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Homily of the Pope in the Mass closing the Fifth World Meeting of Families

The homily given by Benedict XVI on the 9th of July, 2006 during the Mass closing the Fifth World Meeting of Families that he celebrated at the City of Arts and Sciences in Valencia, Spain.

07/10/2006

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In this Holy Mass which it is my great joy to celebrate, together with many of my Brothers in the Episcopate and a great number of priests, I give thanks to the Lord for all of you, the joyful throng of beloved families gathered in this place, and the many others who in distant lands are following this celebration by radio and television. I greet all of you with an affectionate embrace.

Both Esther and Paul, as we have just heard in today's readings, testify that the family is called to work for the handing on of the faith. Esther admits: "Ever since I was born, I have heard in the tribe of my family that you, O Lord, took Israel out of all the nations" (14:5). Paul follows the tradition of his Jewish ancestors by worshiping God with a pure conscience. He praises the sincere faith of Timothy and speaks to him about "a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother

Eunice, and now, I am sure, lives in you" (2 *Tim* 1:15). In these biblical testimonies, the family includes not only parents and children, but also grandparents and ancestors. The family thus appears to us as a community of generations and the guarantee of a patrimony of traditions.

None of us gave ourselves life or singlehandedly learned how to live. All of us received from others both life itself and its basic truths, and we have been called to attain perfection in relationship and loving communion with others. The family, founded on indissoluble marriage between a man and a woman, is the expression of this relational, filial and communal aspect of life. It is the setting where men and women are enabled to be born with dignity, and to grow and develop in an integral manner.

Once children are born, through their relationship with their parents they begin to share in a family tradition with even older roots. Together with the gift of life, they receive a whole patrimony of experience. Parents have the right and the inalienable duty to transmit this heritage to their children: to help them find their own identity, to initiate them to the life of society, to foster the responsible exercise of their moral freedom and their ability to love on the basis of their having been loved and, above all, to enable them to encounter God. Children experience human growth and maturity to the extent that they trustingly accept this heritage and training which they gradually make their own. They are thus enabled to make a personal synthesis between what has been passed on and what is new, a synthesis that every individual and generation is called to make.

At the origin of every man and woman, and thus in all human fatherhood and motherhood, we find God the Creator. For this reason, married couples must accept the child born to them, not simply as theirs alone, but also as a child of God, loved for his or her own sake and called to be a son or daughter of God. What is more: each generation, all parenthood and every family has its origin in God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Esther's father had passed on to her, along with the memory of her forebears and her people, the memory of a God who is the origin of all and to whom all are called to answer. The memory of God the Father, who chose a people for himself and who acts in history for our salvation. The memory of this Father sheds light on our deepest human identity: where we come from, who we are, and how great is

our dignity. Certainly we come from our parents and we are their children, but we also come from God who has created us in his image and called us to be his children.

Consequently, at the origin of every human being there is not something haphazard or chance, but a loving plan of God. This was revealed to us by Jesus Christ, the true Son of God and a perfect man. He knew whence he came and whence all of us have come: from the love of his Father and our Father.

Faith, then, is not merely a cultural heritage, but the constant working of the grace of God who calls and our human freedom, which can respond or not to his call. Even if no one can answer for another person, Christian parents are still called to give a credible witness of their Christian faith and hope. The need to ensure that God's call and the good news of

Christ will reach their children with the utmost clarity and authenticity.

As the years pass, this gift of God which the parents have helped set before the eyes of the little ones will also need to be cultivated with wisdom and gentleness, in order to instill in them a capacity for discernment. Thus, with the constant witness of the their parents' conjugal love, permeated with a living faith, and with the loving accompaniment of the Christian community, children will be helped better to appropriate the gift of their faith, to discover the deepest meaning of their own lives and to respond with joy and gratitude.

The Christian family passes on the faith when parents teach their children to pray and when they pray with them (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 60); when they lead them to the sacraments and gradually introduce

them to the life of the Church; when all join in reading the Bible, letting the light of faith shine on their family life and praising God as our Father.

In contemporary culture, we often see an excessive exaltation of the freedom of the individual as an autonomous subject, as if we were self-created and self-sufficient, apart from our relationship with others and our responsibilities in their regard. Attempts are being made to organize the life of society on the basis of subjective and ephemeral desires alone, with no reference to objective, prior truths such as the dignity of each human being and his inalienable rights and duties, which every social group is called to serve.

The Church does not cease to remind us that true human freedom derives from our having been created in God's image and likeness. Christian education is consequently an

education in freedom and for freedom. "We do not do good as slaves, who are not free to act otherwise, but we do it because we are personally responsible for the world; because we love truth and goodness, because we love God himself and therefore his creatures as well. This is the true freedom to which the Holy Spirit wants to lead us (*Homily for the Vigil of Pentecost*, 9 June 2006).

Jesus Christ is the perfect human being, an example of filial freedom, who teaches us to share with others his own love: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love" (*Jn* 15:9). And so the Second Vatican Council teaches that "Christian married couples and parents, following their own way, should support one another in grace all through life with faithful love, and should train their children, lovingly received from God, in

Christian doctrine and evangelical virtues. Because in this way they present to all an example of unfailing and generous love, they build up the brotherhood of charity, and they stand as witnesses and cooperators of the fruitfulness of Mother Church, as a sign of and a share in that love with which Christ loved his Bride and gave himself for her" (Lumen Gentium, 41).

The joyful love with which our parents welcomed us and accompanied our first steps in this world is like a sacramental sign and prolongation of the benevolent love of God from which we have come. The experience of being welcomed and loved by God and by our parents is always the firm foundation for authentic human growth and authentic development, helping us to mature on the way towards truth and love, and to move beyond ourselves in order to enter into

communion with others and with God.

To help us advance along the path of human maturity, the Church teaches us to respect and foster the marvellous reality of the indissoluble marriage between man and woman which is also the origin of the family. To recognize and assist this institution is one of the greatest services which can be rendered nowadays to the common good and to the authentic development of individuals and societies, as well as the best means of ensuring the dignity, equality and true freedom of the human person.

This being the case, I want to stress the importance and the positive role which the Church's various family associations are playing in support of marriage and the family.

Consequently, "I wish to call on all Christians to collaborate cordially

and courageously with all people of good will who are serving the family in accordance with their responsibility" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 86), so that by joining forces in a legitimate plurality of initiatives they will contribute to the promotion of the authentic good of the family in contemporary society.

Let us return for a moment to the first reading of this Mass, drawn from the Book of Esther. The Church at prayer has seen in this humble queen interceding with all her heart for her suffering people, a prefigurement of Mary, whom her Son has given to us all as our Mother; a prefigurement of the Mother who protects by her love God's family on its earthly pilgrimage. Mary is the image and model of all mothers, of their great mission to be guardians of life, of their mission to be teachers of the art of living and of the art of loving.

The Christian family - father, mother and children - is called, then, to do all these things not as a task imposed from without, but rather as a gift of the sacramental grace of marriage poured out upon the spouses. If they remain open to the Spirit and implore his help, he will not fail to bestow on them the love of God the Father made manifest and incarnate in Christ. The presence of the Spirit will help spouses not to lose sight of the source and criterion of their love and self-giving, and to cooperate with him to make it visible and incarnate in every aspect of their lives. The Spirit will also awaken in them a yearning for the definitive encounter with Christ in the house of his Father and our Father. And this is the message of hope that, from Valencia, I wish to share with all the families of the world. Amen.

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