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Families

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the sad solution of a separation of the spouses, much less by recourse to divorce, a true "plague" of present-day society. (4)

Likewise, in many parts of the world, whole nations are caught in the spiral of bloody conflicts, of which families are often the first victims: Either they are deprived of the main if not the only breadwinner, or they are forced to abandon home, land and property and flee into the unknown; in any event they are subjected to painful misfortunes which threaten all security. How can we fail to recall, in this regard, the bloody conflict between ethnic groups which is still going on in Bosnia-Herzegovina? And this is only one case, amid so many situations of war throughout the world!

In the face of such distressing situations, society often appears incapable of offering effective help, or is even culpably indifferent. The spiritual and psychological needs of those who have experienced the effects of armed conflict are as pressing and serious as their need for food or shelter. Specific structures need to be set up for actively supporting families affected by unexpected and devastating misfortunes, so that in spite of them they will not yield to the temptation to discouragement and revenge, but will react in a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation. How often, unfortunately, there is no sign of this!

4. Nor can one forget that war and violence not only constitute divisive forces which weaken and destroy family structures; they also exercise a pernicious influence on people's minds, suggesting and practically imposing models of behavior diametrically opposed to peace. In this regard, one must deplore a very sad fact: These days unfortunately a growing number of boys and girls and even small children are playing a direct part in armed conflicts. They are forced to join armed militias and have to fight for causes they do not always understand. In other cases, they become involved in a real culture of violence in which life counts for very little and killing does not seem

wrong. It is in the interests of the whole of society to ensure that these young people give up violence and take the path of peace, but this presupposes patient education given by people who sincerely believe in peace.

At this point I cannot fail to mention another serious obstacle to the development of peace in our society: Many, too many children are deprived of the warmth of a family. Sometimes the family is absent: In fact, the parents, taken up by other interests, leave their children to their own devices. In other cases the family simply does not exist: Thus there are thousands of children who have no home but the street and who can count on no resources except themselves. Some of these street children die tragically. Others are led into the use and even the sale of drugs and into prostitution, and not infrequently they end up in criminal organizations. Such scandalous and widespread situations cannot be ignored! The very future of society is at stake. A community which rejects children, or marginalizes them, or reduces them to hopeless situations can never know peace.

In order to count on a peaceful future, every child needs to experience the warmth of caring and constant affection, not betrayal and exploitation. And although the state can do much by providing means and structures of support, the contribution of the family to ensuring that climate of security and trust cannot be replaced, so important is it in helping young children to look to the future with serenity, and in preparing them to take a responsible part in building a society of true progress when they grow up. Children are the future already present among us; they need to experience what peace means, so that they will be able to create a future of peace.

An agent for peace

5. An enduring peaceful order needs institutions which express and consolidate the values of peace. The institution which most immediately responds to the nature of the human being is the family. It alone ensures the continuity and the future of society. The family is therefore called to become an active agent for peace, through the values which it expresses and transmits within itself, and through the participation of each of its members in the life of society.

As the fundamental nucleus of society, the family has a right to the full support of the state in order to carry out fully its particular mission. State laws, therefore, must be directed to promoting

its well-being, helping it to fulfill its proper duties. In the face of increasing pressure nowadays to consider, as legally equivalent to the union of spouses, forms of union which by their very nature or their intentional lack of permanence are in no way capable of expressing the meaning and ensuring the good of the family, it is the duty of the state to encourage and protect the authentic institution of the family, respecting its natural structure and its innate and inalienable rights. (5) Among these, the fundamental one is the right of parents to decide, freely and responsibly, on the basis of their moral and religious convictions and with a properly formed conscience, when to have a child, and then to educate that child in accordance with those convictions.

The state also has an important role in creating the conditions in which families can provide for their primary needs in a way befitting human dignity. Poverty, indeed destitution — a perennial threat to social stability, to the development of people and to peace — in our day affects too many families. It sometimes happens that, because of a lack of means, young couples put off having a family or are even prevented from having one, while needy families cannot participate fully in the life of society or are forced into total emargination.

The duty of the state does not, however, excuse individual citizens: The real reply to the gravest questions in every society is in fact ensured by the harmonious solidarity of everyone. In effect, no one can be at ease until an adequate solution has been found to the problem of poverty, which strikes families and individuals. Poverty is always a threat to social stability, to economic development and ultimately, therefore, to peace. Peace will always be at risk so long as individuals and families are forced to fight for their very survival.

At the service of peace

6. I would now like to speak directly to families, in particular to Christian families.

"Families, become what you are!" I wrote in my apostolic exhortation "Familiaris Consortio." (6) Become an "intimate sharing of married life and love," (7) called to give love and to transmit life!

Families, you have a mission of prime importance: that of contributing to the construction of peace, indispensable for respect for human life and its development. (8) Knowing that peace is never secured once and for all, (9) you must never grow weary of seeking it! Jesus, through his death on the Cross, has left

to humanity his peace, assuring us of his enduring presence. (10) Ask for this peace, pray for this peace, work for this peace! To you parents falls the responsibility for forming and educating your children to be people of peace: for this purpose, you in the first place must be workers for peace.

You children, facing the future with the eagerness of youth, full of hopes and dreams, value the gift of the family, prepare for the responsibility of building it or promoting it according to the particular callings that God will give you in due course. Develop a desire for good and thoughts of peace.

You grandparents, who with the other family members represent unique and precious links between generations, make a generous contribution of your experience and your witness in order to link the past to the future in a peaceful present.

Families, live out your mission in harmony and to the full!

Finally, how can we forget the many people who for various reasons feel that they have no family? To them I would like to say that there is a family for them, too: The church is home and family for all. (11) She opens wide her doors and welcomes in all who are alone or abandoned; in them she sees the specially beloved children of God, whatever their age, and whatever their aspirations, difficulties or hopes.

May the family so live in peace that from it peace may spread throughout the whole human family!

This is the prayer which, through the intercession of Mary, mother of Christ and of the church, I offer to him "from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named" (Eph 3:15), at the beginning of the International Year of the Family.

From the Vatican, Dec. 8, 1993.

John Paul II Footnotes:

1. Cf. Second Vatican Council, "Gaudium et Spes," 52.
2. Article 16, No. 3.
3. "Redemptor Hominis," 10.
4. Cf. "Gaudium et Spes," 47.
5. Cf. in this regard the "Charter of the Rights of the Family presented by the Holy See to all Persons, Institutions and Authorities Interested in the Mission of the Family in Today's World" (Oct. 22, 1983).
6. No. 17.
7. "Gaudium et Spes," 48.
8. Cf. "Catechism of the Catholic Church," No. 2304.
9. Cf. "Gaudium et Spes," 78.
10. Cf. Jn 14:27; 20:19-21; Mt 28:20.
11. Cf. "Familiaris Consortio," 85.

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