

THE VOCATION OF MARRIAGE IN GOD'S PLAN

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Before I begin, I want to thank my brother bishops here in Peru, and all of you brothers and sisters in the faith, for the warmth of your welcome and the genuine hospitality that permeates this entire congress.

This is my first visit to the city of St. Rose, to the country of Peru, a land of such significant and beautiful ancient civilizations. I sincerely hope it will not be my last. The spirit of Christian friendship you have already shown me is a powerful reminder of the love that made World Youth Day such a success last year in my own home city of Denver. I know that some of you joined in that pilgrimage, and I find great joy in being reunited with you today.

I have to admit, though, that when I was first invited to speak to you, some months ago, I hesitated to accept. The reason is simple. Too many North Americans have already offered too much advice to Latin America for too long. In fact, the global crisis now facing the family is largely the creation of the so-called "developed" countries of the northern hemisphere. Yet because of our economic dominance and the enormous influence of our mass media, we are succeeding in imposing our dysfunctions on the whole world community.

I can hardly point to my own country as an example of positive family values. In the US, 27 percent of all children under 18 years of age—or 6.3 million children—live with a single parent. In 1960, the number of such children was 243,000. Moreover, I have little experience of the practical problems the Church faces in your countries, so it would be unwise for me to lecture you on how to solve them.

Nonetheless, I am a brother in the faith, and I do have experience as a personal witness of society in the United States, a society now committed to principles that run directly counter to the health of the family. Therefore, perhaps I can serve as a messenger, and also as a voice of caution.

Struggling for the family

Please understand why this congress is so important. The struggle for the family will be won or lost not by the United States and industrialized Europe, but by nations and cultures in the southern hemisphere, such as your own, because you have not yet abdicated your common sense. You have not yet lost your soul.

It is instructive that Latin America's bishops have provided the most articulate and forceful criticism of the impending Cairo population conference to date, and this is not an accident. No one understands better than the peoples of the southern hemisphere that they are the target, not the beneficiaries, of population control. Leadership on the issues surrounding the family must be provided by Christians of the south. For that reason, I have come to learn and discuss and observe far more than to preach.

"The vocation of marriage in God's plan." This is our theme today. It's a simple phrase with simple words. And rightly so. All Truth is finally very simple, yet rich in meaning at the same time. Pope John Paul II has revisited this simple theme again and again in his immensely important, even foundational, catechesis on the book of Genesis; in <Familiaris Consortio>; in <Mulieris Dignitatem>; and most recently in his international Letter to Families.

In a way, much of what we need to know about the contemporary vocation of marriage in God's plan has already been written or preached. And yet, when we look around us, we can see that the world is not listening. In fact, the world has no interest in listening. The question is: Why?

I suggest that we will find the answer in language itself. The industrialized countries of the north are quickly losing the vocabulary of moral and sacramental discourse. The world and Church may use many of the same words, but they no longer mean the same things.

Marriage as vocation or contract

For example, when the Church speaks of "vocation," she means a calling out to each person to accomplish a task preordained by God in the co-redemption of the world. The highest joy in life for a Christian is searching out, discovering, and pursuing the purpose for which God called him into existence. The idea of vocation implies and demands a larger design to life.

For exactly these reasons, the modern secular world rarely even uses the word "vocation." And when it does, vocation is drained of its sacred resonance and becomes merely a synonym for a craft or profession. The so-called "vocational" high schools of the United States do not exist to help young people discern the larger meaning of their lives. Rather, they exist to teach young workers practical employment skills, such as how to be a skilled automobile mechanic.

This radical difference about the meaning of a word is even more pronounced with the idea of marriage. What do Christians mean by marriage? The blessing found in the ancient Gregorian Sacramentary best describes it. "Oh God, you consecrated the union of marriage by a mystery so profound as to prefigure in the marriage covenant the sacrament of Christ and the Church."

Every one of these qualities—mystery, sacrament, covenant, consecration—is either controverted by, or incomprehensible to, modern secular culture. Change is the order of the day and permanence is a negative value. Homosexual relationships vie for an equal validity before the law. Sacraments have been pushed aside by aggressive technology and pragmatic materialism. The revocable contract has superseded the irrevocable covenant. Children are products and often liabilities. And the very idea of sanctity is seen as a delusion of a closed religious community. How can holiness be taken seriously when we presume that nothing exists outside the visible world?

Creation, chance, and necessity

And what of the word "God"? As Hans Urs von Balthasar has indicated, Christians believe that God has revealed himself through the encounters, in creation and in history, between infinite divine freedom and finite human freedom. The world simply does not believe in that revelation; or if it does believe, God is nothing more than an impersonal force or universal consciousness without direct involvement in the life of humanity.

Finally, without God, there can be no plan to creation. All is either by chance or necessity. For the Christian, all created beings have meaning; they are part of a grand symphony giving glory to the one triune God who out of love freely creates the world. But once God is excised, the symphony becomes discordant. The harmony unravels. The center does not hold.

At the heart of the modern identity lurks a deep pessimism flowing from an inability to find coherence in the knowledge we accumulate. Facts are worthless without a map to what they mean. In fact, they are worse than worthless; they actively mock us, because they become monuments to our emptiness. Humanity now doubles its database every couple of decades. Modern technological culture is drowning in facts and huge quantities of data, and yet we still desperately thirst for meaning. And the postmodern universe threatens to snap under the divisive, diffusive, and destructive tensions dominant since the 1960s, at least in North America and the West.

This then is the fundamental problem facing our efforts on behalf of the family. The language of the secular world is becoming sterile. We are mesmerized by measurable quantities and material objects. Humanity

reductively becomes a collection of statistical studies. As a result, imagination has died. We can conceive of no higher purpose to human sexuality than companionship and pleasure, here and now. And the consequences are enormous.

Dan Quayle vs. Murphy Brown

Some of you who follow North American politics may remember the US presidential campaign of 1992. During that campaign, the then-vice president, Dan Quayle, made "family values" his personal crusade. He argued that the traditional family was under attack in the United States; that if we didn't defend the family, social disorder and contempt for human dignity would continue to increase. For his efforts, Quayle became the target of almost universal media derision. Popular television shows like *Murphy Brown*—whose lead character, a successful career woman, decides to have a child out of wedlock—treated Quayle like a clown. His message of family values was dismissed as dangerously reactionary. Quayle, of course, went down to defeat along with his running mate George Bush.

I mention this not to praise Dan Quayle, but to underline the irony, and the importance, of a story that appeared in a prestigious US magazine only five months after the election. In April 1993, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, writing for the <Atlantic Monthly> magazine, published a cover story entitled "Dan Quayle was right." This article created a firestorm of media attention because she demonstrated—through reliable, social scientific data—that so-called alternatives to the traditional intact two-parent family simply don't work.

And not only do they fail to provide stability within the home, these alternatives also have a very damaging ripple effect on society as a whole. In fact "diverse models" of the family, which in practice mean single-parent and step-parent families, can be shown to undermine society.

Studies indicate that children in single-parent families are six times more likely to be poor, and they stay poor longer. They are two to three times more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems. They are more likely to fail in the classroom and to drop out of school completely, to get pregnant as teenagers, to abuse drugs and get into trouble with the law. They are also at much higher risk for physical and sexual abuse. Children from disrupted families have a harder time achieving intimacy in their relationships, forming stable marriages, and holding steady employment. In other words, contrary to the mythology of the past 25 years in the United States and Europe, divorce is a disaster for children. They do not "bounce back" from it.

This trauma is deep and long-lasting, and it manifests itself in a great variety of ways. Whitehead quotes family researcher Judith Wallerstein as stressing that "Parent-child relationships are permanently altered by divorce in ways that our society has not anticipated." Not only do children experience a loss of parental attention at the onset of divorce, but they soon find that at every stage of their development, their parents are not available in the ways that are urgently needed.

"In a reasonably happy intact family," says researcher Wallerstein, "the child gravitates first to one parent and then to the other, using skills and attributes from each in climbing the developmental ladder." But in a broken family, children find it much harder to draw support and guidance from the needed parent at the needed time. As a result, many children from broken families are haunted by a sense of loss and uncertainty even 15 years after their parents divorce, crippling their own ability to build stable, permanent homes for the next generation.

These are the personal costs. Now multiply the suffering of these children by tens of millions, and you have a portrait of the social fabric of the United States today. Eighty percent of black children in a city like Baltimore are now born out of wedlock. Illegitimacy and divorce rates are rising among all social and ethnic groups. So is gang violence. So is domestic abuse. So is the traffic in illegal drugs. Here in Peru, you have recently witnessed the efforts of US military and police personnel to interdict the cocaine trade. But the real problem is not Peruvian growers; it is North American users and the moral vacuum that is consuming their spirit.

I could go on with this litany of sorrow, but you understand my point. We in the industrialized nations have distorted the true meaning of freedom, which must be rooted in responsibility. Many years ago, Karol Wojtyla wrote, "We are liberated from freedom through love." Today, we have turned "freedom" into the idolatry of personal license, where each defines truth for oneself, and no higher authority is allowed to interfere with the stampede for personal satisfaction. What has emerged is a kind of blankness in experience, a state of moral exhaustion and weariness. In such an environment the values of family and marriage have seemed illusory.

We are no longer a community which shares a common moral culture. Rather, we are becoming an aggregate of narcissistic consumers, blind to the transcendent nature and destiny of the human person.

The American model

For two centuries the United States has perceived itself as a model of liberty for mankind; as a citizen of the United States, I take great pride in my country's founding and framing principles. But something has gone wrong with the North American social fabric today, and instead of addressing it and attempting to heal it, we exalt and export it. In the United States and in the countries of the West, the distinct experience of the 20th century is that behind all human values and endeavors is nothing more than cosmic emptiness.

At the heart of the population-control policies advanced by countries of the northern hemisphere lie two basic impulses: selfishness and fear. President Clinton's address on June 29, 1994, before the Forum on Population Issues mentioned two basic priorities for the G-7 Naples meeting: creation of more jobs among the G-7 countries and population control in third world countries. All other issues seemed subordinate to these priorities. Americans are determined to protect our standard of living. Rather than share what we have with the peoples of the southern hemisphere, we seek to control, contain, and diminish them. It is important to remember that the greatest strains on the environment come from the first world consumption and not from third world population growth.

Any Christian will see how hostile to the family these impulses are. The family, in its very structure, is a rejection of fear and an expression of hope. Its natural fertility brings the future into human flesh. It is the origin of life. The family has the privilege of being the domestic Church. It's the doorway by which the triune God enters into humanity. That's why the modern technological state fears it, and seeks to limit, dilute, and control it, to break it down even when the practical results of that breakdown are so destructive. The family is a competing, sovereign source of meaning. It demands unselfishness. It teaches community. It inculcates higher values that claim an authority independent of the state.

Thus, in the developing world, the family is the single most important vanguard of opposition to the industrialized nations' culture of scarcity and death, embodied in population-control policies. The preparatory document for September's Cairo population conference nowhere refers to the positive value of the family, for the very practical reason that the living community of the family is the preeminent enemy of those who prepared the final draft document for the Cairo Conference. The authors of that document have an unsettling presupposition about the initiation of world-wide change: it can only happen when death enters into the language.

The bishops of Latin America have correctly identified population control as "contraceptive imperialism." It is the worst kind of cynical hypocrisy because it pretends to offer freedom while it robs the emerging world of its birthright. It preaches development while it steals the future, which for every culture resides in its children. It claims to empower women while making them barren.

The vocation of marriage in God's plan today is a call to loving opposition and missionary zeal: opposition to the culture of death and zeal to spread the truth about the nature of the human person, which is fully revealed in Jesus Christ.

Reflection of the Trinity

There is much more to Christian marriage than opposition. Christian marriage is not passive. Love is openly receptive. It creates new life. It renews humanity. It is an echo, in human flesh, of the sacred, creative ecology of love within the Trinity itself.

Every moment of every day, a mother and father are teaching, guiding, and sanctifying each other and their children, while witnessing about their love to the world beyond the borders of their home. They cannot do otherwise. The structure of the marital covenant, if lived fruitfully and faithfully, takes them along this way, a way which leads to the eternal banquet of the Lamb with his Bride.

The marital covenant provides a security to both spouses which enables each to come to full personal realization through the total gift of self to the other. The spouses thereby manifest the splendor of God's Trinitarian love to the world.

In this light we comprehend the divine plan that marriage is the foundation and guarantee of the family, and the family is the foundation and guarantee of society. Nothing else will serve; not government, not technology, not shared economic interests, not the will to individual self-fulfillment.

It is within the intimate, personal community of the family that a child first learns those basic virtues like religious piety, loyalty, honesty, and selfless concern for others. Civil discourse in the public forum is absolutely dependent upon the cultivator of these virtues.

The marital covenant is a mystery of unfathomable depths; it is charged with the miraculous. And the family, founded upon the marriage covenant, safeguards our fundamental social sense of community, because within it the child grows up in a web of intimately connected rights and responsibilities to others. It also protects our unique, individual identity, because it introduces the child into a sheltering and all-encompassing maternal love. And precisely here we find unfolding what John Paul II has described as "the radiation of fatherhood." Here is present the enduring mystery of marriage. We most easily understand and believe in love when we, ourselves, are the fruit of spousal tenderness, forgiveness, and fidelity. Love lived in a family is the unanswerable argument for God—and also for the worthiness of the human heart.

Within marriage, within the family, is where we first learn this. Marriage is transformed and fulfilled when spouses cooperate responsibly with God in the creation of new human beings. man and woman fully realize their masculinity and femininity by sharing in God's transmission of life to their children, who are new and unique images of God. This is why the Church defends marriage and the family, and forcefully resists population control with contraceptive and abortive designs. Unquestionably, the Church insists that the husband and wife exercise responsible fatherhood and motherhood, especially in that moment of special value when united "in one flesh." And with equal clarity, John Paul II summarizes the Catholic Tradition on marriage when he teaches that "The two dimensions of conjugal union, the unitive and procreative, cannot be artificially separated without damaging the deepest truth of the conjugal act itself" (Letter to Families, 12). It is in the conjugal act in particular that the couple realizes the logic of their total gift of self.

Marital love is an act of worship through which God creates new persons destined for eternal, loving union with him; the human parents are sanctified in their cooperation with him. Understood in this light, contraception contradicts God's plan and depersonalizes and dehumanizes those who practice it.

It is the nature of the human condition that at any given moment we are either growing or dying. We must choose life or death. There is no middle ground. In Deuteronomy, God says to his people, "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life then, that you and your descendants may live." The prevention of new life is a choice in favor of death. But every marriage that makes an act of trust in God and

remains open to children is a powerful choice for life. It is to the glory of Christ that, in the face of rupture and cessation, the Church keeps the words of the Creator forever alive in man's conscience.

Holiness and truth

Every vocation is a call to holiness, and marriage is no exception. But what exactly does holiness mean? In everyday language, we use the words "good" and "holy" almost interchangeably. Holy people are, of course, also good people. These two words do not mean the same thing, however.

"Holy" comes from the Hebrew word <kadosh>, which means "other than." God is holy because he is "other than" us. His ways are not the ways of the world. This is why St. Paul tells us, in Romans, "Do not be conformed to the world." Pope John Paul II uses the same Scripture passage—"Do not be conformed to the world"—as a foundation stone for his great encyclical on "the splendor of the truth."

We must remember that God is Truth. If we sincerely seek God, if we earnestly search for the truth, we will necessarily become more like him and contribute to the building up of the civilization of love. This is why Christians seem foolish, or even dangerous, in the eyes of those who inhabit "the civilization of technology." This is why the Church is derided and vilified by global powerbrokers; they assume that human progress must be built on infertility rather than responsible fatherhood and motherhood. To the degree that married couples are true to their Christian vocation, they will be untrue to the agenda of the "anti-civilization."

This brings us back to the ideas of loving opposition and missionary zeal. While we must not be conformed to the world, neither do we have a license to condemn it, or withdraw from it. God put us here to help him complete his work of redemption—because he loves the world. That's why he sent his Son to die for it. As we realize in wonder and joy our call to holiness, so we draw the "groaning" creation toward fulfillment by our priestly mediation.

This balance of love for the world and opposition to its ways is a difficult one. It cannot be accomplished unless we provide much more effective programs of marriage preparation to our young people. I mean both remote and proximate preparation. Such preparation must be experienced within a community of prayer and penance.

At least in the North American context, many Catholic young people marry with good intentions and with a robust love for God and the Church. But they don't take seriously the sacramental nature of marriage, and they don't see the larger purpose or ecclesial dimension of their covenant. Many do not even know what a covenant is. They find it difficult to participate profoundly in the Eucharistic sacrifice. Consequently, they are not ready for the cross. They don't understand its role in marriage; when suffering comes, they see it not as an opportunity to a deepened interiority, but as a failure. They give up.

Missionary zeal

It doesn't have to be this way. In my 37 years as a priest, I have seen again and again that the human heart was made for the truth, and that people are hungry for the truth and will choose it, when they come to know that the way to the truth is Christ. But too often we treat the cross of Christ as if it were a "department" of our life, rather than its foundation.

The world culture now taking shape under the guidance of the northern industrialized nations is presently no friend of the cross of Christ; it despises the cross, characterizing it as "that wild beast" of cruelty. The religion of modern, secular society is an increasingly militant atheism. It is aggressive, confident, and intolerant. These qualities are not foreign to those who have developed the draft document for the Cairo conference.

The personal love of each spouse for the other must be surrounded by the gleam of God's glory. They do their best preaching, of course, by example. A married couple who models love becomes a beacon for other couples. At the same time, our families do need to recover an outward-looking zeal in spreading the Gospel of Christ and his saving death on the cross.

In the United States, entire families of Seventh Day Adventists or Jehovah's Witnesses frequently go from door to door in a neighborhood, recruiting for their sects. The doctrines of these groups are confused, and their tactics are certainly annoying. Still, I admire the astonishing conviction they bring in spreading their religion. And I wonder: How do our Catholic families compare in their zeal for the Gospel of Christ?

No Catholic family can afford to be lukewarm about the mystery of Christ and the mystery of the Church. For no culture is so traditionally "Catholic" that it is safe from a militant atheism or evangelical Protestantism. Catholic families will either live and model and actively spread their Catholic faith, or there will be no Catholic faith to spread.

Memories of World Youth Day

I'll conclude with some thoughts that have been with me since last summer. Perhaps they'll help us better understand our goal.

Exactly one year ago, while Catholics in Colorado prepared for World Youth Day and the papal visit, Denver experienced its bloodiest, most violent season in decades. In the months prior to the pilgrimage, gangs and drugs, guns and drive-by shootings, seemed to dominate the headlines of our newspapers and television broadcasts nearly every day. It became a source of terrible apprehension. We worried about the safety of the young people who would travel to Denver. We worried that violence might overshadow the great promise which World Youth Day could radiate throughout the Church. But we also worried for our own Denver community, because we know our people. They're good and decent people, and the violence came upon them like a crucifixion. They didn't deserve it.

But something curious happened. From the moment World Youth Day began until its conclusion a week later, the violence simply stopped. The city's fears and tensions disappeared. Serious crime declined so dramatically that even the police were confounded. Some 200,000 young people converged on Denver from around the world, and there was not one incident—not one incident—of any of them falling victim to deadly violence.

I have no explanation for this other than God's grace. Something redemptive and sanctifying happened when those young people met the Pope in Denver, and even today, one year later, our city still reflects upon that unexpected peace and grace. The violence, at least the kind of violence we saw last June and July, has not returned. I mention this story because Denver is a young, growing, and highly educated city. In a way, it's a sign of what the United States will look like in the 21st century. It's a glimpse of my country's future. What I see there is what Augustine saw in his world 1,500 years ago: the city of God and the city of man, coexisting in the same time and place and people—and each struggling to win the human soul.

For a week last year, the struggle ended. The civilization of love, through the presence of those 200,000 young people, shone alone in all its beauty in Denver, transforming thousands of lives and bringing many people to the Church. Whom do I thank for this gift? The Pope? Surely. The young people? Surely. But who gave these young people life? Who showed them how to love? Who planted the seed of faith in their heart and helped it grow? Who smoothed their path of faith by walking ahead of them and showing them the way?

The vocation of marriage is to build, one soul at a time, the civilization of love—a city of abundant life which, in God's plan, will one day embrace all creation. I am here in Lima to tell you that it is not a dream. I have seen it.