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Church in the service of marriage and family

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Abstract

Family, built on the foundation of monogamous marriage between a man and a woman, is a natural institution. It is present in even the oldest communities and cultures. However, the contemporary family, which is going through a deep crisis, is the subject of questions and controversies. Opinions that it is an outdated institution and should be replaced by other “modern” forms of cohabitation are expressed more frequently. Hence, the family needs specific actions and forms of assistance that will help it overcome growing problems and interpret its identity anew.

The Church, aware that marriage and family are one of the greatest gifts in the world, constantly undertakes such actions and carries her mission in favor of them on various levels. The article discusses the main ones, which include the need to preach the good news about marriage and family and defend these institutions, undertake specific pastoral actions, and help marriage and family in interpreting their identity.

All these activities require profound discernment on the part of the Church of the current situation of contemporary marriages and families, so that she may be able to fruitfully accompany them in the realization of her vocation.

Keywords

marriage, family, conjugal love, family ministry, discernment, accompaniment

History and anthropology teach us that the family based on the foundation of monogamous marriage between a man and a woman is a natural institution, which is present even in the oldest communities and cultures. That is why people have understood it throughout the ages as the source and basis of the existence of man himself and all communities. Hence, it is public reality and the subject of special laws and social regulations.

For the Church, too, the family is a special place where, by virtue of the sacrament of marriage, the reality of love that embraces all its members comes true. John Paul II reminds us of this when he says: “Among these many paths, the family is the first and the most important. It is a path common to all, yet one which is particular, unique, and unrepeatable, just as every individual is unrepeatable.”¹ Pope Francis also emphasizes that “The welfare of the family is decisive for the future of the world and that of the Church.” Therefore, “Countless studies have been made of marriage and the family, their current problems and challenges.”² A human being needs a family not only to be born but to be able to grow in humanity. Therefore, it is logical to believe that the family, as a community of people, must be stable and strong. First, it should be strong in loving, which unites it. Then, it should be strong in hope, which a human being and society need for existence. Finally, it should be strong in faithing, which becomes the source of the strength needed to conduct its tasks.

However, the contemporary family, which is going through a deep crisis, is the subject of questions and controversies. Opinions that it is an outdated institution and should be replaced by other, more “modern” forms of co-habitation are expressed more frequently. This is even more surprising and dangerous because these views are not just fleeting trends popular in certain circles or manifestations of a passing fashion but also the subject of serious studies of scientific disciplines and discussions and legal regulations in many countries of Western culture as well as in the international forum.³ Hence, the modern family needs specific actions and forms of assistance which will help it overcome the growing problems and interpret its identity anew.

¹ John Paul II, *Letter to families*, 02.02.1994, 2, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_02021994_families.pdf (29.01.2015).

² Francis, Post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, 19.03.2016, 31, [papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf](https://www.vatican.va/holy-father/pope-francis/post-synodal/apostolic-exhortations/amoris-laetitia/amoris-laetitia_en.pdf) (29.01.2025).

³ Cf. M. Schooyans, *La face cachée de l'ONU*, Le Serment, Paris 2000, pp. 187–205.

The Church is constantly taking such actions. As John Paul says: “The Church, aware that marriage and family are among the most precious goods of humanity, wishes to bring her teaching and offer help to those who, knowing the value of marriage and family, strive to remain faithful to them; to those who, in uncertainty and anxiety, seek the truth; and to those who unjustly encounter obstacles in realizing their own vision of the family. By supporting the former, enlightening the latter and supporting those for whom difficulties arise, the Church wishes to serve every person concerned about the fate of marriage and family.”⁴ Pope Benedykt XVI confirms that “The family is the privileged setting where every person learns to give and receive love. That is why the Church constantly wishes to demonstrate her pastoral concern for this reality, so basic for the human person. [...] This is the truth that the Church tirelessly proclaims to the world.”⁵ Pope Francis also confirms this when he writes that the Church is directly expected to make “a more responsible and generous effort to present the reasons and motivations for choosing marriage and the family, and in this way to help men and women better respond to the grace that God offers them.”⁶ Thus, in fulfilling her mission towards marriage and the family, the Church carries it out on various levels. The most important ones of these are: the proclamation of the “good news” about marriage and the family, the defense of these institutions against actions that harm them, the creation of pastoral structures, and inspiring families to constantly interpret and deepen their identity. All of this requires profound discernment on the part of the Church of the current situation of contemporary couples and families, so that she may be able to fruitfully accompany them in the fulfillment of their vocation.

⁴ John Paul II, Apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, 22.11.1981, 1, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html (01.02.2025).

⁵ Benedict XVI, *Vigil of prayer*. Address of the Holy Father on Occasion of the Fifth World Meeting of Families in Valencia, 8.07.2006, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/july/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060708_incontro-festivo.html (01.02.2025).

⁶ Francis, *Amoris lætitia*, 35.

Good news about marriage and family

The Second Vatican Council teaches us that the family is the “intimate partnership of married life and love.”⁷ This fundamental message becomes the content of the post-conciliar teaching of the Magisterium of the Church. A human being, created as man and woman, is called to build a communion of persons (*communio personarum*) based on authentic love, in which they become a gift for each other. In this relationship, in which they both find themselves in their sexual differentiation, they not only overcome their original loneliness but also strive for unity, which is depicted in Revelation: “a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen 2:24; cf. Mt 19:5). For, as John Paul II teaches, “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself; his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it.”⁸ This special experience, and indeed the touch of love, takes place in marriage, when a man and a woman in their spousal union become a gift for each other. Their mutual self-giving, that is, the readiness to give oneself completely to one’s spouse and the ability to accept without limit the gift of the other, is the measure of conjugal love, which in this sense becomes “concern and care for the other.”⁹

Love understood in this way requires a decision of free and conscious will, which is the basis of the relationship between people. Only a person can love, and the acts of love are only those acts which a person realizes based on reason and will, knowing and recognizing the values contained in the personal condition. Therefore, an act of love is a choice that demands exclusivity and finality because its subject is a person. It cannot be a matter of chance, ill-considered behavior or just an emerging feeling because they can be changeable and often fleeting. As Erich Fromm notes, “To love somebody is not just a strong feeling,

⁷ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world *Gaudium et spes*, 7.12.1965, 48, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (01.02.2025).

⁸ John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Redemptor hominis*, 4.03.1979, 10, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis.html (01.02.2025).

⁹ Benedict XVI, Encyclical letter *Deus caritas est*, 25.12.2005, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html (01.02.2025).

it is a decision, it is a judgment, it is a promise. If love were only a feeling, there would be no basis for the promise to love each other forever. A feeling comes, and it may go. How can I judge that it will stay forever, when my act does not involve judgment and decision?”¹⁰ Love for the spouse encompasses all the good that he or she represents. The person of the spouse, in his or her body and spiritual fullness, is itself a good and not an object of reference or use, especially in the bodily sphere. Hence, Pope Paul VI teaches us that “Whoever really loves his partner loves not only for what he receives, but loves that partner for the partner’s sake, content to be able to enrich the other with the gift of himself.”¹¹ Such an attitude demands full commitment and, at the same time, entails responsibility for the spouse. This is the logic of the gift, as John Paul II often emphasizes.¹²

Experiencing love in this way, spouses constantly face the prospect of love’s new meaning and discover new possibilities of its realization. The essence of love includes dynamism, which is the source of its continuous development. Because, as Karol Wojtyła emphasizes, “Love [...] in a sense never ‘is’ but is always only ‘becoming,’ and what it becomes depends on the contribution of both persons and the depth of their commitment.”¹³ It is a space of permanent learning about life for and with another person. Simultaneously, it helps spouses see their own limitations and weaknesses. It is a process that takes place throughout their lives. That is why Pope Benedict XVI writes that “Love embraces the whole of existence in each of its dimensions, including the dimension of time. [...] love looks to the eternal. Love is indeed “ecstasy,” not in the sense of a moment of intoxication but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God.”¹⁴ Pope Francis also emphasizes that conjugal love is by its nature definitive and that a union based on it is more than a social formality or a certain tradition.¹⁵ Conjugal life means continuous learning and discovering love. This process takes place throughout the life and depends on the commitment of both spouses. Jean Guitton aptly illustrates this

¹⁰ E. Fromm, *The art of loving*, https://ia801309.us.archive.org/12/items/TheArt-OfLoving/43799393-The-Art-of-Loving-Erich-Fromm_text.pdf (01.02.2025).

¹¹ Paul VI, Encyclical letter *Humanae vitae*, 25.07.1968, 9, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html (01.02.2025).

¹² John Paul II, *Letter to families*, 11.

¹³ K. Wojtyła, *Miłość i odpowiedzialność*, TN KUL, Lublin 2001, s. 118.

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 6.

¹⁵ Francis, *Amoris lætitia*, 124.

truth when he says: “For it is a profound and invincible error to think, as lovers do, that marriage is the solution to love. Marriage poses a problem: a whole life is scarcely long enough to resolve it. [...] Marriage is a seed. Marriage is the cause of a love that continues to develop throughout the lifetime of the couple, in a punctuated way, interspersed with crises, slow, vulnerable, admirable.”¹⁶ The Church, fulfilling its mission for the family, constantly points out that conjugal love is a path of continuous development and growth, in which the pivotal moment is receiving the sacrament of marriage, through which “conjugal love is purified and made holy.”¹⁷ And earlier, the Second Vatican Council teaches us that the sacrament strengthens and, as it were, consecrates Christian spouses to their duties and dignity of their state.¹⁸ Today, when the understanding of the sacrament of marriage is often reduced to an external and not always spiritually understood ceremony in church, this teaching takes on a special meaning. We may conclude that the crisis of the contemporary family also has its source in the loss of the sense of sacredness of the sacrament of marriage. On the other hand, the sacrament of marriage is a constant dynamic presence of God in the daily life of the family. This is a potent sign of grace because it not only indicates and expresses it in a visible way, like a sign, but also creates it and allows man to be part of it.¹⁹ Therefore, Pope Francis emphasizes that “The sacrament of marriage is not a social convention, an empty ritual or merely the outward sign of a commitment. The sacrament is a gift given for the sanctification and salvation of the spouses, since their mutual belonging is a real representation, through the sacramental sign, of the same relationship between Christ and the Church.”²⁰ Thus, the sacramentality of marriage is not exhausted at the time of its contraction but extends throughout entire conjugal and family life. Therefore, in relation to this sacrament, we speak of a “subsisting sacrament,” of the sacramental state in which Christian spouses live.²¹

Preaching the good news of the family based on the sacramental marriage of a man and a woman, the Church teaches that it is the “sanctuary of life.” The

¹⁶ J. Guitton, *Kobieta, miłość, rodzina*, PAX, Warszawa 1994, pp. 91–92.

¹⁷ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, 56.

¹⁸ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 48.

¹⁹ Cf. John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them: A theology of the body*, trans. M. Waldstein, Pauline Books & Media, Boston 2006.

²⁰ Francis, *Amoris lætitia*, 72.

²¹ Cf. J. Machinek, *Małżeństwo – dar, który zobowiązuje*, in: Jan Paweł II, *Mężczyznę i niewiastę stworzył ich. Sakrament. O Jana Pawła II teologii ciała*, TN KUL, Lublin 1999, p. 248.

vocation of the family is to be the source and guardian of life. The family “has a decisive responsibility. This responsibility flows from its very nature as a community of life and love, founded upon marriage, and from its mission to “guard, reveal and communicate love.” Here it is a matter of God’s own love, of which parents are co-workers and as it were interpreters when they transmit life and raise it according to his fatherly plan. This is the love that becomes selflessness, receptiveness, and gift.”²² This responsibility of the family is all the greater today because of increasing attacks on life in the mother’s womb and in the terminal period. Actions of some anti-life groups as well as the decisions of parliament that seek to legalize the right to abortion and euthanasia are evidence of this. Therefore, the family must fulfill its role throughout the life of its members, from conception to natural death. Because it “is truly “the sanctuary of life: the place in which life—the gift of God—can be properly welcomed and protected against the many attacks to which it is exposed and can develop in accordance with what constitutes authentic human growth.” Consequently, the role of the family in building a culture of life is decisive and irreplaceable.”²³ Pope Francis speaks of “life, which is an end in itself and which can never be considered the “property” of another human being. The family protects human life in all its stages, including its last.”²⁴ No society or state can replace the family in fulfilling this task.

Being life’s guardian, the family is the environment for the proper formation of a person’s personality. Parents’ vocation is to shape and raise a new human being by giving life to it, to be Parents and Educators of a human being. “Fatherhood and motherhood” is “the gift of humanity.”²⁵ Therefore, it is their right and, at the same time, their duty resulting from the fact that they are parents. As John Paul II teaches, “The right and duty of parents to give education is essential, since it is connected with the transmission of human life; it is original and primary with regard to the educational role of others, on account of the uniqueness of the loving relationship between parents and children; and it is

²² John Paul II, Encyclical on the value and inviolability of human life *Evangelium vitae*, 25.03.1995, 92, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html (03.02.2025).

²³ John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, 92.

²⁴ Francis, *Amoris lætitia*, 83.

²⁵ John Paul II, *Letter to families*, 16.

irreplaceable and inalienable, and therefore incapable of being entirely delegated to others or usurped by others.”²⁶

The gift of humanity means introducing man onto the path of true freedom. A human being seeks freedom and strives for it in many ways. It is the essence of their existence. It is also the source of their responsibility for the attitudes and actions of everyday life and for other people. However, contemporary culture emphasizes freedom understood as total autonomy of people, as if they were their only creators, independent of others, and free from responsibility. Therefore, Pope Benedict XVI says, “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.”²⁷ In the family, one learns what it means to be free when one undertakes everyday tasks and feels responsible for their realization. One learns to be free when one does not give up one’s responsibilities despite difficulties or counter models that contemporary culture often presents.

After all, shaping humanity is also educating oneself for social life. Every person belongs to a specific community and is therefore also responsible for its shape and development. Hence, “the family constitutes one of the most important terms of reference for shaping the social and ethical order of human work.” It is “simultaneously a community made possible by work and the first school of work, within the home, for every person.”²⁸ By educating people towards social responsibility, the family strengthens the assets of the community in which it lives and can fully fulfil its vocation. Therefore, the family is “the place of origin and the most effective means for humanizing and personalizing society”²⁹ Pope Benedict XVI will add that the family is “an intermediate

²⁶ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, 36.

²⁷ Benedict XVI, Homily during Apostolic Journey to Valencia (Spain) on Occasion of the Fifth World Meeting of Families, *City of arts and sciences*, Vatican 9.07.2006, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20060709_valencia.html (04.02.2025).

²⁸ John Paul II, Encyclical *Laborem exercens*, 14.09.1981, 10, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html (04.02.2025).

²⁹ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, 43.

institution between individuals and society, and nothing can completely take its place.”³⁰ Pope Francis, on the other hand emphasizes that “Every child has a right to receive love from a mother and a father; both are necessary for a child’s integral and harmonious development.”³¹ Therefore, the family needs society to be able to properly carry out its tasks, but society cannot exist without a healthy family because it guarantees its future and development.

Preaching the truth about marriage and family, the Church respects their distinctive and unique character. Every family is unique, just as every person is unique and unrepeatable. That is why the Church does not act in relation to the family *in abstracto* but to every family on the globe, regardless of the latitude in which it lives or what its cultural heritage is. Every family constitutes the basic “cell” of society and the foundation of the existence of every community.³² Therefore, the Church addresses her message to all families around the world.

The Church—defender of marriage and family

The Church not only preaches the truth about marriage and family to the entire world but also defends the dignity and unique value they both represent for all societies, religions, and cultures. Her attention goes out to every family regardless of faith, denomination, nationality or living situation. Each home is a community of love and a school of enriched humanity for the Church because the family creates an irreplaceable environment conducive to properly experiencing the tensions between autonomy and community, unity, and diversity. Therefore, the voice of the Church calling for respect for the value and dignity of marriage and family has always been clear and decisive, especially in the second half of the 20th century, when the family became the subject of increased attacks.

The Church has expressed its concern for marriage and family very forcefully in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. In the Pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*, it states: “Public authority should regard it as a sacred duty to recognize, protect and promote their [marriage and families, translator’s note] authentic nature, to shield public morality and to favor the prosperity of home

³⁰ Benedict XVI, Homily during Apostolic Journey to Valencia (Spain) on occasion of the Fifth World Meeting of Families.

³¹ Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, 172.

³² John Paul II, *Letters to families*, 4.

life. The right of parents to beget and educate their children in the bosom of the family must be safeguarded. Children who unhappily lack the blessing of a family should be protected by prudent legislation and various undertakings and assisted by the help they need.”³³ We find an echo of the voice of the Second Vatican Council in the *Charter of the Rights of the Family*, published in 1983, which in its introduction very clearly states that for the good of society it reaffirms the universal awareness of the fundamental rights of the family and offers to all those who consider responsibility for the common good a model and a point of reference for the development of legislation and family policy and a guide for programs of activities. It submits this document with full trust to international governmental organizations which, because of their competence and because of the activities undertaken to defend and promote human rights, cannot fail to notice or consent to violations of the fundamental rights of the family.³⁴ Referring to the message of the *Charter of Rights of the Family* Pope Francis emphasizes that “Families and homes go together. This shows how important it is to insist on the rights of the family and not only those of individuals. The family is a good which society cannot do without, and it ought to be protected.”³⁵

Similarly, Pope Paul VI repeatedly defended the dignity of the family and demanded respect for its rights from civil authorities. He did so even during one of the most challenging times for the family when the so-called “sexual revolution” proclaimed universal moral freedom and undermined the value of marriage and the family. In the Encyclical *Humanae vitae*, the pope made an appeal to public authorities: “And now We wish to speak to rulers of nations. To you most of all is committed the responsibility of safeguarding the common good. You can contribute so much to the preservation of morals. We beg of you, never allow the morals of your peoples to be undermined. The family is the primary unit in the state; do not tolerate any legislation which would introduce into the family those practices which are opposed to the natural law of God. [...] If only all governments which were able would do what some are already doing so nobly and bestir themselves to renew their efforts and their undertakings! There must

³³ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 52.

³⁴ Cf. Stolica Apostolska, *Karta Praw Rodziny, Wprowadzenie*, in: *Posoborowe dokumenty Kościoła Katolickiego o małżeństwie i rodzinie*, ed. K. Lubowicki, vol. 1, Wydawnictwo M, Kraków 1999, pp. 239–250.

³⁵ Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, 44.

be no relaxation in the programs of mutual aid between all the branches of the great human family.”³⁶

John Paul II, often called the “Pope of the family,” was particularly vocal about the rights of the family. Cardinal Stanisław Dziwisz described him as a great “priest of the family” at the turn of the second and third millennium of Christianity.”³⁷ John Paul II was aware of the growing threats, which not only undermine the dignity of marriage and family but also the meaning of their existence, presenting them as outdated institutions. Therefore, in the exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, he appeals to public authorities to do “everything possible to ensure that families have all those aids—economic, social, educational, political and cultural assistance—that they need in order to face all their responsibilities in a human way.”³⁸ Opposing the anti-family actions of public authorities, he emphasized that “the Church openly and strongly defends the rights of the family against the intolerable usurpations of society and the State.”³⁹

John Paul II intensified his appeals for respect for the rights of the family during the International Year of the Family proclaimed by the UN (1994). In a letter to heads of states from all over the world, referring to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, he clearly emphasized that “The family is part of the heritage of humanity! It is “the natural and fundamental groups unit of society.” For that reason, “The International Year of the Family should therefore be a special occasion for society and the State to grant the family the protection that the Universal Declaration recognizes it should have. Anything less would be a betrayal of the noblest ideals of the United Nations.”⁴⁰ In his *Letter to families*, Pope John Paul II emphasizes that the family is “a firmly grounded social reality. It is also, in a way entirely its own, a *sovereign society*,” and recalls that the fundamental duty of the state is to support its development without violating its autonomy. Therefore, “No human society can run the risk of permissiveness in fundamental issues regarding the nature of marriage and the family!

³⁶ Paul VI, *Humanae vitae*, 23.

³⁷ Cf. S. Dziwisz, *Jan Paweł II – Papież rodziny, Papież życia*. Konferencja wygłoszona w Walencji – Światowe Spotkanie Rodzin, 7.07.2006, “L’Osservatore Romano” (wyd. pol.) (2006) no. 9–10 (286), p. 20.

³⁸ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, 45.

³⁹ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, 46.

⁴⁰ John Paul II, Letter to the heads of states around the world, Vatican 19.03.1994, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_19031994_population-develop.html (5.02.2025).

Such moral permissiveness cannot fail to damage the authentic requirements of peace and communion among people. It is thus quite understandable why the Church vigorously defends the identity of the family and encourages responsible individuals and institutions, especially political leaders, and international organizations, not to yield to the temptation of a superficial and false modernity.”⁴¹

Pope Benedict XVI talks similarly about the rights of the family. He reminds us of the need to strengthen the values of marriage and family so that they do not become devalued at a time of the growing crisis of these basic institutions. Their destruction will undermine the foundations of the entire human community. As he emphasizes in the message for the World Day of Peace: “The social community, if it is to live in peace, is also called to draw inspiration from the values on which the family community is based. This is as true for local communities as it is for national communities; it is also true for the international community itself, for the human family which dwells in that common house which is the earth.”⁴²

This topic is also discussed by Pope Francis, who calls contemporary culture a “culture of the ephemeral,” pointing out that “The State has the responsibility to pass laws and create work to ensure the future of young people and help them realize their plan of forming a family.”⁴³

The above passages clearly indicate that the Church considers service to the family to be its fundamental mission. She defends it from ever bigger problems but is not shy of firmly standing her ground addressing international organizations or civil authorities, reminding us that every family is a constitutive and irreplaceable element of every community. The Church does not limit her activity only to Catholic families but extends her care to every human family regardless of faith, denomination, nationality or living situation. For her, every home remains a school of life and a richer humanity because it alone creates an irreplaceable environment, particularly conducive to properly experiencing the tensions between autonomy and community, unity, and diversity. Therefore, in the above mentioned letter to heads of states before the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, John Paul II emphasizes that: “Without infringing on the autonomy of a reality which they can neither

⁴¹ John Paul II, *Letter to families*, 17.

⁴² Benedict XVI, Message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace, Vatican 01.01.2008, 6, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20071208_xli-world-day-peace.html (6.02.2025).

⁴³ Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, 39, 43.

produce nor replace, civil authorities have a duty, in effect, to strive to promote the harmonious growth of the family, not only from the point of view of its social vitality but also from that of its moral and spiritual health.” Because the family is a universal institution and, as a natural and fundamental element of society “is part of the heritage of humanity!”⁴⁴ It is a universal institution, even though the modern world is trying to do without the family, questioning the validity of marriage as a union between a man and a woman and the need for a family environment for raising children.

Forming and developing pastoral care for the family

The Church’s commitment to the family manifests itself in the development of various pastoral forms and structures that can help the family fulfil its mission. The Second Vatican Council emphasizes this when it teaches that it is necessary to “nurture the vocation of spouses by a variety of pastoral means [...] so that families which are truly illustrious can be formed.”⁴⁵ John Paul II in *Familiaris consortio* says that “Every effort should be made to strengthen and develop pastoral care for the family, which should be treated as a real matter of priority, in the certainty that future evangelization depends largely on the domestic Church.”⁴⁶ In *Novo millennio ineunte* he will emphasize that “At a time in history like the present, special attention must also be given to the pastoral care of the family, particularly when this fundamental institution is experiencing a radical and widespread crisis.”⁴⁷ Pope Francis also stressed that “Pastoral care for families needs to make it clear that the Gospel of the family responds to the deepest expectations of the human person: a response to each one’s dignity and fulfilment in reciprocity, communion and fruitfulness. This consists not merely in presenting a set of rules, but in proposing values that are clearly needed today, even in the most secularized of countries.”⁴⁸ These appeals are addressed pri-

⁴⁴ John Paul II, *Letter to the heads of states around the world*.

⁴⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 52.

⁴⁶ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, 65.

⁴⁷ John Paul II, Apostolic letter at the close of the great jubilee of the year 2000, *Novo millennio ineunte*, 6.01.2001, 47, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/pl/apost_letters/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte.html (08.02.2015).

⁴⁸ Francis, *Amoris lætitia*, 201.

marily to priests and local church communities, in which families can directly discover and experience their vocation and mission.

The activity of the Church encompasses many areas of the life of the married couple and family. The basic ones, however, include pastoral activity (the practical aspect) and scientific reflection. The first consists in accompanying the married couple and family in everyday moments of the day, that is, in being progressively with them throughout their lives. The second consists in determining in a scientific way the tasks of the Church towards marriage and family, establishing the principles of their correct performance and developing ways and means of this activity.⁴⁹ Both of these areas are complementary and require constant deepening.

The practical sphere of pastoral care for the family includes all kinds of initiatives, from those undertaken by the forum of the Universal Church to the smallest units of local churches. Popes and individual dicasteries of the Roman Curia issue documents emphasizing the fundamental importance of pastoral care for the family. These include, among others, John Paul II's exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, especially part IV, the encyclical *Evangelium vitae* and the *Letter to families*, Pope Francis' Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia* on love in the family, issued at the conclusion of the 2nd World Meeting for Families in Rio de Janeiro, and the documents of the Congregation for Catholic Education (for Seminaries and Educational Institutions) *Directives on the formation of seminarians concerning problems related to marriage and the family*, and the Pontifical Council for the Family *Vademecum for confessors concerning some aspects of the morality of conjugal life*. These and other documents and homilies of popes define the general framework for all pastoral activities on behalf of the family, which should find their concrete application in the conditions of local communities and specific families.

The World Meetings for Families, initiated by John Paul II in 1994, are also among the general church initiatives. Before each meeting, there is a theological and pastoral congress, the aim of which is to study the current challenges that plague the contemporary family. These meetings are not only an opportunity to exchange pastoral experiences from various regions of the world but also a source of specific initiatives applied later in activities for families.

⁴⁹ Cf. R. Bieliński, *Duszpasterstwo rodzin we współczesnej Polsce*, Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin 2001, pp. 63–64.

However, these are local communities at the national level, especially at the diocesan and parish levels, that engage in the most significant and concrete pastoral actions in relation to marriage and family. As John Paul II said, care for the family led the Church in recent years to create new structures for its good. So, not only documents but also structures and concrete actions.⁵⁰ Here, individual families meet with existing problems; problems that await solutions.

In Poland, the structures of family ministry consist of the Polish Episcopal Commission, diocesan Family Ministry Departments, and parishes, which are the basic organizational units of family ministry.⁵¹ The most important pastoral activities include educational work undertaken in schools regarding children and youth, marriage preparation for engaged couples⁵², and working with families, especially those experiencing difficulties or problems. A very important role here is played by specialist counselling centers for engaged couples and spouses, where professionally trained people and specialists from various fields related to family life help to solve any difficulties and problems that may arise.⁵³ Defending life from conception to natural death also occupies an important place on the list of activities of family ministry. They include single mother homes, diocesan Adoption Centers established in each diocese, the Prayer Crusade for unborn children, and the Spiritual Adoption movement.⁵⁴

The didactic and scientific platform, on the other hand, undertakes systematic scientific research on marriage and family and educates priests and lay employees to work in the sector of pastoral care for the family.⁵⁵ It does this by using research results and achievements in sciences like genetics, psychology, pedagogy or sociology, without which the development of family studies would

⁵⁰ Cf. Jan Paweł II, *Czym jesteś, rodzinio chrześcijańska?*, in: Jan Paweł II, *Rodzino, co mówisz o sobie? Dokumenty i przemówienia papieskie w Roku Rodziny*, ed. A. Świerczek, Wydawnictwo Czuwajmy, Kraków 1995, p. 233.

⁵¹ Cf. R. Bieleń, *Duszpasterstwo rodzin we współczesnej Polsce*, pp. 76–88.

⁵² R. Bieleń, *Duszpasterstwo rodzin we współczesnej Polsce*, pp. 240–263.

⁵³ R. Bieleń, *Duszpasterstwo rodzin we współczesnej Polsce*, pp. 263–278.

⁵⁴ R. Bieleń, *Duszpasterstwo rodzin we współczesnej Polsce*, pp. 228–239.

⁵⁵ R. Bieleń, *Duszpasterstwo rodzin we współczesnej Polsce*, pp. 77–81; cf. *Nauki o rodzinie. Tradycje i perspektywy edukacyjne*, eds. G. Koszałka, M. Stopikowska, Wydawnictwo Ateneum-Szkoły Wyższej, Gdańsk 2007; *Nauki o rodzinie w służbie rodziny*, ed. J. Stala, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Papieskiego Jana Pawła II, Kraków 2014; *Duszpasterstwo rodzin. Refleksja naukowa i działalność pastoralna*, eds. R. Kamiński, G. Pyżlak, J. Goleń, Bonus Liber Lublin 2013; *Towarzyszyć małżeństwu i rodzinie. Inspiracje adhortacji apostołskiej "Amoris Laetitia" dla duszpasterstwa rodzin*, ed. J. Goleń, Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin 2017.

be impossible. And they are essential for understanding and undertaking ways to solve issues related to the implementation of marital and family tasks and solving arising problems.

All these pastoral activities and initiatives are among the most important tasks of the Church, whose pastoral action, as John Paul II emphasizes, “must be progressive, also in the sense that it must follow the family, accompanying it step by step in the different stages of its formation and development.”⁵⁶ Both on the practical and didactic and scientific platforms, the family should be at the center, as the subject for whom all actions are taken. Otherwise, it will become an object used to achieve goals or justify the means of achieving them. Hence, the subsidiary principle applies to all actions towards marriage and the family, which emphasizes the primacy of the family. The family must fulfill its obligations and tasks on its own but awaits help and support.

Family, what do you say about yourself?

It is a disturbing phenomenon that today’s family does not try hard enough to deepen and strengthen the bonds that should unite its members or fulfill its educational obligations towards its children. Explanations which try to justify the situation, like: “such are the times” or “we don’t have time” have become a permanent part of everyday language and, imperceptibly but very consistently, contributed to deepening the crisis of the modern family. Therefore, there is a need for the family to awaken to free itself from the growing apathy, constant search for external reasons for difficulties, and expectation that someone will provide a solution. Hence, as one of the forms of action for the family, the Church reminds us that the family should become what it is in its essence. Therefore, the Second Vatican Council teaches that for the family to be able “to achieve the full flowering of its life and mission, it needs the kindly communion of minds and the joint deliberation of spouses, as well as the painstaking cooperation of parents in the education of their children.”⁵⁷ The mutual dedication of spouses and their commitment to transforming their relationship into a community of love is a fundamental condition for its duration and development. External

⁵⁶ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, 65.

⁵⁷ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 52.

factors can either promote or hinder the development of the family. However, their influence depends on the attitude of the family itself.

Considering this issue, John Paul II asks the family a very fundamental question: "Family, what do you say of yourself?"⁵⁸ Who are you for yourself, for society and for the Church? The task of the family is therefore to continually learn about its identity, to discover its subjectivity, which results from the theology of marriage and the family. For God included in the plan of creation his plan for the family, so that it would be a community of love and life.

Man and woman are given to each other by the Creator as their proper help and personal complement. Their mutual self-giving, that is, their readiness to give themselves completely as a person to their spouse and their ability to accept the gift of the other person completely, is the measure of conjugal love. Deepening the awareness of such a commitment puts spouses in the perspective of a constant new perception and realization of their conjugal and family life. It also becomes a source of constant "freshness" of their communion, which is the most effective antidote to the often-mounting difficulties of everyday life. Moreover, for others, it is a strengthening testimony and confirmation that the family can be strong and beautiful. Pope John Paul II reminds us of this when he appeals to new families, urging them to bear witness to the greatness of the vocation to marriage and parenthood to all families in the world today, in every place on earth, among nations, peoples and cultures. Only families can bear witness to other families. The pope urged them to become a living sign of the love of God and the Church for every new family.⁵⁹ This is probably one of the most important ways of strengthening and renewing the contemporary family, which should be performed by strong families that are aware of their dignity and indisputable value. Then, various external influences or pressures become less harmful in the development of the family. Therefore, as John Paul II emphasizes "it is necessary to ensure that through an ever more complete Gospel formation Christian families show convincingly that it is possible to live marriage fully in keeping with God's plan and with the true good of the human person—of the spouses, and of the children who are more fragile."⁶⁰ And Pope Francis emphasizes that Christian marriages and families, "by the grace of the

⁵⁸ Cf. Jan Paweł II, *Czym jesteś, rodzino chrześcijańska?*, p. 231.

⁵⁹ Jan Paweł II, *Ewangelizacja rodziny przez rodzinę rodzinę*, p. 159.

⁶⁰ John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, 47.

sacrament of matrimony” should be a source of joy-filled witness for other couples and families.⁶¹

In this context, communities and associations of families play a significant role. They are of great importance for the Church⁶² because within their framework, families, through joint efforts and above all through a greater possibility of action, also in the social and legal sense, can more effectively counteract the many threats that affect this fundamental social community. Above all, however, they help individual families find their identity, values, and dignity, especially in situations of problems or danger. Families are not alone and do not have to fight for a dignified existence alone. These communities are also an expression of the great dynamism of families, convinced that the lives of their members and the future of society depend on them. For, as M. Schooyans remarks, if the family is good for its members, it is even a greater good for the community.⁶³

The actions of the Church included in the above presentation indicate her great commitment to marriage and family. They are also an expression of the Church’s deep conviction that “the well-being of society and her own good are intimately tied to the good of the family.” Hence the need for its constant development and strengthening, so that it can truly be “the first and most important” path for a human being. This is especially important today, when in the times of profound and rapid social and cultural changes, there are families that “have become uncertain and bewildered over their role or even doubtful and almost unaware of the ultimate meaning and truth of conjugal and family life. Finally, there are others who are hindered by various situations of injustice in the realization of their fundamental rights.”⁶⁴

Pope Francis also emphasizes that we must take every effort to best discern the situation of contemporary marriages and families and to accompany them at every stage of their lives, from education to conjugal and family life. Only then will the Church fulfill her mission in relation to marriage and family. Because,

⁶¹ Cf. Francis, *Amoris lætitia*, 200.

⁶² Cf. John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, 72; Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 18; Francis, *Amoris lætitia*, 202.

⁶³ Cf. M. Schooyans, *The hidden face of the United Nations*, transl. by Rev. J. H. Miller, C.S.C., S.T.D, https://lust-for-life.org/Lust-For-Life/_Textual/MichaelSchooyans_TheHiddenFaceOfTheUnitedNations_2001_190pp/MichaelSchooyans_TheHiddenFaceOfTheUnitedNations_2001_190pp.pdf (08.02.2025).

⁶⁴ Cf. John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, 1–3.

as he emphasizes, “The Church wishes, with humility and compassion, to reach out to families and to help each family to discover the best way to overcome any obstacles it encounters. It is not enough to show generic concern for the family in pastoral planning. Enabling families to assume their role as active agents of the family apostolate calls for an effort at evangelization and catechesis inside the family.”⁶⁵

The contemporary family needs to find the source of its identity and strength, to be the joy and hope (*Gaudium et spes*) of a human being and society. In this search, the Church is the one that tirelessly shows the direction and offers support in the journey against the current. Finding the source gives a chance to regain the “reviving freshness” that brings rebirth to people, family, and society.⁶⁶

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⁶⁵ Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, 200.

⁶⁶ Cf. Jan Paweł II, *Tryptyk rzymski*, Wydawnictwo św. Stanisława BM, Kraków 2003, p. 11.

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