

# "Without the Mutual Love of the Family Our Society Dies"

by [European Catholic-Orthodox Forum](#)

## **Preamble**

By the grace of the Holy Spirit, we, thirty representatives of the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches in Europe, from countries stretching from the Urals to the Atlantic, have gathered together for the First European Catholic-Orthodox Forum. The meeting has been organized by the Council of European Bishops Conferences (CCEE) in close collaboration with various Orthodox Churches and some of the dicasteries of the Holy See.

Our task is to concentrate on anthropological issues of crucial importance for the present and future of humanity. The goal of the Forum is to help define common positions on social and moral questions. By engaging in this exchange, we help each other realize just how close our moral and social doctrines are. At the same time, we make the world aware of our concerns.

We agreed to dedicate our first encounter to "The Family: A Good for Humanity". Countless numbers of families have contributed so much to European culture. Over our four days together, we have discussed topics relating to marriage and family, as well as various aspects of sexual ethics. In particular, animated by the love of Christ for humanity, we have focused on the family, acknowledging all the efforts being done to promote family life on our continent but also voicing our concern for the deteriorating condition of family life that is evident in many ambits of society.

Marriage and the family belong to the created order and are not products of mere human decision. Written into the very nature of human being and revealed to us in the Bible, the family, founded on marriage, was established by God as a union between man and woman. The Bible presents us a vision of the family as a unity of life-giving love, an indissoluble relationship, and open to life.

## **I — Marriage and Family**

### **A. Orthodox Views on Marriage and the Family**

In the Christian Orthodox tradition, marriage is viewed as an eternal union of spouses, strengthened not only by physical but also by spiritual intimacy. In spite of widespread belief to the contrary, the Orthodox Church "by no means calls on its members to shun the body or sexual intimacy as such, for physical relations between a man and a woman are blessed by God in marriage, where they become a source of the continuation of the human race and express chaste love, total community, and the 'unity of souls and bodies' of the spouses." According to the teaching of the Orthodox Church, "the transformation of these relations, which are pure and worthy according to God's plan, as well as of the body itself into an object of degrading exploitation and trade aimed at the receiving of egoistic and impersonal, loveless, and distorted satisfaction, deserves condemnation." (The Bases of the Social Conception of the Russian Orthodox ChurchX, 6.)

According to the Orthodox understanding, an essential element of the marital union and the fruit of the love between man and wife are children, the birth and upbringing of which are one of the main goals of marriage (Ibid., X 3-4). In accordance with this view, the Orthodox Church considers the freely willed

rejection of childbirth and the artificial termination of pregnancy inadmissible. As the equivalent of murder, abortion is unequivocally rejected by the Church, which insists on the personal responsibility of all who take part in this act: the woman, the man (in the case of his consent) and the doctor (ibid., XII,2).

On the basis of Holy Scripture and Tradition, the Orthodox Church denounces homosexual relations, seeing in them the distortion of man's divinely created nature (Ibid., XII, 9). It also rejects all forms of fornication, adultery, and marital infidelity, as well as prostitution and promiscuity. At the same time, it recognizes the need to pastorally assist those people who have disordered inclinations and whose way of life does not correspond to the Gospel's moral teaching.

## **B. Catholic Positions on Marriage and the Family**

According to Catholic teaching, as affirmed also by the Orthodox, Jesus Christ raised natural marriage to the dignity of a sacrament: "The marriage covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of their whole life and which of its own very nature is ordered to the well-being of the spouses and to the procreation and upbringing of children, has, between the baptized, been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament" (CIC can. 1055 - §1).

This sacramental value requires fidelity unto death among the spouses in the indissolubility of the marriage bond. Marital love between the spouses is the basis of the family, the first personal communion into which a human being is born. It must be promoted by society as its fundamental cell. The Catholic Church recognizes the inseparable link willed by God between the unitive and procreative meanings of married love. Exclusion of offspring is therefore contrary

to the unity of marital love. Sexuality is recognized as a dimension of the image of God in human beings and so has a personal value. Men and women must learn in the language of the body their vocation to responsible love as a true gift of themselves. Other sexual expressions, such as fornication, homosexual acts, and sexual unions outside marriage, are contrary to this vocation to love.

## **II — Mission of the Family**

### **A. Key Common Points**

God's commandment to the first human family remains relevant to all subsequent families: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28).

Catholics and Orthodox agree that the family is the unique moral environment in which the gift of human life should be transmitted by the marital act.

The human being is the only one created in the image and likeness of God; this constitutes his particular dignity. We do not give life to ourselves, nor are parents the sole source of human life, since divine intervention is necessary. Thus, the sacredness of human life from conception to natural death should be fully respected.

We acknowledge the positive international documents that support the family. For instance, article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that: "Man and woman of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality, or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family" and "the family is the natural and fundamental group of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State." In the past, the family and childbirth were regarded as something sacred. In recent years, however, these notions are questioned. There is an

attempt to change language and introduce ambiguity into international documents under the ideological introduction of the gender theory.

Today, both men and women are equally busy with the realization of their professional potential, and both have to bear the burden of financial responsibility for the family. Under these circumstances, the possibilities of bearing and rearing children are drastically reduced.

A particularly tragic phenomenon has emerged in twenty first century Europe. Due to wages that do not sustain families, hundred of thousands of mothers and fathers have had to leave their families to go to wealthier countries to provide for the basic needs of their families. This has resulted in increased numbers of divorces and in great suffering to children, with many of them being deprived of the presence of their parents' love and care.

The secular vision prevailing in modern society often undermines the notion of motherhood as a personal vocation. It is sometimes devalued. We, Orthodox and Catholics together, insist on the sacredness of motherhood and on the need for society to respect it. Mothers who stay at home in order to raise and educate children should be afforded support, both morally and financially. Their mission is in no way less important than that of other respected professions. Motherhood is a mission, and as such it deserves unconditional support and respect. The idea of fatherhood is also fundamental for society, and it too needs to be rediscovered by contemporary society. It's impossible to speak of a fraternal society without fatherhood.

## **B. Family and Education**

Having given the gift of life to their children, parents are their first educators.

"The right and duty of parents to give education is essential, since it is connected with the transmission of human life; it is original and primary with regard to the educational role of others on account of the uniqueness of the loving relationship between parents and children; it is irreplaceable and inalienable and, therefore, incapable of being entirely delegated to others or usurped by others". ("Familiaris Consortium," 36). Integral education within the family is not limited simply to the development of a child's natural gifts and capacities but refers also to spiritual values, in particular the handing on of faith. Parents are to be the first witnesses of the Gospel. In the family life we learn the meaning of faith as the true light that guides a person's life.

The most suitable environment for the harmonious development of the child is the family, composed of a father, mother, and siblings. Other bodies that help the family in education of their children must act in collaboration with parents, passing on the principles and values which always remain the parents' primary responsibility to transmit. In the context of education, one often hears about the rights of the child. This is good, but such rights must always be considered within the environment of the family.

The issue of "sex education" merits particular attention. Here, too, parents are the first teachers. The principle aim of such teaching is directed towards forming young people in the meaning of married love: "Education in love as self-giving is also the indispensable premise for parents called to give their children a clear and delicate sex education" (Ibid., 37). In the family, where we have the first experience of personal communion, we are introduced into love in all its dimensions: the family is the first place of personal socialization. Furthermore,

parents must provide information proportionate to each stage of the individual development of their children. Other bodies, such as the school, constitute, in this sense, an aid for parents.

Particular influence is brought to bear on the education of children and young people by the mass media that strongly condition family relations. Young people imitate the examples communicated through the media. Alongside many positives aspects, however, the means of communication unfortunately and increasingly present pornographic material and an individualist, egoistic culture.

Families that teach their children well, attentive to establishing proper relationships between all family members, constitute a valuable human capital that has great importance for society in both its economic and spiritual well-being. Family life creates culture: man learns the essential language of life and all that helps him become fully human. All culture, in its beginnings and in its development, is a family event.

### **C. The Crisis of our Society: Challenges and Opportunity**

Today, we are faced with a certain ideology of culture that emerged with the sexual revolution in the last century. This has brought about a deep crisis in the vision of what it is to be human and of family life. It is a major challenge to the evangelization of the Christian Churches that are attentive to the needs of the heart of the human being and his or her calling to full life in Christ.

Among the profound changes of our society, a deep economic crisis has recently emerged. The banking, financial, and economic crisis of today is one of the indicators of a major turning point in our global and European society. We are all

rightly concerned. But another vital element of this turning point is the crisis in regard to family life. The demographic trends alone in Europe are clear signals of a crisis much greater than the financial one. The family, born of marriage between man and woman that gives rise to children and an extended network of relationships, needs to be rediscovered as valuable social capital. We appeal to political and social leaders to address this major social issue before it is too late. Without this attention, lack of financial funds will pale before the lack of social and human resources that the family brings.

On the other hand, we express gratitude for what has been done. Many positive developments have helped the family: recent social and economic recognition in some countries of the contribution of motherhood to society, financial and social assistance for the care of disabled and elderly, medical coverage for disadvantaged members of society.

### **III — Recommendations and Appeals**

In recent years, the Churches have become aware of the importance of supporting spiritual renewal and, in particular, accompanying young people as they journey towards becoming husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. While assisting all families pastorally, we recognize that special care needs to be given to newly established families. Marginalized families (and often migrant families are such) deserve attentive care. The Church's mission is to give hope to our society that today is faced with many challenges. We need to show signs of solidarity and, through the media, communicate our positive message regarding the family.

All of us together, Catholics and Orthodox, affirm the following recommendations and appeal to all people of good will in society to act together with us on them:

1. There is a most urgent need to rediscover the understanding of the family and marriage. We believe that one of the primary causes of the current demographic crisis and all related crises is the rejection of this understanding. Much effort needs to be invested in the promotion of family life. The family needs to be rediscovered for what it offers society. In the family, we have homes that are creative, dynamic, and vital schools of socialization in many ways: educating family members to a discovery of the value of community and otherness, forming them in a culture of giving, encouraging openness to diversity in solidarity, facilitating mutuality in communication, and providing a dynamic towards discovery and novelty, the fruit of interpersonal endeavor.
2. We affirm that it is only in relationship to God that all human beings blossom in their full humanity. Accordingly, it is our belief that by promoting the family institution, based on the marriage of man and woman, Europe will be furthering this fundamental unit of society that carries out a vital liberating, fulfilling, and enlightening role in society. To recognize this is the beginning of a renewal of our European culture that is seeking its way forward at this time of profound soul-searching. Our appeal to political and social leaders is the following: The family is not an outdated notion! Rightly rediscovered, it is the future. Without the mutual love of the family, our society dies.
3. We affirm that, since they have conferred life on their children, parents have the original, primary, and inalienable right to educate them. They

must be acknowledged as the generally best suited and the first and foremost educators of their children. We call upon the political institutions to ensure the parents' right to educate their children in conformity with their moral and religious convictions, taking into account the cultural traditions of the family. This includes the right to freely choose schools or other means necessary to educate their children in keeping with their convictions. In particular, sex education is a basic right of the parents and must always be carried out according to their choice and under their close supervision.

4. We see a great danger in the apparent subordination of the needs of children and the well-being of the family to economic interests.
5. We call upon all public institutions to ensure that policies regarding remuneration for work are consistent with establishing and maintaining a family with dignity. This could be obtained by tax laws which recognize the indispensable contribution of the family to society. It should be such that both parents need not necessarily be obliged to work full time outside the home to the detriment of family life and especially to the detriment of the education of children. We call upon the public institutions to recognize and respect the work of the mother in the home because of its value for the family and for society. The issue of "child care" needs further consideration, with the best interests of the child as the guiding principle.
6. Finally, we call to mind the moral choice on which the future of the whole of humanity depends. Its essence is expressed as a central point of the Covenant God made with the humankind which is fulfilled in Christ: "See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil; I command you this day to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep

his commandments . . . that you may live and multiply: and the Lord your God shall bless you. I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both you and your seed may live."  
(Deut. 30:15-19).