THE KEYNOTE ADDRESS
The Bishops’ Workshop for 1985

The Ecclesial Identity and Mission of the Family

Part I: The Identity

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Our reflection will be divided into two fundamental parts. In the first part, I will try to demonstrate the identity of the family, and, in the second, its mission.

I. Identity of the Family.

When I speak of the identity of the family, I mean that which constitutes its truth, that is, the specific characteristics and specific nature which make the family different from any other social grouping.

But I realize that we must immediately tackle what today is one very serious problem. Indeed, our whole reflection will depend on the solution to this problem: Does there exist such a “truth” about the family? Are there such “specific characteristics and specific nature” of the family? Is there a truth and a nature which remain unchanged for the family within every culture? Or must we not rather think that the family is a creation of the culture itself, — the society assigns the family whatever characteristics and nature society sees fit?

Not only from a theological point of view, but also from a philosophical one, we must begin to tackle this problem by pointing out that, when one speaks of the “truth of a thing”, one must not intend by this expression first of all what man thinks about that thing. For the “truth of a thing” is rather what God thinks about it. We can cite in this connection the profound text of St. Thomas, which I shall give in Latin and, with your indulgence, paraphrase in English:

“prior est comparatio ad intellectum divinum quam humanum, unde etiam si intellectus humanus non esset, adhuc res dicerentur verae in ordine ad intellectum divinum. Sed si eterque intellectus, quod est impossibile, intelligeretur auferri, Nullo modo veritatis ratio remaneret”

We must see a thing first as God understands it, not as man does. For even if no human intellect at all existed to see the truth about things, things would still be true as far as the intellect of God is concerned. But if both kinds of intellect — human and divine — should cease to exist — which is, of course, plainly impossible — then only could one say that there is no truth.

Note the beginning of this text: “prior est comparatio ad intellectum divinum quam humanum” — we must see a thing first as God understands it, not as man does. This means: what each thing is, what each reality is, — its truth — depends on the idea that God has of it. The truth of any reality comes from God’s idea of it and depends on the project God has in mind for it. And this, God’s project for it, remains unchangeable.

On the other hand, it is equally certain that we can observe also that the family changes in its structure, in the various world cultures, and even within the same culture with the passing of time. This mutating of the family is caused, in the final analysis, by two factors: the knowledge and the liberty of human persons.

Mutation — change — in the family is caused by knowledge or, better, lack of knowledge. For man does not always achieve complete knowledge of God’s design for the family. His knowledge is often partial. At one period, man may know more about what the family is; at another period, less.

Change in the family is caused also by human liberty: even when man knows the design of God, he must freely consent to carry it out. But he can, of course, also refuse to carry it out. The family, seen as necessarily a structure of persons, that is, freely self-determining agents, is consequently the place in which the proposal of God and the liberty of man meet. And from this meeting we can derive two important consequences.

The first consequence of this meeting of God’s proposal and man’s liberty: Not every carrying out of the institution of the family has the same value, but its value depends on its greater or lesser faithfulness to God’s design. In other words: we can and must give an ethical judgment, that is, a judgment on the goodness and badness of the institution of the family as it is found in any given case or era, according to the concrete way in which family life is being carried out. It is necessary and obligatory that we possess the criteria for making this judgment.

The second consequence of the meeting of God’s proposal and man’s liberty: The fundamental criterion, in order to work this judgment out as to how good or how bad the family is in any concrete realization is not and cannot be deduced from the de...
facto situation in which the family finds itself, or from the relevant statistics, or from the consent of the majority, but only from the truth, that is, from God’s design for the family. Without this reference — God’s design — every ethical judgment becomes, in reality impossible.

Having clarified in which sense, then, one can and must speak of the truth about the family, — truth in the sense of God’s design for the family — we must ask ourselves what path we must take in order to discover this truth of the family’s identity. In the light of the Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris Consortio and of the catechesis of John Paul II at his Wednesday audiences over the past five years, it seems to me that we can point out the path to take: namely, the experience — the “essentially human experience” — which man, illuminated by Revelation, has of his own self, and — reciprocally — the light of Christ insofar as it reveals to man, in an internal way, this “essentially human experience” which man has of his own self.

I must pause here for a moment in order to explain this very important point. When I speak of the “essentially human experience,” I mean that knowledge which man has of his own self, a knowledge which allows man to know his human identity, his truth as a human person, — in other words what it is, in truth, to be a human person.

It is obvious that this definition of the “essentially human experience” presupposes an affirmation which we cannot take time to demonstrate exhaustively here and now: that is, the very capacity of man to reach, by means of his own knowledge, a truth about himself, a truth which is not subject to the changes of history, a truth which is not relative to any culture and which is always and everywhere valid. To demonstrate this capacity of man to know the truth about himself, it is sufficient for our purpose here and now to think just a little about what happens inside each one of us when we live “an ethical experience”, that is, the experience of an “unconditional ought-to-be,” an experience of that which is a foundation for “an ethical experience”, an absolute imperative upon one as a human person. Each one of us, in that moment “an ethical experience”, sees what is good and what is evil in relation to his or her being a human person. How could such a clear vision of good and evil be possible if we do not know what man is? As Plato put it:

“Could we know what is the art of improving man himself if we did not know who we are?... If we know ourselves, at least there is a possibility that we will know the care we must take of ourselves. Otherwise we will never know that”. (Plato, Alcibiades I, 129 a).

The “essential human experience”, then, is a necessary foundation for “an ethical experience”. This “essentially human experience”, however, is not enough in order to know the design of God for the family, and to know that design in its entirety — and therefore to know the true identity of the family. This experience must be illuminated by the light of Christ. We must therefore ask ourselves, first of all, what is this illumination which Christ alone casts on the “essentially human experience”, and secondly, why is such an illumination necessary?

First: What is this illumination of Christ on the “essentially human experience”? Pascal it was who wrote that “Man infinitely exceeds man”. This means that man in himself is a mystery so great and profound that man — his own self — is the only created reality which he himself cannot understand entirely. This greatness and this profundity of the mystery-which-is-man consists in the fact that the human person feels himself as aimed in the direction of an end, a goal, a destiny which infinitely exceeds his powers: “Man infinitely exceeds man” — precisely! For the goal towards which inherently he is aimed, the destiny for which he is made, is communion with God which is reached in the vision of God. This orientation, inherent to man, is part of his very make-up, moulds him, so to speak, and penetrates every dimension of his person. Man is an enigma to himself — the light of Christ solves this enigma. Christ fully reveals man to man, in that Christ shows him the fundamental meaning of his existence. This is precisely the illumination which Christ alone casts on the “essentially human experience”: the revelation to man of what man, from the depths of his being, waits for and cries out for: total communion with the Father.

Second: Why is this illumination of Christ necessary? It is necessary because — as the faith teaches us — man was created in Christ and, consequently, Christ Himself is the truth about man. As one Italian theologian wrote, “the freely chosen design of God — what we call the mystery — is the humanity of God and our humanity in God: Jesus Christ and the Church, together with the universe in Christ, and for the Church and with the Church. This is the design decided upon by God, in its utility and essence. Outside this one unitive and original design there is only “non-being”, “the abstract” (I. Biffi, Theology and a Theologian, St. Thomas Aquinas, ed. Piemme 1984, p. 16, emphasis added). To try to capture the truth about man without giving full weight to this “one unitive and original design” centered in Christ and the Church is to produce a merely theoretical (“abstract”) concept of man as, in reality, he has never existed (a “non-being”).

In the believer there is, therefore, a kind of circulation, a constant going back and forth, between the “essentially human experience” and the light of Christ: in the light of Christ, man understands his own self more and more profoundly, and, reciprocally, the most profound consciousness of his own self, reached only in this light of Christ, allows him to receive the light of Christ more and more deeply into himself.

Having stated therefore in which sense we are speaking about the identity or truth of the family — namely, God’s design for it — and which path brings us to the uncovering of that identity or truth — namely, the path of the “essentially human experience” of our own selves, an experience which needs the light of Christ — we are now able actually to uncover this identity of the family. It is obvious that we set out from the pre-suppositions: (1) that only marriage containing the elements of unity and indissolubility can form the basis of the family; and (2) that the family community is an expansion of the husband-wife community. In fact, we can uncover the identity of the family by beginning precisely with the following question: In what does this very expansion of the husband-wife community into a family community consist? What does this expansion consist of in its specific identity and nature? How, precisely, does the husband-wife community get transformed into a family community?

The answer is so obvious and simple that it might make us wonder if beginning with this question in order to uncover the identity of the family is perhaps too simple to put us on the right
track: for the answer is the child. It is the child who transforms the husband-wife community into a family community, and it is therefore the act of procreation which expands the husband-wife community so that it becomes a family community.

We must go to the very depths of the arrival of this new existence, this new event, this new human person who brings about the transformation of the husband-wife community. We must go to this new event as the event which indeed founds the family-community. Just as the husband-wife community’s origin lies always in a meeting between the enterprise of God and the marriage consent of man and woman—a meeting of God and the couple to be married—so also in the family community, its origin lies again in a meeting between God and the married couple,—between the divine act of creation and the human act of procreation.

A) The divine act of creation. At the origin of the first instant of existence of every single human person there is present always a creative act of God. This is a truth of faith taught by the Church. But even our reasoning powers can comprehend this statement. Because the human spirit constitutes him or her as a unique and irreplaceable subject—a thinking and acting individual—the human person cannot himself be the fruit simply of some inevitable necessity or chance. The human person cannot be the result merely of the impersonal, mechanical working of purely material natural laws. When in the universe a human being appears, someone appears (and not simply something),—someone essentially different from and superior to the infra-personal world. Someone appears who is destined for immediate and direct communion with God. This cannot happen without God’s knowing it and wishing it. God knows this person into existence: He wills this person into existence. In other words, He creates him.

Not only this, but, as we have said already, this new person is created in view of Christ, for the sake of Christ, by reason of Christ; in order to become a son or daughter in the only-begotten Son of the Father by participating in that divine life which, by nature, is proper among all human beings, only to Jesus.

B) The human act of procreation. In the light of what we have just said, we can comprehend, then, the innermost nature of the conjugal act of procreation. This conjugal act is the place where God’s divine act of creating takes place. The conjugal act, then, is human cooperation in a most profound divine activity.

The procreative capacity inscribed in human sexuality is ordered intrinsically to be a capacity to work with God as Creator. This is the reason why this act is—as it must be—inseparably connected with the unitive capacity of this same human sexuality: only an act of authentic human love is worthy of cooperating with God’s creative activity. The husband-wife community becomes the family community when this meeting takes place between creative divine love and procreative human love. It is precisely this meeting that determines the truth, the identity of the family. We must now turn to showing this.

The fact is that the human person owes his existence to the creative act of God, and that the married couple can only posit the conditions in order for this act of God to take place. (Generatio—said the ancients—est opus naturae non personae: Begetting a child is a working of nature, not of human effort). This means that, always, the child is a pure gift given to the married couple by God Himself. God entrusts to them what is the most precious gift in all the universe: a human person. What, then, should be the couple’s attitude,—an attitude adequate to this pure gift, the child?

St. Augustine wrote: “Secretum Dei intentos debet facere, non adversos” (Tract, in Jo, 27, 2: CCL 36, 270): The mystery (the secretum), the gift hidden in God’s mind for man should make us “intentos”, that is, alert for that gift,—conscious, receptive, and active in receiving that gift—and not “adversos”, that is, oblivious, distrustful, resentful of the gift. The married couple are involved with a “secretum Dei” — the gift hidden in the mind of God—because they are involved in an act which is creative and therefore His act. The right and adequate attitude, then, is one of receiving this gift according to God’s intention. We have uncovered, then, the first and most fundamental dimension of the identity of the family, its deepest truth. For the family is the place, the holy temple, in which God completes His greatest act ad extra, the creative act. Even more precisely: the family, as such, constitutes itself this sacred place, the space for God’s creation, a new human person. Moreover, this economy or divine arrangement, for creating new human persons is carried through even in the economy, that is, the divine plan, of redemption: for even the Eternal Word was made flesh inside a human family.

But, now, we must understand even more profoundly what this acceptance of the child as a gift made by God the Creator means. For whenever this gift is given it is not a thing being given, but a person. From this very simple observation derive some very important consequences.

The first and most immediate consequence is that the gift does not bring into existence a piece of “property”, but only a “trust”. (Obviously, I do not use these terms in their strict financial or juridical meaning). In other words, the new human person is given to the parents for the sole purpose of being guided to the fullness of his/her personal being,—to bring to realization, through personal acceptance, the plan which God has for every person who comes to the existence.

In this way, the human person is begotten, not simply in one instant, but continuously and progressively in co-operation with the creative God of love. This continuous and progressive begetting is the education, the upbringing of the child. God Himself precisely as Creator, preserves in existence the person whom He has created (conservatio est continua creatio—for God to preserve His creatures is simply for Him to continue the act of creation). In the same way, therefore, a married couple also beget continuously the new person whom they once procreated (eucado est continua procreation). There remains constantly, then, a profound, intimate rapport and resonance between the activity by which the Lord continues to create, and the couple continue to procreate, the new human being. The Lord in His activity of continuous creating (that is, preservation) is leading the new human person to that creature’s destiny, to the purpose for which He has created the new person; and the couple in their activity of human upbringing are also leading the new
creature to make God's plan his or her own — to consent more and more faithfully to what God has provided.

As I have said earlier, God's Providence establishes a purpose — indeed the only ultimate purpose — and He has revealed it to us: to have every person participate, that is, live in the divine sonship of Jesus, the Word Incarnate, the Son Who alone is eternally begotten Son of the Father. In Jesus Christ alone our authentic communion with God, and our authentic communion with other human beings, is re-established, and re-established precisely in the Church.

Every human person is created in light of this purpose designated by God, and for no other purpose. Every human person is given to parents precisely so that, through the parents, the new human person can be led to this achievement of the person's destiny, to the full realization of the person's very self. Obviously, only baptized parents can be conscious of this reason for God's having given them this child. But God's reason is there, whether the parents are conscious of it or not.

The first consequence, then, of God's plan in giving a child to the parents is that the child is not a piece of property, not something owned. The child is a trust, that is, a person entrusted for a particular reason, God's reason.

The second consequence is simply that the parents must lead the new human person into the family of the sons and daughters of God, that is, the Church. They must lead the child into this family through Baptism and, then, through bringing the child up in the faith and Christian life of the Church. To this second essential dimension of the identity, the truth, about the Christian family, we now turn our attention.

As a result of that primeval event which we call Original Sin, human persons are born as "children of wrath", and need to be saved, to be begotten again, to be conceived again, to be "born again". The life-story of any human person works itself out, then, along the lines of his being begotten into life in a two-fold way: first, by being conceived as a "living soul", as are all human beings, through the human begetting which is the well-spring of the human family (though "falling short of the glory of God", as this family does because it is under sin); and, second, by being conceived as a "living soul" through the divine begetting which is the well-spring of the new human family which is re-created in the glory of God, the new human family which constitutes the Body of Christ, and is the Church. Where the two kinds of giving life — human begetting and divine begetting — meet and intersect, the world-wide human family enters into the Church and the Church enters into the worldwide human family, generation by generation. The Christian family asks the Church for Baptism for its child. Precisely by asking for this Baptism, the Christian family itself brings about this joining and intersecting of the human and the divine, of the human begetting and the divine begetting of human persons. In this way, the family becomes the place in which God completes His redemptive work: God not only creates the human person, but He creates him or her again in the spiritual begetting. St. Thomas, precisely in the context of baptism, speaks of parental care, even prior to Baptism, as a "quodam spirituali utero" — (S. Th. 2, 2, q. 10, a. 12 Resp. C) — the loving care of parents is a kind of spiritual womb, the place where life comes to be. Christian parents beget the new person into the spiritual life in this spiritual womb of their parental care, that is, in the spiritual, Christian upbringing they give.

If, then, we at this point wish to express in a short synthesis the identity of the Christian family, we can say: the family is the place in which God has the new human person become a holy temple in which that new human person celebrates God's act of creating and redeeming him or her.

Before finishing this first part of my reflection, I should like now to say something about what destroys the family identity just described. For there are actions which by their very nature are an attempt to kill the truth about the family.

As we have seen, the "beginning", the founding-event, of the family-community is the wondrous and mysterious meeting and merging of the creative power of God and procreative capacity of the married couple. What on man's side destroys this meeting and merging of the human and divine? In what way can a man and a woman be opposed to this founding-event, this meeting between God's creative power and their procreative capacity? It is obviously contraception. Contraception breaks this merging of God's power and the couple's capacity. Precisely in contraception the man and the woman do their utmost to prevent God from being Creator. Precisely in this lies the grave intrinsic malice of the contraceptive act, and precisely for this reason, above all others, contraception destroys the identity of the family, its deepest truth.

But note well! This indictment of contraception must not be understood only in its obvious, immediate meaning. For the obvious, immediate meaning is that contraception prevents procreation and, therefore, the bringing forth of a family. It is a rejection of a capacity God has created in man — the capacity for procreation. It is also the rejection of another created being — the child. This rejection of certain created beings is the obvious and immediate meaning of what we have just said about contraception. But the matter is much deeper than simply the rejection of two created entities. For what is really and more fundamentally at issue, in the final analysis, is that a man and a woman, in the contraceptive act, arrogate to themselves power which belongs only to God the Creator: power over the appearance of new life. Contraception thus makes them competitors with God for His rightful freedom to call forth a new human being. It is a way of saying that God should not be God.

This is the way in which a man and woman break the rapport and resonance between the creative love of God and family-community: they reduce this family-community simply to a reality created by man. As you can see, contraception changes completely the very definition of the family. For the family, by definition, it is true, is the work of human beings, but only in collaboration with the creative act of God and under His sovereign authority.

But as far as destroying the identity of the family is concerned, there is an act morally more serious than contraception itself. For God completes His artistry of creating the new human person by entrusting this new being to an openness and acceptance on the part of the couple, and primarily of the woman
who conceived it.

God says to each of us: “It is good that you should be!” And each one of us comes into existence at the very moment God pronounces these words, this welcome.

But for the total completion of God’s creative act, someone else too has to say: “It is good that you should be!” That must be the exclamation also of the man who begets the child, but especially of the woman from the very instant she realizes that she has conceived. And so in this human welcoming the new human person becomes one among us. And what prevents this from happening? We all know: abortion. Abortion is the one act which, more than any other act, destroys the truth of the family — totally! A human being is rejected precisely in the very moment in which he/she should find an unconditional welcome — forever! A woman withholds acceptance from another human being in his or her very moment of origin! I believe there is not and cannot be be any other act more destructive of the identity of the family. When a human being is no longer safe even in the womb of the woman who conceived him or her, then the human being is no longer safe anywhere: the very well-spring of creation is polluted. Only Satan could devise an act so profoundly hostile to the whole of creation. Contraception, then, and even more so abortion are two acts which attempt to kill the deepest truth of the family.

Last but not least, the identity of the family is destroyed when the family refuses to be that “uteros spiritualis” — that spiritual womb of which St. Thomas spoke; in other words, when the family declines its human and Christian parental care.

I am going to close now by saying something which, strictly speaking, is outside any charism of authority I may have as a priest. For I am going to attempt a word of edification — of building up — for our bishops, our fathers-in-Christ who, more than any others, are the builders of us all, of the temples which form themselves into the great temple of God, His Church. Our readers will, I am sure, forgive me my daring. And so, I say it. It is a serious duty of the bishops as pastors — more than it is anyone else’s duty — to uphold God’s right, God’s sanctity and God’s glory, when, above all, He creates a human being. The family, therefore, is the first temple in which God sanctifies His Name and reveals His Glory. It is one of the gravest duties of all pastors, but especially of our bishops, to uphold the sanctity of that temple, to prevent its profanation: to do whatever they possibly can so that God may glorify Himself in that temple, the family. When, then, Bishops above all, as the pastors of the Church, are not clear in their teaching on contraception, or on abortion, or on the right of the family to bring their children up and educate them, they become accomplices in the profanation of God’s first temple.

(Part II of Msgr. Caffarra’s Keynote Address, “The Ecclesial Identity and Mission of the Family” will follow in next month’s Ethics and Medics)