family which, in fact, is characteristic of our spirit.

It is good to see in the provinces interesting initiatives of meetings of parents and relatives of confreres, the association of mothers of Salesians (begun in Uruguay), the insistence on mutual relationships even in our Rule of life itself. We have already recalled art. 29 of the Constitutions, and here we may add what is laid down in the Regulations: "The community maintains cordial relations with the family of each confrere, and shows them love and gratitude. The Salesian who has left his home to follow Christ loses none of his love for his relatives and especially for his parents; he gives it expression by his prayers, letters and visits".⁴³ Speaking later of the services of the Rector to the religious community, the Regulations remind him explicitly to "take an interest also in the parents of confreres, and consider them as united to the community in a special way".⁴⁴

This genial 'family' style has its origins in the life of the Founder himself, in his experience in his own family under the guidance of Mamma Margaret. Her heroic removal to Valdocco served to permeate the environment of those poor boys with the same family style, from which has sprung the substance of the preventive system and so many of our traditions that go with it. Don Bosco knew by personal experience that the formation of his own personality was vitally rooted in the extraordinary cli-

⁴³ R 46

⁴⁴ R 176

mate of dedication and kindness ("self-giving") of his family at the Becchi, and he wanted to reproduce its most significant qualities at the Valdocco Oratory among those poor and abandoned youngsters.

He had a clear conviction that his mission must be able to reproduce that of the best of parents, under the living and manifest sign of genuine love. In a letter of 1883 to the confreres on the particular kindness of the preventive system, he told them: "Never forget that you *represent the parents* of these lads, that this was always the tender objective of my labours, of my studies, of my priestly ministry and of our Salesian Congregation. If you are going to be *true fathers* of your pupils, you must take them to heart... The *fatherly heart* which we must have is opposed to all angry ways of acting... Those over whom we have to exercise authority we must regard as our sons. Let us place ourselves at their service as it were, following Christ who came to obey and not command, and be ashamed of anything that could make us seem to be domineering; let us never dominate them except for the purpose of serving them with greater pleasure... Since they are our sons let us do away with all signs of anger when we have to reprove them, or at least let us moderate it so that it does not show externally. No agitation of mind, no displeasure in the eyes, no harsh words on the lips; but let us feel compassion for the present moment and hope for the future, and then you will be *true fathers* and will bring about real conversion... Remember that education is a thing of the heart. Let us study how to make ourselves loved".⁴⁵

It is my sincere impression that we are all convinced of this evangelical relationship with the

⁴⁵ *Collected Letters of Don Bosco*, SEI Turin 1959, vol. 4, pp. 201-209

families. The problem lies at the present day in the demands of the New Evangelization which gives the family pride of place among the objectives of our pastoral care. We need to give special attention to a revision of this sector of our commitment which touches vitally on our educative activities, the care of lay people in our associations and our collaboration in the pastoral priorities of the local Church.

The letter of the Pope to families must have an impact on our sense of fidelity to the mission of the Founder and render more dynamic the educative and pastoral plans and programmes in our salesian works, even long after the present *Year of 1994* of special celebration by the UNO and by the Church.

⁴⁶ cf. GC23 203 ff.

Education to the social dimension of charity⁴⁶ certainly contributes to ensuring internal union in the family, and initiatives of commitment between families, which serve to strengthen in a concrete way love as the gift of oneself.

The Holy Family

In conclusion let us turn our thoughts to the Family of Nazareth. There we see highlighted in a wonderful way the intensity of the marriage covenant, the offering of the person to God in self-donation, the perfection of sexuality in love, and the specific educative environment of the family. We become immersed in the mystery of the genealogy of the Person and there emerges, in education, the care of the vocation.

If we want to contemplate the fullness of the fidelity and peace of the family home, we must look to Nazareth. The same is true if we want to admire

the satisfaction and joy of living together, the daily availability for sacrifice, the dedication to work, the living sense of prayer, the immense gratitude for God's initiatives, the simple but heroic adherence to his concrete plans, his constant intervention in people and in history, his central presence in the home.

At Nazareth we discover, in the great mystery of marriage, the role of the spiritual soul which bestows on the married couple the image and likeness of God above all merely biological values. But especially we are opened up to the horizons of faith, which raises up in the soul an ineffable participation in the very life of God, infusing in the persons of the couple the highest gift of self-sacrificing love, both in the virginal motherhood of Mary and in the special fatherhood of Joseph.

The richness of their sexuality far exceeds in joy its biological use, to be expressed in a married love, maternal and paternal, which becomes a model for all believers, whether in married or consecrated life. Faith perfects their sexuality by raising it to the sublime experiences of the love of the Trinity.

The generation and education of the Son bears, in the family of Nazareth, the genealogy of the person to the highest pinnacle of love, introducing the faith of the married couple into the divine fertility of the supreme mystery of God.

The faith of Mary and Joseph ("they who have believed") results in a family spirituality which permeates and gives fragrance to the family home of Nazareth as the admirable "house of God in history"; from there comes forth the new humanity, there is the starting point of the victory over evil, egotism and concupiscence; and there is revealed all the mystery of man in the newness of the Sec-

ond Adam who will bring everyone to the goal of the resurrection.

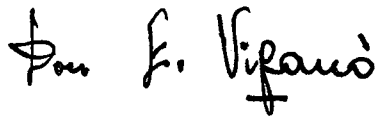
The unique nature of the Family of Nazareth prompts us to consider that the perfection of the human person in Mary and Joseph is the fullness of love, and that education to faith and love constitutes God's purpose in history, leaving this precise mission to the Church and placing our own charism at the present day among the outposts of the new evangelization.

Don Bosco is expecting from us a true and practical renewal in the light of this *Year of the Family*.

May the Holy Family of Nazareth help the Church to renew human love and obtain for us the ability to collaborate in so urgent a mission with a specialized educative commitment.

With heartfelt greetings and every best wish.

Affectionately in Don Bosco,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Don F. Viganò". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'V' and a long horizontal stroke at the end.