

Discourse to Family Associations

November 27, 1951

Pope Pius XII

In the natural order, there is no social institution closer to the heart of the Church than the family. The root thereof, so to speak, is matrimony, which Christ raised to the dignity of a Sacrament. The family itself always has found and will find in the Church its defense, protection, and support in everything that concerns its inviolable rights, its freedom, and the performance of its noble duty.

Therefore, beloved sons and daughters, it gives Us particular joy to welcome to Our residence the national Conference of the “*Fronte della famiglia*” [“Union of the Family”] and of large families, and to express Our contentment with your efforts in pursuing your intended goals and also Our paternal wishes that you will succeed in attaining them.

A pro-family movement like yours, which endeavors to implement fully among the people the idea of the Christian family, cannot fail, spurred by the interior force that animates it and by the need of the people themselves in the midst of whom it lives and grows, to place itself at the service of that threefold purpose that constitutes the object of your care: influencing legislation in the vast field that indirectly or directly concerns the family, solidarity among Christian families, and the Christian cultivation of the family. This third object is the fundamental one: the first two should help support and promote it.

“Discourse of Pope Pius XII to the Union of the Family and to the Federation of Family Associations,” translated by Michael J. Miller from the original Italian text in *Discorsi e Radiomessaggi di Sua Santità Pio XII*, vol. 13, *Tredicesimo anno di Pontificato, 2 marzo 1951–1 marzo 1952* (Vatican City: Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1952), 413–418. Translation © 2011 National Catholic Bioethics Center.

We have spoken often and on the most varied occasions in favor of the Christian family, in most cases in order to come to its aid or to call others to do so, and to save it from the most serious distress—above all to assist it in the calamities of the war. The damage done by the First World War was far from being fully repaired when the second, even more terrible conflagration came to complete it. It will take much more time and many labors on men's part, and even greater divine assistance, before the deep wounds that these two wars have inflicted on the family begin to heal properly. Another misfortune, due also in part to those devastating wars, but in addition a consequence of overpopulation and of particular unsuitable trends or special interests, is the housing crisis; all those legislators, statesmen, and members of social services who strive to remedy it are performing an eminently valuable apostolate, albeit only indirectly. The same is true for the fight against the scourge of unemployment, for regulations guaranteeing an adequate living wage, so that the mother is not forced to seek work outside the home, as too often happens, but can dedicate herself mainly to her husband and their children. Working to promote the school and religious education is another invaluable contribution to the good of the family, as is also promoting within the family a natural, healthy simplicity in its customs and reinforcing its religious convictions, developing around it an atmosphere of Christian purity suited to free it from detrimental external influences and from all those unhealthy excitements that stir up disordered passions in the minds of adolescents.

But there is an even more profound misery from which we must protect the family, namely, the demeaning servitude to which it is reduced by a mentality that tends to make it a mere organization at the service of society, meant to produce for it a sufficient quantity of "human material."

At least one other danger threatens the family, not just recently but for a long time now; presently, however, this danger is increasing before our eyes and may become fatal to it, because it attacks the very origin of the family: We mean the extensive destruction of conjugal morality.

Over the course of last few years We have taken every occasion to expound one or another essential point of that morality, and more recently to present it in its entirety, not only refuting the errors that corrupt it, but also showing positively its meaning, purpose, and importance, how valuable it is for the happiness of the spouses, the children and the whole family, for the stability and greater good of society, from the hearth and home all the way to the State and the Church herself.

At the center of this teaching, matrimony figured as an institution at the service of life. According to the constant teaching of the Church, We have described a thesis that is closely connected with this principle and is one of the essential foundations not only of conjugal morality but also of social morality in general: namely, that a direct attack on innocent human life, as a means to an end—in the present case for the purpose of saving another life—is illicit.

Innocent human life, in whatever condition it may be, must be exempt, from the first moment of its existence, from any direct, voluntary attack. This is a fundamental right of the human person which is universally valid in the Christian concept of [human] life; valid for life still hidden in the mother's womb as well as for the life

that is already blossoming outside her, and thus [it is] opposed to direct abortion as well as to the direct killing of the baby before, during, or after childbirth. However well-founded distinctions among these various stages in the development of born or preborn life may be for civil and ecclesiastical law and for some civil and penal consequences, according to the moral law it is in all these cases a question of a serious and illicit attack on inviolable human life.

This principle holds true for the life of the child as well as for the life of the mother. Never and in no case has the Church taught that the life of the child must be preferred to that of the mother. It is wrong to frame the question in terms of this alternative: either the life of the child or that of the mother. No: neither the mother's life nor the child's can be subjected to an act of direct destruction. On behalf of the one and of the other, there can be only one requirement: to make every effort to save the life of both, of the mother and of the child (see Pius XII, Encyclical *Casti connubii*, December 31, 1930, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 22: 562–563).

One of the finest and noblest aspirations of medicine is the constant search for new ways to protect the life of both. Even though, notwithstanding all the advances of science, there still remain, and will remain in the future, cases in which one must count on the death of the mother, when she wants to bring to birth the life that she is carrying within her, and not destroy it in violation of God's commandment, "Thou shalt not kill!" Man has no alternative but to do his utmost to help and save her until the final moment, and to bow respectfully before the laws of nature and the dispositions of Divine Providence.

But—the objection goes—the life of the mother, especially the mother of a large family, is of incomparably greater worth than that of an unborn baby. The application of the theory of weighing values [i.e., consequentialism] to the case before us now has already found acceptance in legal discussions. The answer to this torturous objection is not difficult. The inviolability of the life of an innocent person does not depend on his or her greater or lesser worth. More than ten years ago already, the Church formally condemned the killing of [human] life that was thought to be "worthless"; and anyone acquainted with the lamentable precedents that provoked that condemnation, anyone who is able to ponder the deadly results that he would arrive at if he tried to measure the intangible quality of innocent life according to its "worth," can very well appreciate the reasons that led to that decree.

Besides, who can judge with certainty which of the two lives is really more precious? Who can know what path that child will follow and what height of achievements and perfection he will be able to attain? Two quantities are being compared here, but nothing is known about one of them.

In this connection We would like to mention an example which is perhaps already known to some of you, but which does not therefore lose its suggestive value. It goes back to the year 1905. There lived at that time a young woman from a noble family with even nobler sentiments, who was however slender and had delicate health. As an adolescent she had fallen ill with a mild apical pleurisy, which seemed to be cured; then, however, after contracting a happy marriage, she felt a new life swelling in her womb, and very soon noticed a peculiar physical malady that dismayed the two skilled physicians who watched over her with loving care. That

old pulmonary condition, that infection that had once healed, was now recurring; in their judgment there was no time to lose; if they wanted to save the gentle lady, it would be necessary to resort to therapeutic abortion without the slightest delay. The husband, too, understood the seriousness of the case and said that he consented to the sorrowful act. But when the treating obstetrician announced to her with all due respect the doctors' decision, urging her to comply with their opinion, she firmly responded, "I thank you for your well-meaning advice, but I cannot cut short the life of my baby! I cannot, I cannot! I can already feel her moving in my womb; she has the right to live; she comes from God and must know God so as to love Him and enjoy His presence." The husband, too, asked, begged, implored, but she remained inflexible and serenely awaited the outcome. A little girl was born normally, but soon afterward the mother's health continued to decline. The pulmonary infection spread; the patient progressively lost strength. Two months later she was at death's door; she looked again at her little baby, who was thriving with the help of a strong nurse; her lips formed a sweet smile, and she peacefully breathed her last. Years passed. In a certain religious institute you might notice in particular one young Sister who was quite dedicated to the care and education of abandoned children, her eyes beaming with maternal love as she bent over her little patients as though to give them life. She was the daughter of that sacrifice, who now with her great heart did so much good among the homeless children. The heroism of that fearless mother had not been in vain (see Andrea Majocchi, *Tra bistori e forbici*, 1940, pages 21ff. [English edition: *Life and Death: The Autobiography of a Surgeon*]). But We ask: Has the Christian sense, or even merely human sensibility, vanished to the point where people can no longer understand the sublime sacrifice of the mother and the visible action of Divine Providence, which caused such a splendid offspring to be born from her sacrifice?

We have deliberately always used the expression "direct attack on innocent life," "direct killing." This is because if, for example, saving the life of the expectant mother, independently of her pregnant state, urgently required a surgical act, or some other therapeutic treatment, which would have as an incidental consequence—inevitable but in no way willed or intended—the death of the fetus, such an act could not be called a *direct* attack on innocent life. Under those conditions the operation could be licit, like other similar medical interventions, provided that some very valuable good was at stake, such as life, and it was not possible to postpone it until after the birth of the child, or to have recourse to some other effective remedy.

Therefore, since the primary duty of matrimony is to be at the service of life, I express Our satisfaction and Our paternal gratitude to those generous spouses who for the love of God, and trusting in Him, are courageously raising a large family.

On the other hand, the Church is able to consider with sympathy and understanding the real difficulties of married life in our days. Therefore in Our last allocution on conjugal morality We affirmed the legitimacy and at the same time the limits—which are actually quite broad—of regulating the number of children [in a family], which, unlike so-called "birth control," is compatible with God's law. One can even hope that the Church may succeed in providing a sufficiently firm basis for this licit method (although in such matters the Church naturally leaves any

judgment about medical fact to medical science), and the most recent findings seem to confirm this hope.

Furthermore, in order to overcome the many trials of conjugal life, the most important things are a lively faith and frequent reception of the Sacraments, the source of rivers of strength so effective that those who live outside the Church can only with difficulty form an idea of it. And with this reference to aid from above We wish to conclude Our talk. Some day or other it could happen to you, beloved sons and daughters, that you feel your courage wavering at the violence of the storm that is unleashed around you, and even more dangerously within your family, by teachings that subvert the healthy, normal concept of Christian marriage. Have confidence! The natural energies and especially the powers of grace with which the Lord has endowed your souls in the Sacrament of Matrimony are like an unshakable rock, against which the waves of a storm-tossed sea crash powerlessly. And although the tragedies of the war and the post-war years have inflicted on marriage and the family wounds that are still bleeding, nevertheless even in these years the constant fidelity and the steadfast perseverance of spouses, and the maternal love that is ready for unspeakable sacrifices, have truly and splendidly triumphed in countless cases.

Continue, then, your work bravely, confident in divine assistance, as a sign of which we cordially impart to you and your families Our fatherly Apostolic Blessing.