

ADDRESS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE FAMILY
“The Pastoral Care of the Divorced and Remarried”

Friday, 24 January 1997

Your Eminences,
Beloved Brothers in the Episcopate,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. I am pleased to welcome and greet you on the occasion of the plenary assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Family. I thank the President, Cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo, for his kind words introducing this very important meeting. In fact, the theme of your reflection: “The Pastoral Care of the Divorced and Remarried”, is at the centre of the attention and concern of the Church and of her Pastors having the care of souls, who continually lavish their pastoral attention on those who are suffering because of difficult family situations.

The Church cannot be indifferent to this distressing problem, which involves so many of her children. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio* I had already acknowledged that in dealing with a wound that is more widely affecting even Catholic environments, “the problem must be faced with resolution and without delay” (n. 84). The Church, Mother and Teacher, seeks the welfare and happiness of the home and when it is broken for whatever reason, she suffers and seeks to provide a remedy, offering these persons pastoral guidance in complete fidelity to Christ’s teachings.

2. The 1980 Synod of Bishops on the family considered this painful situation and gave appropriate pastoral guidelines for these circumstances. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, taking the Synod Fathers’ reflections into consideration, I wrote: “The Church, which was set up to lead to salvation all people and especially the baptized, cannot abandon to their own devices those who have been previously bound by sacramental marriage and who have attempted a second marriage. The Church will therefore make untiring efforts to put at their disposal her means of salvation” (n. 84).

It is in this clearly pastoral setting, as you have explained in your presentation of the work of this plenary assembly, that the reflections of your meeting are framed, reflections aimed at helping families to discover the greatness of their baptismal vocation and to practise works of piety, charity and repentance. Nevertheless, pastoral help presupposes that the Church’s doctrine be recognized as it is clearly

expressed in the Catechism: "The Church does not have the power to contravene this disposition of divine wisdom" (n. 1640).

However, let these men and women know that the Church loves them, that she is not far from them and suffers because of their situation. The divorced and remarried are and remain her members, because they have received Baptism and retain their Christian faith. Of course, a new union after divorce is a moral disorder, which is opposed to precise requirements deriving from the faith, but this must not preclude a commitment to prayer and to the active witness of charity.

3. As I wrote in the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, the divorced and remarried cannot be admitted to Eucharistic Communion since "their state and condition of life objectively contradict that union of love between Christ and the Church which is signified and effected by the Eucharist" (n. 84). And this is by virtue of the very authority of the Lord, Shepherd of Shepherds, who always seeks his sheep. It is also true with regard to Penance, whose twofold yet single meaning of conversion and reconciliation is contradicted by the state of life of divorced and remarried couples who remain such.

However, there are many appropriate pastoral ways to help these people. The Church sees their suffering and the serious difficulties in which they live, and in her motherly love is concerned for them as well as for the children of their previous marriage: deprived of their birthright to the presence of both parents, they are the first victims of these painful events.

It is first of all urgently necessary to establish a pastoral plan of preparation and of timely support for couples at the moment of crisis. The proclamation of Christ's gift and commandment on marriage is in question. Pastors, especially parish priests, must with an open heart guide and support these men and women, making them understand that even when they have broken the marriage bond, they must not despair of the grace of God, who watches over their way. The Church does not cease to "invite her children who find themselves in these painful situations to approach the divine mercy by other ways ... until such time as they have attained the required dispositions" (Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, n. 34). Pastors "are called to help them experience the charity of Christ and the maternal closeness of the Church, receiving them with love, exhorting them to trust in God's mercy and suggesting, with prudence and respect, concrete ways of conversion and participation in the life of the community of the Church" (Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church concerning the Reception of Holy Communion by Divorced and Remarried Members of the Faithful, 14 September 1994, n. 2).

The Lord, moved by mercy, reaches out to all the needy, with both the demand for truth and the oil of charity.

4. How is it possible not to be concerned about the situations of so many people, especially in economically developed nations, who are living in a state of abandonment because of separation, especially when they cannot be blamed for the failure of their marriage?

When a couple in an irregular situation returns to Christian practice, it is necessary to welcome them with charity and kindness, helping them to clarify their concrete status by means of enlightened and enlightening pastoral care. This apostolate of fraternal and evangelical welcome towards those who have lost contact with the Church is of great importance: it is the first step required to integrate them into Christian practice. It is necessary to introduce them to listening to the word of God and to prayer, to involve them in the charitable works of the Christian community for the poor and needy, and to awaken the spirit of repentance by acts of penance that prepare their hearts to accept God's grace.

A very important aspect concerns the human and Christian formation of the children born of the new union. Making them aware of the full content of the Gospel's wisdom, in accordance with the Church's teaching, is a task that wonderfully prepares parents' hearts to receive the strength and necessary clarity to overcome the real difficulties on their path and to regain the full transparency of the mystery of Christ, which Christian marriage signifies and realizes. A special, demanding but necessary task concerns the other members who belong, more or less closely, to the family. With a closeness that must not be confused with condescension, they should assist their loved ones, especially the children who, because of their young age, are even more affected by the consequences of their parents' situation.

Dear brothers and sisters, my heartfelt recommendation today is to have confidence in all those who are living in such tragic and painful situations. We must not cease "to hope against all hope" (Rom 4:18) that even those who are living in a situation that does not conform to the Lord's will may obtain salvation from God, if they are able to persevere in prayer, penance and true love.

5. Lastly, I thank you for your help in preparing the Second World Meeting of Families which will take place in Rio de Janeiro on 4-5 October next. I address my paternal invitation to the world's families to prepare for this meeting with prayer and reflection. For families unable to travel to this meeting, I know that a useful tool is being prepared for all: catechesis, which will serve to instruct parish

groups, associations and family movements and encourage an effective interiorization of important topics concerning the family.

I assure you that I will remember you in my prayers, so that your work may help restore to the sacrament of marriage all the joy and lasting freshness which the Lord gave it by raising it to the dignity of a sacrament.

In the hope that you will be generous and attentive witnesses to the Church's concern for families, I cordially impart my Blessing to you and willingly extend it to all your loved ones.

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