

Session 6: The Role of the Christian Family

Family, Become What You Are (*FC*, article 17)

1. Forming a Community of Persons (*FC*, articles 18-21)

1. Prayer (formal/informal)
2. Scripture reading:

If our life in Christ means anything to you, if love can persuade at all, or the Spirit that we have in common, or any tenderness and sympathy, then be united in your convictions and united in your love, with a common purpose and a common mind. That is the one thing which would make me completely happy. There must be no competition among you, no conceit; but everyone is to be self-effacing. Always consider the other person to be better than yourself, so that no one thinks of his own interests first but everyone thinks of other people's interests instead. In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus (Ph 2:1-5).

3. Read an outline of articles 17-21, pp. 75-76.
4. Commentary:

Article 17 introduces Part III ("The Role of the Christian Family") and spells out the Christian family's mission. John Paul II sums up that mission in a short, rather puzzling call: "Family, become what you are." What does he mean?

The family must become what it originally was designed to be: an "intimate community of life and love" whose mission is to "guard, reveal, and communicate love." In fulfilling that mission, the family becomes what it is supposed to be. Simply put, by loving, the family becomes a community of love.

The 1980 Synod on the Family divided that mission into four general tasks. This session and the next will cover the first task, *forming a community of persons*.

What is a community of persons? What is a *communion* of persons? Is there a difference? In Catholic theology, the perfect communion of persons is found in the Trinity, where the First Person (the Father) gives all he has to the Second Person (the Son), save for the principle that makes him the initiator of all. The Second Person, in turn, gives all he has actively received back to the First Person. The result is a relationship of total gift, of total love. That love relationship, proceeding from the initial *communion* of Persons, is the Third Person (the Holy Spirit).

We, as individual persons, imitate such a communion when we recognize the value in another and respond to that value with love, that is, with the gift of ourselves. If the other responds to us in kind, a communion of persons comes into being. In our human experience, the spousal love of man and woman is the most complete example of the total gift of self. Husband and wife "are called to grow continually in their communion through day-to-day fidelity to their marriage promise of total mutual self-giving" (*FC* 19).

The husband and wife's communion, based on mutual love and self-giving, is the nucleus for a larger *community* of persons including children, grandparents, and other members of the extended family. A community of persons (in *Familiaris Consortio*) is therefore more than one *communion* of persons.

Because the love that bonds husband and wife reflects the love within the Trinity as well as the love between Christ and his Church, it speaks of a unity that is permanent. (See Mt 19:3-9.)

Polygamy—where the spouse of either sex has more than one mate—is not an example of a communion of persons because it does not reflect the equal and personal dignity of men and women. St. Thomas Aquinas' statements on polygamy are not only interesting but timely:

Besides, friendship consists in an equality. So, if it is not lawful for the wife to have several husbands, since this is contrary to certainty as to offspring, it would not be lawful, on the other hand, for a man to have several wives, for the friendship of wife for husband would not be free, but somewhat servile. And this argument is corroborated by experience, for among husbands having plural wives the wives have a status like that of servants.

Furthermore, strong friendship is not possible in regard to many people... Therefore, if a wife has but one husband, but the husband has several wives, the friendship will not be equal on both sides. So, the friendship will not be free, but servile in some way (*On the Truth of the Catholic Faith [Summa Contra Gentiles]*, Book III, Chap.124, 4 & 5).

Building a family community is each family member's responsibility. Such a community is heightened by an "educational exchange" between parents and children and strengthened by a constant spirit of sacrifice and reconciliation.

Without an ever-deepening communion of persons among family members, the Christian family cannot possibly fulfill its other major tasks of *serving life, helping develop society, and sharing in the life and mission of the Church*.

5. Questions for discussion and reflection:

- a. What makes the family a community of persons?
- b. In God's plan, why is marriage indissoluble (permanent)?
- c. How does marriage symbolize or reflect God's relationship with us?
- d. Case file: Martin and Angela were married for 25 years. For the past 10 years, Martin had been working out of town 2-3 days each week. Angela says that when Martin comes home he is tired, and so she lets him relax and doesn't ask much of him in the way of help around the house or attending to her emotional needs. "He is a good husband," she says, "and we hardly ever argue, but I do wish that he would talk to me more. Our sex life is good but infrequent, and Martin doesn't seem to crave intimacy like I do." They came

to therapy because Martin had requested a separation. This was a shock to Angela as she thought that she was being a good wife and meeting Martin's needs.

After a few weeks of therapy, Angela discovered that Martin had been visiting prostitutes when he was out of town on business. This behavior had increased over time, and Martin was now very dissatisfied with his wife. She could not compete with the excitement and variety of women he had access to, and he had begun to despise how "old and ordinary" she seemed. He could not see any of Angela's goodness or the true self-giving love that she had for him. In therapy, he focused only on separating from Angela without undue drama and on preserving his relationship with his children.

In their case, the gift of self now goes only one way. Their "communion of persons" has been ruptured, at least temporarily. Do you see any possibilities for a reconciliation? If so, what might they be?

- e. How would you respond to someone who says that marriage ends when love ends?
 - f. The Church sees marriage—the covenant between one man and one woman—as a reality issue, not a civil rights issue. Since she believes that the reality of marital love comes from the mind of God, not from man, she will not, indeed *cannot*, change her view. How would you explain that to someone who believes that marriage is a social construct under the umbrella of civil rights and therefore can be whatever society wants it to be?
6. Read *FC*, articles 22-27, before Session 7.

Session 7: The Role of the Christian Family

1. Forming a Community of Persons (FC, articles 22-27)

1. Prayer (formal/informal)
2. Scripture reading:

Meanwhile Mary stayed outside near the tomb, weeping. Then, still weeping, she stooped to look inside, and saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head, the other at the feet. They said, "Woman, why are you weeping?" "They have taken my Lord away" she replied "and I don't know where they have put him." As she said this she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, though she did not recognize him. Jesus said, "Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and remove him." Jesus said, "Mary!" She knew him then and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbuni!"—which means Master. Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go and find the brothers, and tell them: I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." So Mary of Magdala went and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord and that he had said these things to her (Jn 20:11-18).

3. For an outline of articles 22-27, see p. 76.
4. Commentary:

In the previous session, John Paul II concentrated on the meaning of an authentic communion of persons and how that communion is the foundation of a larger community of persons. In this session, we will see how that meaning applies to individual members of the family.

John Paul II begins this practical application of real communion by talking about the rights and roles of women in the home and in society. He stresses the following points in language that we cannot possibly misunderstand:

- (1) God created men and women with equal dignity and responsibility. Because women are made in the image and likeness of God, because God's Word became flesh through the Virgin Mary, because Christ obviously held women in special esteem—no one can legitimately perceive women as inferior, or as objects to be used in any way.
- (2) Women have the right to pursue jobs and professions in the public sector. However, society must recognize the tremendous and irreplaceable value of women's maternal role in the home. Without a real harmony between women's professional and familial roles, society will not become more truly and fully human.
- (3) We must structure society in such a way that women do not have to work outside the home in order for families to live and prosper. (For the relationship between family and

work, see John Paul II's encyclical, *On Human Work [Laborem Exercens]*, September 14, 1981.)

- (4) Any form of degrading discrimination against women attacks the dignity of both men and women and blocks the possibility of a true communion, or community, of persons.

The multi-billion-dollar business of pornography, for example, continues to target women and children as objects of use and pleasure. During the 1980s and 1990s, women's groups decried pornography as violating their personal dignity and, therefore, their civil rights.

Nowadays a huge slice of the porn industry is directed toward women, as more and more of them become porn viewers rather than porn decriers. Author-lesbian Anna Pulley describes the shift succinctly in a 2013 blog piece—"Guess What? Many Ladies Love Porn":

Porn makers and distributors are tuning into the fact that women are getting on the porn bandwagon. Nothing speaks truer to the mainstreaming of porn than the fact that Oprah Winfrey has porn recommendations filtered through the wisdom of Violet Blue.

Pulley is referring to the July 2007 issue of *O, The Oprah Magazine* in which blogger-journalist-sex educator Violet Blue recommends "quality" porn sites for women.

Earlier that same year, Tanith Carey wrote an article for *The Guardian*, titled "Why more and more women are using pornography." The subtitle: "Increasing numbers of women admit to being hooked on internet porn. Why is this happening, and where are they finding help?"

The Guardian touts itself as the world's leading liberal (center-left) voice, yet Carey's article was clearly an assist to those women who found themselves addicted to porn. Carey introduces the reader to Crystal Renaud, founder and director of WHOLE Women Ministries, the first support group in the United States for women addicted to porn, run by women.

Concerning the family community of persons, the man as husband and father has extremely important responsibilities. First, he must cultivate a genuine respect for the dignity of his wife and her role in the home. Second, and sometimes against great odds, he must realize the importance of his role as nurturer and educator. Third, he is responsible for the "harmonious and united" development of his family. Obviously, these responsibilities leave no room for a "macho" attitude.

Back in 1983, the U.S. Senate held hearings on broken families. The hearings revealed the tremendous importance of the father's nurturing presence in the home. Dr. George A. Rekers, then a professor in the Department of Family and Child Development at Kansas State University, testified that:

Research has documented that children without fathers more often have lowered academic performance, more cognitive and intellectual deficits, increased adjustment

problems, and higher risks for psychosexual development problems (*S. Hrg.* 98-195, p. 132).

In other words, children without fathers were more likely to do poorly in school and experience difficulty in maturing and in achieving a healthy sexual identity.

Concerning sexual identity, Dr. Rekers went on to say that, "When fathers are in the home and are affectionate, nurturing, available, and actively involved in child rearing, child development research indicates that secure sexual identity is fostered in both boys and girls" (*S. Hrg.*, p. 134).

During the same Senate hearings, Dr. Armand Nicholi, a psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School, testified that, according to cross-cultural studies, American parents (especially fathers) spent much less time with their children than did parents of most other countries. Comparing father-son time, for example, some Russian fathers never let a day go by without spending two hours with their sons. By contrast, a study of a small, American community, at the time, showed that the fathers had spent a daily average of 37 seconds with their infant and toddler sons (*S. Hrg.*, p. 66).

In May of 2004, the U.S. Senate heard testimony on the impact of marriage and divorce on children. Psychologist Patrick Fagan, Ph.D. (presently a Senior Fellow at the Family Research Council in Washington, D.C.) was clarion in his remarks:

The family is the building block of our society. It is the place where everyone begins life and to which they always belong. The more that members of a family belong to each other, the more each individual and each family thrive. When rejection occurs in the family, especially between the parents when they separate or divorce, or even when they never come together, the entire family, and especially the children, suffers.

... for every hundred children born [in 1950], 12 entered a broken family—four were born out of wedlock and eight suffered the divorce of their parents. By the year 2000, that number had risen five-fold, and, for every 100 children born, 60 entered a broken family:

33 born out of wedlock and 27 suffered the divorce of their parents.

We must conclude that over the last fifty years America has changed from being preponderantly "a culture of belonging" to now being "a culture of rejection"....

As a nation we need to set about restoring the conditions that will grow again a culture of belonging, with all the ingredients that go into such a culture: courtship, marriage, worship and communities of families that form neighborhoods that are nice places to come home to: neighborhoods in which romance, courtship and marriage are normal and frequent... ("The Impact of Marriage and Divorce on children," May 13, 2004).

As we have noted, the father is responsible for the overall well-being of his family. He cannot delegate that responsibility to anyone else. As husband and father, he can delegate *authority*—that is done all the time. But his *responsibility*, vis-à-vis the family, cannot be shifted—it is always his.

Article 26 covers the dignity and rights of children. John Paul II states that there is no greater test of the relationship of one human being to another than the concern for a child from conception onward, especially if the child is sick, suffering, or handicapped.

Anne was born with stubs for arms and clubbed feet at a time when society and the medical field were not equipped to provide rehabilitation. Though uneducated himself, Anne's father knew the potential of an educated mind. He encouraged her to enroll in an academy and then in junior college, after she had completed her initial years of education. For the next six years, at 7 am each morning, he brought her to school in a little red wagon.

After graduating from junior college, Anne enrolled at and graduated from a major university. (By this time, her legs had been amputated.) She went on to become the top administrator of a crippled children's school (which was subsequently named after her), a member of the President's Commission for the Handicapped, and a dedicated lobbyist for the disabled; she also helped found educational programs for the disabled in California and Australia. Without parental care and concern, Anne's life may well have taken a different turn.

Finally, in article 27, John Paul II emphasizes the dignity and special charism of the elderly, a charism which can bridge generation gaps.

Pen-pal and visitation programs between primary school children and the elderly turn out to be reciprocal blessings for both age groups. When the exuberance and innocence of children meet the wisdom and unconditional love of the elderly, a community of persons results.

North Coast Opportunities (NCO), a non-profit organization in Northern California, has a Foster Grandparent Program where seniors can share their love and wisdom with special-needs children and adolescents. Foster grandparents are 55 years or older, have a limited income, volunteer 15 to 40 hours a week, and provide support, guidance, mentoring, and individualized instruction. From NCO's website (<https://www.ncoinc.org/programs/foster-grandparents/>):

... Many Foster Grandparents provide the only stable loving presence in a young person's life. Foster Grandparents bring an openness and sensitivity to the challenge of helping troubled children.

America needs its older generation more than ever. There are so many troubled youths in our country, as new challenges emerge that jeopardize the health and happiness of young Americans. Foster Grandparents will be there, helping children realize their full potential. The value of their contribution to the lives of our young people—and to the future of our nation—is incalculable....

Youth and seniors would be very different without the program.... It encourages [older adults] to get up and get out into the community to assist children. The socialization provided has proven to benefit older adults.... Foster Grandparents rarely end up in nursing homes....

Teachers state emphatically that the extra attention provided to the children is often the reason they are able to promote to the next grade level by the end of the academic year. In addition these children gain self-esteem and self confidence, improving their behavior and self-control.

In such a program, the melding of older adults and at-risk children is win-win.

5. Questions for discussion and reflection:
 - a. What are some scriptural passages where Christ specifically shows his great esteem for women?
 - b. How could society help mothers harmonize their professional role with their irreplaceable role in the home?
 - c. What are some things we can do in our society to make it easier for men and women to be better fathers and mothers to their children, and better husbands and wives to each other?
 - d. What essential rights has God given to children? How can we foster those rights?
 - e. How can we engender proper respect toward our elders?
6. Read *FC*, articles 28-31, before Session 8.