

CATECHESIS ON THE FAMILY

2014 - 2015 (VOL. I)



POPE FRANCIS

CATECHESIS ON THE FAMILY

VOL. I

Pope Francis
2014-2015

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INTRODUCTION

General Audience
December 10, 2014

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,

We have concluded a cycle of catecheses on the Church. Let us thank the Lord who had us take this journey, rediscovering the beauty and responsibility of belonging to the Church, of being Church, all of us.

We now begin a new stage, a new cycle, and the theme will be the family; a theme which fits into this intermediate period between two Assemblies of the Synod dedicated to this very important reality. Therefore, before entering into the different aspects of family life, I would like to return today to begin precisely from the Synod Assembly of the past month of October, which had this theme: “The pastoral challenges of the family in the context of [the new] evangelization”. It is important to remember how it took place and what it produced, how it unfolded and what it produced.

During the Synod the media did their work — there was much expectation, much attention — and we thank them because their coverage was complete. So much news, so much! This was possible thanks to the Press Office, which held a briefing every day. But often the vision of the media was somewhat in the style of sports events, or political coverage: often two teams were spoken of, for and against, conservatives and progressives, and so on. Today I would like to recount what the Synod was.

First of all, I asked the Synod Fathers to speak frankly and courage and to listen with humility, to say with courage all that they had in their heart. In the Synod there was no prior censorship, but each one could — even more, was supposed to — say what he had on his heart, what he honestly thought. “But, this one will argue”. It is true, we heard how the Apostles debated. The text says: “there had been much debate. The Apostles argued among themselves, because they were seeking God’s will about whether or not pagans could enter the Church. It was something new. Always, when God’s will is sought, in a Synod Assembly, there are different points of view and there is debate and this is not a bad thing! Providing it be done with humility and with the spirit of service to the assembly of brothers. Prior censorship would have been a bad thing. No, no each one had to say what he was thinking. After Cardinal Erdő’s *Relatio ante disceptationem*, there was a first basic phase in which *all the Fathers were able to speak and all*

listened. And that attitude of listening that the Fathers had was edifying. It was a moment of great freedom, in which each one expounded his thoughts with *parrhesia* and with trust. At the basis of the interventions was the *Instrumentum Laboris*, which resulted from the previous consultation of the entire Church. And here we must thank the Secretariat of the Synod for the great work done both before and during the Assembly. Truly excellent.

No intervention called into question the fundamental truths of the Sacrament of Marriage, namely: indissolubility, unity, fidelity and openness to life (cf. Second Ecumenical Vatican Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 48; *Code of Canon Law*, 1055-1056). This was not touched.

All the interventions were gathered and this is what led to the second phase, that is a draft called *Relatio post disceptationem*. This *Relatio* was also given by Cardinal Erdő, and is organized in three sections: listening — the context and challenges to the family; the gaze on Christ — the Gospel of the Family; discussion of pastoral perspectives.

Group discussions, which took place at the third phase, were held on this initial summary proposal. The groups, as always, were divided by language, because it is better this way, communication is easier: Italian, English, Spanish and French. Each group, after finishing its work, presented a report, and all the group reports were published immediately. Everything was given, for transparency, in order to make known what had occurred.

At that point — the fourth phase — a commission examined all the recommendations made by the language groups and the *Relatio sinodi* was drawn up, maintaining the previous format — listening to the current situation; in keeping with the Gospel and pastoral responsibility — but it sought to reflect the developments from the group discussions. As always, a *Final Message* of the Synod was also approved, being shorter and more informative with respect to the *Relatio*.

This was how the Synod unfolded. Some of you may ask me: “Did the Fathers argue?”. But, I do not know if they argued, but they spoke firmly, yes, really. And this is freedom, it is actually the freedom that is found in the Church. Everything happened “*cum Petro* and *sub Petro*”, that is to say, in the presence of the Pope, who is the guarantor for everyone of freedom and trust, and who guarantees orthodoxy. And at the end, through my intervention, I gave a concise summary of the Synod experience. Thus, the three *official documents* that came out of the Synod are: the *Final Message*,

the *Final Report*, and the *Final Address of the Holy Father*. There are no others.

The *Final Report*, which was the result of all the reflections of the Dioceses up to that moment, was published yesterday and is to be sent to all Episcopal Conferences, which will discuss it in view of the upcoming Ordinary Assembly in October 2015. I say it was published yesterday — it had already been published —, but yesterday it was published with the questions addressed to the Episcopal Conferences and it thus becomes the actual *Lineamenta* of the next Synod.

We must understand that the Synod is not a parliament, a representative comes from this Church, this Church, this Church... No, it is not this. Representatives come, yes, but the structure is not parliamentary, it is completely different. The Synod is a protected space in order that the Holy Spirit can work; there were no clashes between factions, like in parliament where this is permissible, but a comparison among Bishops, which has come after lengthy preparations and which now will work further for the good of families, of the Church, and of society. It is a process, it is the normal Synodal path. Now this *Relatio* is sent to the particular Churches and there the work of prayer, reflection and fraternal discussion will be done in preparation for the next Assembly. This is the Synod of Bishops. Let us entrust it to the protection of the Virgin, our Mother: that she may help us to follow the will of God, taking pastoral decisions which may help the family more and better. I ask you to accompany this synodal path with prayer until the next Synod. May the Lord illuminate us, enable us to move toward the maturity of what we, as a Synod, must say to all the Churches. Your prayer is very important for this.

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NAZARETH

General Audience
December 17, 2014

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,

The Synod of Bishops on the Family, recently celebrated, was the first stage of a journey, which will conclude next October with the celebration of another Assembly on the theme: “The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and [Contemporary] World”. The prayer and reflection which must accompany this journey is required of all the People of God. I would also like the customary meditations of the Wednesday Audiences to be included in this common journey. I have therefore decided to reflect with you, this year, precisely on the family, on this great gift that the Lord has made to the world from the very beginning, when he entrusted Adam and Eve with the mission to multiply and fill the earth (cf. Gen 1:28); that gift that Jesus confirmed and sealed in his Gospel.

The nearness of Christmas casts a great light on this mystery. The Incarnation of the Son of God opens a new beginning in the universal history of man and woman. And this new beginning happens within a family, in Nazareth. Jesus was born in a family. He could have come in a spectacular way, or as a warrior, an emperor.... No, no: he is born in a family, in a family. This is important: to perceive in the nativity, this beautiful scene.

God chose to come into the world in a human family, which He himself formed. He formed it in a remote village on the outskirts of the Roman Empire. Not in Rome, which was the capital of the Empire, not in a big city, but on its nearly invisible outskirts, indeed, of little renown. The Gospels also recall this, almost as an expression: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (Jn 1:46). Perhaps, in many parts of the world, we still talk this way, when we hear the name of some areas on the periphery of a big city. And so, right there, on the outskirts of the great Empire, began the most holy and good story of Jesus among men! And that is where this family was.

Jesus dwelt on that periphery for 30 years. The Evangelist Luke summarizes this period like this: Jesus “was obedient to them”; — that is, to Mary and Joseph. And someone might say: “But did this God, who comes to save us, waste 30 years there, in that suburban slum?”. He wasted 30 years! He wanted this. Jesus’ path was in that family — “and his mother kept all

these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favour with God and man” (Lk 2:51-52). It does not recount miracles or healing, or preaching — He did none in that period — or of crowds flocking; in Nazareth everything seemed to happen “normally”, according to the customs of a pious and hardworking Israelite family: they worked, the mother cooked, she did all the housework, ironed shirts... all the things mothers do. The father, a carpenter, worked, taught his son the trade. Thirty years. “But what a waste, Father!”. God works in mysterious ways. But what was important there was the family! And this was not a waste! They were great saints: Mary, the most holy woman, immaculate, and Joseph, a most righteous man.... The family.

We are certainly moved by the story of how the adolescent Jesus followed the religious calendar of the community and the social duties; in knowing how, as a young worker, He worked with Joseph; and then how He attended the reading of the Scriptures, in praying the Psalms and in so many other customs of daily life. The Gospels, in their sobriety, make no reference to Jesus’ adolescence and leave this task to our loving meditation. Art, literature, music have taken this journey through imagination. It is certainly not difficult to imagine how much mothers could learn from Mary’s care for that Son! And how much fathers could glean from the example of Joseph, a righteous man, who dedicated his life to supporting and protecting the Child and his wife — his family — in difficult times. Not to mention how much children could be encouraged by the adolescent Jesus to understand the necessity and beauty of cultivating their most profound vocation and of dreaming great dreams! In those 30 years, Jesus cultivated his vocation, for which the Father had sent him. And in that time, Jesus never became discouraged, but increased in courage in order to carry his mission forward.

Each Christian family can first of all — as Mary and Joseph did — welcome Jesus, listen to Him, speak with Him, guard Him, protect Him, grow with Him; and in this way improve the world. Let us make room in our heart and in our day for the Lord. As Mary and Joseph also did, and it was not easy: how many difficulties they had to overcome! They were not a superficial family, they were not an unreal family. The family of Nazareth urges us to rediscover the vocation and mission of the family, of every family. And, what happened in those 30 years in Nazareth, can thus happen to us too: in seeking to make love and not hate normal, making mutual help commonplace, not indifference or enmity. It is no coincidence, then, that “Nazareth” means “She who keeps”, as Mary, who — as the Gospel states —

“kept all these things in her heart” (cf. Lk 2:19, 51). Since then, each time there is a family that keeps this mystery, even if it were on the periphery of the world, the mystery of the Son of God, the mystery of Jesus who comes to save us, the mystery is at work. He comes to save the world. And this is the great mission of the family: to make room for Jesus who is coming, to welcome Jesus in the family, in each member: children, husband, wife, grandparents.... Jesus is there. Welcome him there, in order that He grow spiritually in the family. May the Lord grant us this grace in these last days of Advent. Thank you.

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MOTHER

General Audience
January 7, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters, good morning. Today we continue with catecheses on the Church and we will reflect on Mother Church. The Church is mother. Our Holy Mother Church.

In these days the Church's liturgy sets before our eyes the icon of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God. The first day of the year is the Feast of the Mother of God, followed by the Epiphany, commemorating the visit of the Magi. The Evangelist Matthew writes: "going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him" (Mt 2:11). It is the Mother who, after giving birth to him, presents the Son to the world. She gives us Jesus, she shows us Jesus, she lets us see Jesus.

Let us continue with the catecheses on the family, and in the family there is *the mother*. Every human person owes his or her life to a mother, and almost always owes much of what follows in life, both human and spiritual formation, to her. Yet, despite being highly lauded from a symbolic point of view — many poems, many beautiful things said poetically of her — the mother is rarely listened to or helped in daily life, rarely considered central to society in her role. Rather, often the readiness of mothers to make sacrifices for their children is taken advantage of so as to "save" on social spending.

It also happens that in Christian communities the mother is not always held in the right regard, she is barely heard. Yet the centre of the life of the Church is the Mother of Jesus. Perhaps mothers, ready to sacrifice so much for their children and often for others as well, ought to be listened to more. We should understand more about their daily struggle to be efficient at work and attentive and affectionate in the family; we should better grasp what they aspire to in order to express the best and most authentic fruits of their emancipation. A mother with her children always has problems, always work. I remember there were five of us children at home, and while one was doing one thing, the other wanted to do another, and our poor mama went back and forth from one's side to another, but she was happy. She gave us so much.

Mothers are the strongest antidote to the spread of self-centred individualism. “Individual” means “what cannot be divided”. Mothers, instead, “divide” themselves, from the moment they bear a child to give him to the world and help him grow. It is they, mothers, who most hate war, which kills their children. Many times I have thought of those mothers who receive the letter: “I inform you that your son has fallen in defense of his homeland...”. The poor women! How a mother suffers! It is they who testify to the beauty of life. Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero said that mothers experience a “martyrdom of motherhood”. In the homily for the funeral of a priest assassinated by death squads, he said, recalling the Second Vatican Council: “We must be ready to die for our faith, even if the Lord does not grant us this honour.... Giving one’s life does not only mean being killed; giving one’s life, having the spirit of a martyr, it is in giving in duty, in silence, in prayer, in honest fulfilment of his duty; in that silence of daily life; giving one’s life little by little. Yes, like it is given by a mother, who without fear and with the simplicity of the martyrdom of motherhood, conceives a child in her womb, gives birth to him, nurses him, helps them grow and cares for them with affection. She gives her life. That’s martyrdom”. End quote. Yes, being a mother doesn’t only mean bringing a child to the world, but it is also a life choice. What does a mother choose, what is the life choice of a mother? The life choice of a mother is the choice to give life. And this is great, this is beautiful.

A society without mothers would be a dehumanized society, for mothers are always, even in the worst moments, witnesses of tenderness, dedication and moral strength. Mothers often pass on the deepest sense of religious practice: in a human being’s life, the value of faith is inscribed in the first prayers, the first acts of devotion that a child learns. It is a message that believing mothers are able to pass on without much explanation: these come later, but the seed of faith is those early precious moments. Without mothers, not only would there be no new faithful, but the faith would lose a good part of its simple and profound warmth. And the Church is mother, with all of this, she is our mother! We are not orphans, we have a mother! Our Lady, mother Church, is our mom. We are not orphans, we are children of the Church, we are children of Our Lady, and we are children of our mothers.

Dearest mothers, thank you, thank you for what you are in your family and for what you give to the Church and the world. And to you, beloved Church, thank you, thank you for being mother. And to you, Mary, Mother of God,

thank you for letting us see Jesus. And thank you for all the mammas present here: let us salute them with a round of applause!

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FATHER

General Audience
January 28, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Let us resume the series of catecheses on the family. Today we shall take the word “father” as our guide. It is a term dearer than any other to us Christians because it is the name by which Jesus taught us to call God: father. The meaning of this name took on new depth from the very way Jesus used it to turn to God and to manifest his special relationship with Him. The blessed mystery of God’s intimacy, Father, Son and Spirit revealed by Jesus, is the heart of our Christian faith.

“Father” is a term familiar to everyone, a universal word. It indicates a fundamental relationship, the reality of which is as old as human history. Today, however, one has reached the point of claiming that our society is a “society without fathers”. In other words, particularly in Western culture, the father figure would be symbolically absent, faded, removed. At first, this was perceived as a liberation: liberation from the father-master, from the father as the representative of the law that is imposed from without, from the father as the censor of his children’s happiness and the obstacle to the emancipation and autonomy of young people. At times in some homes authoritarianism reigned in the past, in some cases even oppression: parents who treated their children like servants, not respecting their individual needs for growth; fathers who did not help them to start out on their journey with freedom — and it is not easy to bring up a child in freedom —; fathers who did not help them assume their own responsibilities to build their future and that of society.

This, certainly, is not a good approach; but, as often happens, one goes from one extreme to the other. In our day, the problem no longer seems to be the invasive presence of the father so much as his absence, his inaction. Fathers are sometimes so concentrated on themselves and on their work and at times on their career that they even forget about the family. And they leave the little ones and the young ones to themselves. As Bishop of Buenos Aires I sensed the feeling of orphanhood that children are experiencing today, and I often asked fathers if they played with their children, if they had the courage and love to spend time with their kids. And the answer was

negative in most cases: “But I can’t, because I have so much work...”. And the father was absent from the little child growing up, he did not play with him, no, he did not waste time with him.

Now, on this common journey of reflection on the family, I would like to say to all Christian communities that we must be more attentive: the absent father figure in the life of little ones and young people causes gaps and wounds that may even be very serious. And, in effect, delinquency among children and adolescents can be largely attributed to this lack, to the shortage of examples and authoritative guidance in their everyday life, a shortage of closeness, a shortage of love from the father. And the feeling of orphanhood that so many young people live with is more profound than we think.

They are orphaned in the family, because the father is often absent, also physically, from the home, but above all because, when they are present, they do not behave like fathers. They do not converse with their children. They do not fulfill their role as educators. They do not set their children a good example with their words, principles, values, those rules of life which they need like bread. The educative quality of the time the father spends raising the child is all the more necessary when he is forced to stay away from home because of work. Sometimes it seems that fathers don’t know what their role in the family is or how to raise their children. So, in doubt, they abstain, they retreat and neglect their responsibilities, perhaps taking refuge in the unlikely relationship as “equals” with their children. It’s true that you have to be a “companion” to your child, but without forgetting that you are the father! If you behave only as a peer to your child, it will do him/her no good.

And we also see this problem in the civil community. The civil community with its institutions, has a certain — let’s call it paternal — responsibility towards young people, a responsibility that at times is neglected or poorly exercised. It too often leaves them orphaned and does not offer them a true perspective. Young people are thus deprived of safe paths to follow, of teachers to trust in, of ideals to warm their hearts, of values and of hopes to sustain them daily. They become filled perhaps with idols but their hearts are robbed; they are obliged to dream of amusement and pleasure but they are not given work; they become deluded by the god of money, and they are denied true wealth.

And so it would do everyone good, fathers and children, to listen again to the promise that Jesus made to his disciples: “I will not leave you orphans” (cf. Jn 14:18). He is, indeed, the Way to follow, the Teacher to listen to, the Hope that the world can change, that love conquers hatred, that there can be a future of brotherhood and peace for all. One of you might say to me: “But Father, today you were too negative. You only spoke about the absent father, what happens when fathers are not close to their children....” “It’s true, I wanted to stress this, because next Wednesday I am going to continue this catechesis by highlighting the beauty of fatherhood. That is why I chose to start from the darkness, in order to reach the light. May the Lord help us understand these things better.

General Audience
February 4, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today I would like to develop the second part of my reflection on the figure of the father in the family. Last time I spoke about the danger of “absent” fathers, today I would like to look instead at the positive aspect. Even St Joseph was tempted to leave Mary, when he discovered that she was pregnant; but the Angel of the Lord intervened and revealed to him God’s plan and his mission as foster father; and Joseph, a just man, “took his wife” (Mt 1:24) and became the father of the family of Nazareth.

Every family needs a father. Today we shall reflect on the value of his role, and I would like to begin with a few expressions that we find in the Book of Proverbs, words that a father addresses to his own son, and it reads like this: “My son, if your heart is wise, my heart too will be glad. My soul will rejoice when your lips speak what is right” (Pr 23:15-16). Nothing could better express the pride and emotion a father feels when he understands that he has handed down to his child what really matters in life, that is, a wise heart. This father does not say: “I am proud of you because you are the same as me, because you repeat the things I say and do”. No, he does not say anything so simple to him. He says something much more important, which we can understand in this way: “I will be happy every time I see you act with wisdom, and I will be moved every time that I hear you speak with rectitude. This is what I wanted to leave to you, that this one thing become

yours: the attitude to feel and act, to speak and judge with wisdom and rectitude. And that you might be like this, I taught you the things you didn't know, I corrected the errors you didn't see. I made you feel a profound and at the same time discrete affection, which maybe you did not fully recognize when you were young and unsure. I gave you a testimony of rigour and steadfastness that perhaps you didn't understand, when you would have liked only complicity and protection. I had first to test myself in the wisdom of my heart, be vigilant of my excesses of sentiment and resentment, in order to carry the weight of the inevitable misunderstandings, to find the right words to make myself understood." Now, continues the father, "I see that you strive to be this way with your own children, and with everyone, and it moves me. I am happy to be your father". This is what a wise father, a mature father, says. A father knows all too well what it costs to hand down this heritage: how close, how gentle and how firm to be. But what consolation and what recompense he receives when the children honour this legacy! It is a joy that rewards all the toil, that overcomes every misunderstanding and heals every wound.

The first need, then, is precisely this: that a father be *present* in the family. That he be close to his wife, to share everything, joy and sorrow, hope and hardship. And that he be close to his children as they grow: when they play and when they strive, when they are carefree and when they are distressed, when they are talkative and when they are silent, when they are daring and when they are afraid, when they take a wrong step and when they find their path again; a father who is always present. To say "present" is not to say "controlling"! Fathers who are too controlling cancel out their children, they don't let them develop.

The Gospel speaks to us about the exemplarity of the Father who is in Heaven — who alone, Jesus says, can be truly called the "good Father" (cf. Mk 10:18). Everyone knows that extraordinary parable of the "prodigal son", or better yet of the "merciful father", which we find in the Gospel of Luke in chapter 15 (cf. 15:11-32). What dignity and what tenderness there is in the expectation of that father, who stands at the door of the house waiting for his son to return! Fathers must be patient. Often there is nothing else to do but wait; pray and wait with patience, gentleness, magnanimity and mercy.

A good father *knows how to wait and knows how to forgive* from the depths of his heart. Certainly, he also knows how to correct with firmness: he is not a weak father, submissive and sentimental. The father who *knows how to correct without humiliating* is the one who knows how to protect

without sparing himself. Once I heard a father at a meeting on marriage say: “Sometimes I have to strike the children lightly... but never in the face so as not to humiliate them”. How beautiful! He has a sense of dignity. He must punish, but he does it in a just way, and moves on.

If, then, there is someone who can fully explain the prayer of the “Our Father”, taught by Jesus, it is the one who lives out paternity in the first person. Without the grace that comes from the Father who is in Heaven, fathers lose courage, and abandon camp. But children need to find a father waiting for them when they come home after failing. They will do everything not to admit it, not to show it, but they need it; and not to find it opens wounds in them that are difficult to heal.

The Church, our mother, is committed to supporting with all her strength the good and generous presence of fathers in families, for they are the irreplaceable guardians and mediators of faith in goodness, of faith in justice and in God’s protection, like St Joseph.

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CHILDREN

General Audience
February 11, 2015

Dear Brother and Sisters, Good morning,

After reflecting on the figures of the mother and father, in this catechesis on the family I would like to talk about the child, or even better, about children. I shall use a beautiful image from Isaiah. The Prophet writes: “they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far, and your daughters shall be carried in the arms. Then you shall see and be radiant, your heart shall thrill and rejoice” (60:4-5). It is a splendid image, an image of happiness which is fulfilled in the reunion of parents and children, who journey together toward a future of freedom and peace, after a long period of deprivation and separation, when the Hebrew people were far from their homeland.

In essence, there is a close link between the hope of a people and the harmony among generations. We must consider this carefully. There is a close link between the hope of a people and the harmony among generations. The joy of children causes the parents’ hearts to beat and reopens the future. Children are the joy of the family and of society. They are not a question of reproductive biology, nor one of the many ways to fulfil oneself, much less a possession of their parents.... No. Children are a gift, they are a gift: understood? Children are a gift. Each one is unique and irreplaceable; and at the same time unmistakably linked to his/her roots. In fact, according to God’s plan, being son and daughter means to carry within oneself the memory and hope of a love which was fulfilled in the very kindling of the life of another, original and new, human being. And for parents each child is original, different, diverse. Allow me to share a family memory. I remember what my mother said about us — there were five of us: — “I have five children”. When they asked her: “Which one is your favourite”, she answered: “I have five children, like five fingers. [He displays his fingers] Should they strike this one, it hurts me; should they strike that one, it hurts me. All five hurt me. All are my children and all are different like the fingers of a hand”. And this is how a family is! The children are all different, but all children.

A child is loved because he is one's child: not because he is beautiful, or because he is like this or like that; no, because he is a child! Not because he thinks as I do, or embodies my dreams. A child is a child: a life generated by us but intended for him, for his good, for the good of the family, of society, of mankind as a whole.

From this also derives the depth of the human experience of being son or daughter, which allows us to discover the most gratuitous dimension of love, which never ceases to astonish us. It is the beauty of being loved first: children are loved before they arrive. So often I find mothers in the square who are expecting a baby and ask me for a blessing ... these babies are loved before coming into the world. And this is free, this is love; they are loved before being born, like the love of God who always loves us first. They are loved before having done anything to deserve it, before knowing how to talk or think, even before coming into the world! Being children is the basic condition for knowing the love of God, which is the ultimate source of this authentic miracle. In the soul of every child, inasmuch as it is vulnerable, God places the seal of this love, which is at the basis of his/her personal dignity, a dignity which nothing and no one can ever destroy.

Today it seems more difficult for children to imagine their future. Fathers — I touched on this in previous catecheses — have perhaps taken a step backward and children have become more uncertain in taking their steps forward. We can learn the good relationship between generations from our Heavenly Father, who leaves each of us free but never leaves us on our own. And if we err, He continues to follow us with patience, without abating his love for us. Our Heavenly Father does not take steps back in his love for us, ever! He always goes forward and if He cannot go forward He waits for us, but He never goes backward; He wants his children to be brave and take their steps forward.

The children, for their part, must not be afraid of the task of building a new world: it is right for them to want to improve on what they have received! But this must be done without arrogance, without presumption. One must know how to recognize a child's virtue, and parents always deserve honour.

The fourth Commandment asks children — we are all children! — to honour our father and mother (cf. Ex 20:12). This Commandment comes immediately after those regarding God Himself. Indeed, it contains something sacred, something divine, something which lies at the root of every other type of respect among men. And to the biblical formulation of the fourth Commandment is added: "that your days may be long in the land

which the Lord your God gives you". The virtuous bond between generations is the guarantee of the future, and is the guarantee of a truly human history. A society with children who do not honour parents is a society without honour; when one does not honour one's parents one loses one's own honour! It is a society destined to be filled with arid and avid young people. However, even a society with a paucity of generations, which does not love being surrounded by children, which considers them above all a worry, a weight, a risk, is a depressed society. Let us consider the many societies we know here in Europe: they are depressed societies, because they do not want children, they are not having children, the birth rate does not reach one percent. Why? Let each of us consider and respond. If a family with many children is looked upon as a weight, something is wrong! The child's generation must be responsible, as the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* of Blessed Pope Paul VI also teaches, but having many children cannot automatically be an irresponsible choice. Not to have children is a selfish choice. Life is rejuvenated and acquires energy by multiplying: it is enriched, not impoverished! Children learn to assume responsibility for their family. They mature in sharing its hardship. They grow in the appreciation of its gifts. The happy experience of brotherhood inspires respect and care for parents, to whom our recognition is due. So many of you present here have children and we are all children. Let us do something, let us observe a moment of silence. Each of us think in our heart about our children — if we have any; — think in silence. And let us all think about our parents and thank God for the gift of life. In silence, those who have children think of them, and everyone think of our parents. (Silence). May the Lord bless our parents and bless your children. May Jesus, the eternal Son, who in the fullness of time became a child, help us find the path of a new radiation of this so great and so simple human experience of being children. In the multiplication of generations there is a mystery of enrichment of the life of all, which comes from God Himself. We must rediscover it, challenging prejudice; and live it, in the faith, in perfect happiness. And I say to you: how beautiful it is when I pass in your midst and I see the dads and moms lift up their children to be blessed; this is an almost divine gesture. Thank you for doing it!

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SIBLINGS

General Audience
February 18, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,

In our continuing catechesis on the family, after having considered the roles of the mother, the father, the children, today we shall reflect on *siblings*. “Brother” and “sister” are words that Christianity really loves. And, thanks to the family experience, they are words that all cultures and all times comprehend.

The fraternal bond holds a special place *in the history of the People of God*, who received his revelation at the core of the human experience. The Psalmist sings of the beauty of the fraternal bond: “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” (Ps 133[132]:1). And this is true, brotherhood is beautiful! Jesus Christ also brought to its fullness this human experience of being brothers and sisters, embracing it in Trinitarian love and thereby empowering it to go well beyond the ties of kinship and enabling it to surmount every barrier of extraneousness.

We know that *when the fraternal relationship is destroyed*, when the relationship between siblings is destroyed, the road is open to painful experiences of conflict, of betrayal, of hate. The biblical account of *Cain and Abel* is an example of this negative outcome. After the killing of Abel, God asks Cain: “Where is Abel your brother?” (Gen 4:9a). It is a question that the Lord continues to repeat to every generation. And unfortunately, in every generation, Cain’s dramatic answer never fails to be repeated: “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” (*ibid.*, 4:9b). The rupture of the bond between siblings is a nasty, bad thing for humanity. In the family too, how many siblings quarrel over little things, or over an inheritance, and then they no longer speak to each other, they no longer greet one another. This is terrible! Brotherhood is a great thing, when we consider that all our brothers and sisters lived in the womb of the same mother for nine months, came from the mother’s flesh! Brotherhood cannot be broken. Let us consider: we all know families that have divided siblings, who have quarrelled; let us ask the Lord — perhaps in our family there are a few cases — to help these families to reunite their siblings, to rebuild the family. Brotherhood must not be broken and when it breaks, what happened to

Cain and Abel occurs. When the Lord asks Cain where his brother is, he replies: “I do not know, my brother does not matter to me”. This is terrible, it is a very, very painful thing to hear. In our prayers let us always pray for siblings who are at odds.

Should the bond of *fraternity* which *forms in the family between children* arise in an educational atmosphere of openness to others, it is the great school of freedom and peace. In the family, among siblings, human coexistence is learned, how one must live in society. Perhaps we are not always aware of it, but the family itself introduces fraternity into the world! Beginning with this first experience of fraternity, nourished by affection and education at home, the style of fraternity radiates like a promise upon the whole of society and on its relations among peoples.

The blessing that God, *in Jesus Christ*, pours out on this bond of fraternity, *expands* in an unimaginable way. He renders it capable of overcoming all differences of nationality, language, culture and even religion.

Consider what becomes of the bond between men and women, even when completely different from each other, when they are able to say of another: “He is truly like a brother, she is just like a sister to me!”. This is beautiful! History has shown well enough, after all, that even freedom and equality, without brotherhood, can be full of individualism and conformism, and even personal interests.

Familial fraternity shines in a special way when we see the care, the patience, the affection that envelop *the weakest little brother or sister*, sick or physically challenged. There are countless brothers and sisters who do this, throughout the world, and perhaps we do not appreciate their generosity enough. And when there are many siblings in a family — today, I greeted a family that has nine children? — the eldest boy or girl helps the dad, the mom, to take care of the younger children. This work of helping among siblings is beautiful.

Having a brother, a sister, who loves you is a deep, precious, irreplaceable experience. *Christian fraternity* happens in the same way. The smallest, the weakest, the poorest soften us: they have the “right” to take our heart and soul. Yes, they are our brothers and sisters and as such we must love and care for them. When this happens, when the poor are like family members, our own Christian fraternity comes to life again. Christians, in fact, go to meet the poor and the weak not to obey an ideological programme, but because the word and the example of the Lord tell us that we are all

brothers and sisters. This is the principle of God's love and of all justice among men. I should like to suggest something: before concluding, just a few words, in silence each of us, let us think of our brothers, our sisters, and from our heart let us pray in silence for them. A moment of silence.

Here then, with this prayer we have brought all, brothers and sisters, with our thoughts, with our hearts, here to the Square to receive the blessing.

Today more than ever it is necessary to place fraternity back at the centre of our technocratic and bureaucratic society: then even freedom and equality will find the correct balance. Therefore, let us not thoughtlessly deprive our families, out of criticism or fear, of the beauty of a bountiful fraternal experience of sons and daughters. And let us not lose our trust in the broad horizon faith is able to draw from this experience, enlightened by God's blessing.

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ELDERLY

General Audience
March 4, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good Morning,

Today's catechesis and next Wednesday's will be dedicated to the elderly, who in the family are the *grandparents, aunts and uncles*. Today we will reflect on the current problematic condition of the elderly, and next time, that is, next Wednesday, on a more positive note, on the vocation pertaining to this stage of life.

Thanks to the progress of medicine life-spans have increased: but society *has not "expanded" to life!* The number of elderly has multiplied, but our societies are not organized well enough to make room for them, with proper respect and practical consideration for their frailty and their dignity. While we are young, we are led to ignore old age, as if it were a disease to keep away from; then when we become old, especially if we are poor, if we are sick and alone, we experience the shortcomings of a society programmed for efficiency, which consequently ignores its elderly. And the elderly are a wealth not to be ignored.

Benedict XVI, visiting a home for the elderly, used clear and prophetic words, saying in this way: "The quality of a society, I mean of a civilization, is also judged by how it treats elderly people and by the place it gives them in community life" (12 November 2012). It's true, attention to the elderly makes the difference in a civilization. Is there attention to the elderly in a civilization? Is there room for the elderly? This civilization will move forward if it knows how to respect wisdom, the wisdom of the elderly. In a civilization in which there is no room for the elderly or where they are thrown away because they create problems, this society carries with it the virus of death.

In the West, scientists present the current century as *the aging century*: children are diminishing, the elderly are increasing. This imbalance challenges us, indeed, it is a great challenge for contemporary society. Yet a culture of profit insists on casting off the old like a "weight". Not only do they not produce — this culture thinks — but they are a burden: in short, what is the outcome of thinking like this? They are thrown away. It's brutal to see how the elderly are thrown away, it is a brutal thing, it is a sin! No

one dares to say it openly, but it's done! There is something vile in this *adherence to the throw-away culture*. But we are accustomed to throwing people away. We want to remove our growing fear of weakness and vulnerability; but by doing so we increase in the elderly the anxiety of being poorly tolerated and neglected.

During my ministry in Buenos Aires I was in direct contact with this reality and its problems: "The elderly are abandoned, and not only in material instability. They are abandoned out of a selfish incapacity to accept their limitations that reflect our own limitations, because of the numerous difficulties that must be overcome in order to survive in a society that does not allow them to participate, to have their say, or be referents in the consumer model of 'only the young can be useful and enjoy'. These elderly persons throughout society ought to be a reservoir of wisdom for our people. The elderly are the reservoir of wisdom for our people! How easily the conscience falls dormant when there is no love!" (*Solo l'amore ci può salvare*, Vatican City, 2013, p. 83).

And it happens like that. I remember, when I was visiting a retirement home, I spoke with each person and I frequently heard this: "How are you? And your children? Well, well. How many do you have? Many. And do they come to visit you?. Oh sure, yes, always, yes, they come. When was the last time they came?" I remember an elderly woman who said to me: "Mmm, for Christmas". It was August! Eight months without being visited by her children, abandoned for eight months! This is called mortal sin, understand? Once as a child, a grandmother told us the story of an old grandfather who got dirty while eating because he couldn't easily bring the spoonful of soup to his mouth. And his son, that is, the father of the family, had decided to move him from the dinner table and set up a little table in the kitchen to eat alone, so he couldn't be seen. In this way he wouldn't make a bad impression when friends came over to lunch or dinner. A few days later, he came home and found his youngest child playing with some wood and a hammer and nails, he was making something there, he said: "What are you making? — I'm making a table, papa. — A table, why? — To have one for when you grow old, so that you can eat there". Children are more aware than we are!

In the tradition of the Church there is a *wealth of wisdom* that has always supported a culture of *closeness to the elderly*, a disposition of warm and supportive companionship in this final phase of life. This tradition is rooted in Sacred Scripture, as these passages from the Book of Sirach attest: "Do

not disregard the discourse of the aged, for they themselves learned from their fathers; because from them you will gain understanding and learn how to give an answer in time of need” (Sir 8:9).

The Church cannot and does not want to conform to a mentality of impatience, and much less of indifference and contempt, towards old age. We must reawaken the *collective sense of gratitude*, of appreciation, of hospitality, which makes the elder feel like a living part of his community.

Our elders are men and women, fathers and mothers, who came before us on our own road, in our own house, in our daily battle for a worthy life. They are men and women from whom we have received so much. The elder is not an alien. We are that elder: in the near or far future, but inevitably, even if we don't think it. And if we don't learn how to treat the elder better, that is how we will be treated.

We old people are all a little fragile. Some, however, are *particularly weak*, many are alone, and stricken by illness. Some depend on the indispensable care and attention of others. Are we going to take a step back? Abandon them to their fate? A society without *proximity*, where *gratuity* and affection *without compensation*— between strangers as well — is disappearing, is a perverse society. The Church, faithful to the Word of God, cannot tolerate such degeneration. A Christian community in which proximity and gratuity are no longer considered indispensable is a society which would lose her soul. Where there is no honour for elders, there is no future for the young.

General Audience
March 11, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,

In today's catechesis we continue our reflection on grandparents, *considering the value and importance of their role in the family*. I do so by placing myself in their shoes, because I too belong to this age group.

When I was in the Philippines, the Filipino people greeted me saying “Lolo Kiko” — meaning Grandpa Francis — “Lolo Kiko”, they said! The first important thing to stress: it is true that society tends to discard us, but the Lord definitely does not! The Lord never discards us. He calls us to follow Him in every age of life, and *old age has a grace and a mission* too, a true

vocation from the Lord. Old age is a vocation. It is not yet time to “pull in the oars”. This period of life is different from those before, there is no doubt; we even have to somewhat “invent it ourselves”, because our societies are not ready, spiritually and morally, to appreciate the true value of this stage of life. Indeed, it once was not so normal to have time available; it is much more so today. Christian spirituality has also been caught somewhat by surprise, with regard to outlining a kind of spirituality of the elderly. But thanks be to God there is no shortage of the testimony of elderly saints, both men and women!

I was really moved by the “Day dedicated to the elderly” that we had here in St Peter’s Square last year, the Square was full. I listened to the stories of elderly people who devote themselves to others, and to stories of married couples, who said: “We are celebrating our 50th wedding anniversary, we are celebrating our 60th wedding anniversary”. It is important to present this to young people who tire so easily; the testimony of the elderly in fidelity is important. There were so many in this Square that day. It is a reflection to continue, in both the ecclesial and civil spheres. The Gospel comes to meet us with a really moving and encouraging image. It is the image of Simeon and Anna, whom are spoken of in the Gospel of Jesus’ childhood, composed by St Luke. There were certainly elderly, the “old man”, Simeon, and the “prophetess”, Anna, who was 84 years old. This woman did not hide her age. The Gospel says that they awaited the coming of God every day, with great trust, for many years. They truly wanted to see Him that day, to grasp the signs, to understand the origin. By then, they were also perhaps more resigned to die first: that long wait, however, continued to occupy their whole life, having no commitments more important than this: to await the Lord and pray. So, when Mary and Joseph went to the temple to fulfil the provisions of the Law, Simeon and Anna moved quickly, inspired by the Holy Spirit (cf. Lk 2:27). The burden of age and waiting disappeared in an instant. They recognized the Child, and discovered *new strength, for a new task*: to give thanks for and bear witness to this Sign from God. Simeon improvised a beautiful hymn of jubilation (cf. Lk 2:29-32) — in that moment he was a poet — and Anna became the first woman to preach of Jesus: she “spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Lk 2:38).

Dear grandparents, dear elderly, let us follow in the footsteps of these extraordinary elders! Let us too become like poets of prayer: let us develop a taste for finding our own words, let us once again grasp those which teach us the Word of God. *The prayer of grandparents and of the elderly is a*

great gift for the Church! The prayer of grandparents and of the elderly is a great gift for the Church, it is a treasure! A great injection of wisdom for the whole of human society: above all for one which is too busy, too taken, too distracted. Someone should also sing, for them too, sing of the signs of God, proclaim the signs of God, pray for them! Let us look to Benedict XVI, who chose to spend the final span of his life in prayer and listening to God! This is beautiful! A great believer of the last century, of the Orthodox tradition, Olivier Clément, said: “A civilization which has no place for prayer is a civilization in which old age has lost all meaning. And this is terrifying. For, above all, we need old people who pray; prayer is the purpose of old age”. We need old people who pray because this is the very purpose of old age. The prayer of the elderly is a beautiful thing.

We are able to *thank* the Lord for the benefits received, and fill the emptiness of ingratitude that surrounds us. We are able to *intercede* for the expectations of younger generations and give dignity to the memory and sacrifices of past generations. We are able to remind ambitious young people that a life without love is a barren life. We are able say to young people who are afraid that anxiety about the future can be overcome. We are able to teach the young who are overly self-absorbed that there is more joy in giving than in receiving. Grandfathers and grandmothers form the enduring “chorus” of a great spiritual sanctuary, where prayers of supplication and songs of praise sustain the community which toils and struggles in the field of life.

Last, Prayer *unceasingly purifies the heart*. Praise and supplication to God prevents the heart from becoming hardened by resentment and selfishness. How awful is the cynicism of an elderly person who has lost the meaning of his testimony, who scorns the young and does not communicate the wisdom of life! How beautiful, however, is the encouragement an elderly person manages to pass on to a young person who is seeking the meaning of faith and of life! It is truly the mission of grandparents, the vocation of the elderly. The words of grandparents have special value for the young. And the young know it. I still carry with me, always, in my breviary, the words my grandmother consigned to me in writing on the day of my priestly ordination. I read them often and they do me good.

How I would like a Church that challenges the throw-away culture with the overflowing joy of a new embrace between young and old! This is what I ask of the Lord today, this embrace!

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CHILDREN

General Audience
March 18, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,

After reviewing the various members of the family — mother, father, children, siblings, grandparents —, I would like to conclude this first group of catecheses on the family by speaking about children. I will do so in two phases: today I will focus on the great gift that children are for humanity — it is true they are a great gift for humanity, but also really excluded because they are not even allowed to be born — and the next time I shall focus on several wounds that unfortunately harm childhood. Who come to mind are the many children I met during my recent journey to Asia: full of life, of enthusiasm, and, on the other hand, I see that in the world, many of them live in unworthy conditions.... In fact, from the way children are treated society can be judged, not only morally but also sociologically, whether it is a liberal society or a society enslaved by international interests.

First of all children remind us that we all, in the first years of life, were completely dependent upon the care and benevolence of others. The Son of God was not spared this stage. It is the mystery that we contemplate every year at Christmas. The Nativity Scene is the icon which communicates this reality in the simplest and most direct way. It is curious: God has no difficulty in making Himself understood by children, and children have no difficulty in understanding God. It is not by chance that in the Gospel there are several very beautiful and powerful words of Jesus regarding the “little ones”. This term, “babes”, refers to all the people who depend on the help of others, and to children in particular. For example, Jesus says: “I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding, and revealed them to babes” (Mt 11:25). And again: “See that you do not despise one of these little ones: for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 18:10).

Thus, children are in and of themselves a treasure for humanity and also for the Church, for they constantly evoke that necessary condition for entering the Kingdom of God: that of not considering ourselves self-sufficient, but in need of help, of love, of forgiveness. We all are in need of help, of love and

of forgiveness! Children remind us of another beautiful thing: they remind us that we are always sons and daughters. Even if one becomes an adult, or an elder, even if one becomes a parent, if one occupies a position of responsibility, underneath all of this is still the identity of a child. We are all sons and daughters. And this always brings us back to the fact that we did not give ourselves life but that we received it. The great gift of life is the first gift that we received. Sometimes in life we risk forgetting about this, as if we were the masters of our existence, and instead we are fundamentally dependent. In reality, it is a motive of great joy to feel at every stage of life, in every situation, in every social condition, that we are and we remain sons and daughters. This is the main message that children give us, by their very presence: simply by their presence they remind us that each and every one of us is a son or daughter.

But there are so many gifts, so many riches that children bring to humanity. I shall mention only a few.

They bring their way of seeing reality, with a trusting and pure gaze. A child has spontaneous trust in his father and mother; he has spontaneous trust in God, in Jesus, in Our Lady. At the same time, his interior gaze is pure, not yet tainted by malice, by duplicity, by the “incrustations” of life which harden the heart. We know that children are also marked by original sin, that they are selfish, but they preserve purity, and interior simplicity. But children are not diplomats: they say what they feel, say what they see, directly. And so often they put their parents in difficulty, saying in front of other people: “I don’t like this because it is ugly”. But children say what they see, they are not two-faced, they have not yet learned that science of duplicity that we adults have unfortunately learned.

Furthermore, children — in their interior simplicity — bring with them the capacity to receive and give tenderness. Tenderness is having a heart “of flesh” and not “of stone”, as the Bible says (cf. Ezek 36:26). Tenderness is also poetry: it is “feeling” things and events, not treating them as mere objects, only to use them, because they are useful....

Children have the capacity to smile and to cry. Some, when I pick them up to embrace them, smile; others see me dressed in white and think I am a doctor and that I am going to vaccinate them, and they cry... spontaneously! Children are like this: they smile and cry, two things which are often “stifled” in grown-ups, we are no longer capable.... So often our smile becomes a cardboard smile, fixed, a smile that is not natural, even an artificial smile, like a clown. Children smile spontaneously and cry spontaneously. It always

depends on the heart, and often our heart is blocked and loses this capacity to smile, to cry. So children can teach us how to smile and cry again. But we must ask ourselves: do I smile spontaneously, frankly, with love or is my smile artificial? Do I still cry or have I lost the capacity to cry? These are two very human questions that children teach us.

For all these reasons Jesus invited his disciples to “become like children”, because “the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like them” (cf. Mt 18:3; Mk 10:14).

Dear brothers and sisters, children bring life, cheerfulness, hope, also troubles. But such is life. Certainly, they also bring worries and sometimes many problems; but better a society with these worries and these problems, than a sad, grey society because it is without children! When we see that the birth rate of a society is barely one percent, we can say that this society is sad, it is grey because it has no children.

General Audience
April 8, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning,

In this series of Catecheses on the family, today we are completing our reflection on children, who are the most beautiful gift and blessing that the Creator has given to man and woman. We have already spoken about the great gift that children are. Today sadly we must speak about the “passions” which many of them endure.

From the first moments of their lives, many children are rejected, abandoned, and robbed of their childhood and future. There are those who dare to say, as if to justify themselves, that it was a mistake to bring these children into the world. This is shameful! Let’s not unload our faults onto the children, please! Children are never a “mistake”. Their hunger is not a mistake, nor is their poverty, their vulnerability, their abandonment — so many children abandoned on the streets — and neither is their ignorance or their helplessness... so many children don’t even know what a school is. If anything, these should be reasons to love them all the more, with greater generosity. How can we make such solemn declarations on human rights and the rights of children, if we then punish children for the errors of adults?

Those who have the task of governing, of educating, but I would say all adults, we are responsible for children and for doing what we can to change this situation. I am referring to “the passion” of children. Every child who is marginalized, abandoned, who lives on the street begging with every kind of trick, without schooling, without medical care, is a cry that rises up to God and denounces the system that we adults have set in place. And unfortunately these children are prey to criminals who exploit them for shameful trafficking or commerce, or train them for war and violence. But even in so-called wealthy countries many children live in dramatic situations that scar them deeply because of crises in the family, educational gaps and at times inhuman living conditions. In every case, their childhood is violated in body and soul. But none of these children are forgotten by the Father who is in heaven! Not one of their tears is lost! Neither is our responsibility lost, the social responsibility of people, of each one of us, and of countries.

Once Jesus rebuked his disciples because they sent away the children whose parents brought them to Him to be blessed. It is a moving Gospel narrative: “Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people; but Jesus said, ‘Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.’ And he laid his hands on them and went away” (Mt 19:13-15). How beautiful is this trust of the parents and Jesus’ response! How I would like this passage to become the norm for all children! It is true that by the grace of God children in grave difficulty are often given extraordinary parents, ready and willing to make every sacrifice. But these parents should not be left alone! We should accompany them in their toil, and also offer them moments of shared joy and lighthearted cheer, so that they are not left with only routine therapy.

When it comes to children, no matter what, there should be no utterance of those legal defense-like formulas: “after all, we are not a charity”, or, “in private, everyone is free to do as he or she wishes”, or even, “we’re sorry but we can’t do anything”. These words do not count when it comes to children.

Too often the effects of a life worn down by precarious and underpaid work, unsustainable hours, bad transport rebound on the children.... Children also pay the price for immature unions and irresponsible separations: they are the first victims; they suffer the outcome of a culture of exaggerated individual rights, and then the children become more precocious. They

often absorb the violence they are not able to “ward off” and before the very eyes of adults are forced to grow accustomed to degradation.

Also in our age, as in the past, the Church sets her motherhood at the service of children and their families. To parents and children of this world of ours, she bears the blessing of God, motherly tenderness, a firm reproach and strong condemnation. Children are no laughing matter!

Think what a society would be like if it decided, once and for all, to establish this principle: “It’s true, we are not perfect and we make many mistakes. But when it comes to the children who come into the world, no sacrifice on the part of adults is too costly or too great, to ensure that no child believe he or she was a mistake, is worthless or is abandoned to a life of wounds and to the arrogance of men”. How beautiful a society like this would be! I say that for such a society, much could be forgiven, innumerable errors. Truly a great deal.

The Lord judges our life according to what the angels of children tell him, angels who “always behold the face of the Father who is in heaven” (cf. Mt 18:10). Let us always ask ourselves: what will the children’s guardian angels tell God about us?

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PRAYER FOR THE SYNOD

General Audience
March 25, 2015

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

In our series of catecheses on the family, today's is a special step: it will be a pause in prayer.

Indeed, on 25 March in the Church we solemnly celebrate the Annunciation, the mystery of the Incarnation begins. The Archangel Gabriel visits a humble girl in Nazareth and proclaims to her that she will conceive and bear the Son of God. With this Annunciation the Lord illuminates and strengthens Mary's faith, as He will also do for her spouse Joseph, so that *Jesus could be born into a human family*. This is very beautiful: it shows us how deeply the mystery of the Incarnation, as God desired, encompasses not only conception in the mother's womb, but also acceptance in a real family. Today I would like to contemplate with you the beauty of this bond, the beauty of God's condescension; and we can do this by reciting the *Hail Mary* together, the first part of which takes up the words of the Angel, those he addressed to the Virgin. I invite you to pray together:

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

And now a second aspect: on 25 March, the Solemnity of the Annunciation, in many countries the *Day for Life* is celebrated. That is why, 20 years ago, St John Paul II on this day signed the Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*. In order to commemorate this anniversary there are many followers of the Pro-Life Movement present in the Square today. In *Evangelium Vitae*, *the family occupies a central place*, as it is the womb of human life. The word of my venerable Predecessor reminds us that *a human couple was blessed from the beginning to form a community of love and life, entrusted with the mission to generate life*. Christian spouses, celebrating the Sacrament of Marriage, make themselves open to honour this blessing, with the grace of Christ, for their whole lives. The Church, for her part, is solemnly committed to care for the family that is born, as a gift of God for her life, in good times and in bad: *the bond between the Church and the family is sacred and inviolable*. The Church, as a mother, never abandons the family, even when it is downhearted, wounded and humiliated in so many ways.

Neither when it falls into sin nor moves away from the Church; she will always do everything to try to care for and heal it, to call it to conversion and to reconcile it to the Lord.

If this then is the task, it is clear *how much prayer the Church needs* in order to be able, in every age, to carry out this mission! Prayer full of love for the family and for life. Prayer that can rejoice with the rejoicing and suffer with the suffering.

Here then is what I, together with my co-workers, have thought to offer today: *renewal of prayer for the Synod of Bishops on the Family*. We relaunch this commitment until this coming October, when the Ordinary Synodal Assembly dedicated to the family will take place. I would like this prayer, as the whole journey of the Synod, to be animated by the compassion of the Good Shepherd for his flock, especially for people and families who, for different reasons, are “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Mt 9:36). Thus, sustained and animated by the grace of God, the Church can be ever more committed, and ever more united, in the witness of the truth of the love of God and of his mercy for the world’s families, none excluded, both within the fold and without.

I ask you, please do not fail to pray. Everyone — the pope, cardinals, bishops, priests, men and women religious, lay faithful — we are all called to pray for the Synod. This is what is needed, not gossip! I also call to prayer those who feel distant or who are no longer used to it. This *prayer for the Synod on the Family* is for the good of everyone. I know that this morning you were given a holy card, which you are holding in your hands. I invite you to keep it and carry it with you, so that in the coming months you can recite it often, with holy persistence, as Jesus asked us to. Now let us recite it together:

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, in you we contemplate the splendour of true love, to you we turn with trust.

Holy Family of Nazareth, grant that our families too may be places of communion and prayer, authentic schools of the Gospel and small domestic Churches.

Holy Family of Nazareth, may families never again experience violence, rejection and division: May all who have been hurt or scandalized find ready comfort and healing.

Holy Family of Nazareth, may the approaching Synod of Bishops make us more mindful of the sacredness and inviolability of the family, and its beauty in God's plan.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, graciously hear our prayer. Amen.

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Information Office
Opus Dei, 2015

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