



PONTIFICIUM CONSILIUM
PRO FAMILIA



Vatican City, 24 February 2014

To the Presidents of the Episcopal Commissions for the Family and the national Caritas

Contributing toward the preparation of the Special Assembly of the Synod on the Family

Dear Brothers,

As Presidents of the Pontifical Council for the Family and of Caritas Internationalis, we are addressing jointly you today, at this time when preparations for the Special Assembly of the Synod on the Family convened by the Holy Father Pope Francis from 5 to 19 October 2014, continue in your respective particular Churches.

We deem this initiative by the Holy Father to be highly prophetic, and the title of the preparatory document, **Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization**, indicates the extent of the task in which we all must engage during the preparatory phase of this important ecclesial event.

Thus this invitation, addressed to the entire Church and all men and women of good will, is being launched, i.e., to consider the family as the Creator wished it to be, to reaffirm its primacy, and to tackle with courage and determination all the challenges it faces in a period of our history marked by a social, spiritual and moral crisis that is threatening a vital institution which is indispensable for the future of the Church and society.

As part of a pastoral process, the preparatory document has already highlighted some of the challenges currently being faced by the family; it also has raised highly relevant questions to facilitate analysis and reflection. We are convinced that the answers given will enable us to reaffirm that the family is at the heart of Christian and social life.

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The previous Synod focused on the "New Evangelization", and the Pope has recently published his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, which invites all members of the Church to play an active and joyful part in proclaiming the Gospel!

Indeed, the poor are the privileged beneficiaries of the "Good News" of salvation. Thus "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free" (*Lk 4:18*).

In our modern world, despite the progress made in almost all areas of human life, we continue to see poor people. Indeed, millions of people still live in poverty and only know suffering and exploitation. Populations have wars imposed on them, leading to loss of human life for political, ideological and economic reasons. Aggression against human life continues, from conception to its natural end. An unbalanced relationship with nature and an improper exploitation of its resources still are to be deplored, as well as the economic crisis that has plunged so many people into despair to the point of endangering their lives and those of their families, as we see every day with the victims who perish on their migratory journeys, etc.

There is also "the first poverty of peoples", which according to Mother Teresa of Calcutta, involves not knowing Christ!

A few days after his election, Pope Francis, who revealed that he had heard an urgent appeal "not to forget the poor", encourages us daily to commit ourselves to change the lives of our poorest brothers and sisters. This, it seems to us, is one of the messages conveyed by *Evangelii Gaudium*. The Synod Assembly on the Family, just convened by the Bishop of Rome who presides over the charity of all Churches, undoubtedly will be one of the highlights of his pontificate. In deciding to do this he seems to be saying to the Church that the Gospel cannot be proclaimed today without renewed attention to pastoral care for the family, especially those families faced with poverty in all its forms.

Therefore, preparation of the upcoming Synod Assembly provides an opportunity for all the living forces of the Church around the world to focus on the most violent forms of poverty, which still affect millions of families worldwide.

For example, hunger (but not exclusively, as we just have noted above), remains a disgrace that still affects approximately one billion people even though there is enough food for everyone, as the Holy Father recently reminded us in giving his support to the Campaign against hunger and for the right to food launched by Caritas Internationalis on 10 December 2013.

We believe that an examination of the forms of poverty that currently disfigure and threaten the family in various contexts and places of mission should be on the Synod agenda, especially during the preparatory phase. At the appropriate time, this could lead the Church as a whole to revisit and/or rethink, among other things, its presence and role in the social field. This could give impetus to a new dynamism in the practice of charity by and within the Church, give it a specific pastoral content, organise it at all levels of the life of the Church, and really make it one of the "pillars of Evangelization" as Pope Benedict XVI recalled during the opening of the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization.

Most Reverend Excellencies, as you will have heard, the purpose of our message is thus to invite you to include the theme of **The family and poverty** among the reflections held in your diocesan communities in preparation for the upcoming Synod.

This is a complex issue. One of the keys to address it is to start with the role of the family as an integrating space, and of poverty as a destabilising factor among many others. The family is the basic unit of society; this is indispensable for ensuring the continuity of society. The family is a space for the transmission of values, social and cultural apprenticeship, and integration within society and the Church. The good health of a society depends on the health of the family and its capacity to contribute to the wellbeing of everyone. When the family fares badly society fares badly, and when society fares badly it is the family that is affected by it. The family is, *par excellence*, a space for socialisation and the process of solidarity. Children who see their parents sharing, giving and paying attention to others can in turn replicate the same values. Ten years ago, after the tsunami disaster, we saw how children were moved by the events and touched by the suffering, and in their own way expressed compassion. In a world of indifference and lack of attention to one's neighbour, the family helps to teach children about solidarity. The educational role of the family should be promoted so that all its members, especially children, always remember that no-one has the right to be happy alone; on the contrary, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" *Acts 20:35*.

The phenomenon of poverty, as it is observed in almost all our environments, is manifested by certain indicators, such as: isolation of individuals or groups of individuals; lack of hope; a feeling of impotence and exclusion; lack of access to education and information for children; unemployment; overcrowding and lack of decent housing; insecurity and lack of basic needs; no access to healthcare services; living from day to day; being exploited and perceived sexually, especially women and children; and being a victim of racism or discrimination.

All this causes poverty to become a kind of vicious circle, which sometimes has an economic cause, but also has social, psychological and cultural consequences that are incompatible with the human dignity that lies at the heart of the Gospel and of the Social Teaching of the Church.

Poverty undoubtedly makes the family unit more fragile and threatens its very existence. Supporting and strengthening families to make them less vulnerable to moral, spiritual, social, cultural and economic violations, as well as promoting the role of parents and enabling them to exercise their responsibilities, including in the economic field, have become part of the pastoral challenges for the Church, and even more so today.

Moreover, the pastoral care of families that face extreme poverty constitutes a major pastoral emergency which puts our imagination and pastoral creativity to the test, especially in countries from the South, where economic, social and cultural vulnerability exposes many families to the onslaught of sects. Some people promise heaven on earth! Others hem the poor into feeling guilty by making them believe that being poor is their own fault, or a punishment from God!

It should also be recognised that poor families often are victims of a negative attitude towards them, including by and within communities of believers.

Therefore, in both the preparatory phase and during the actual meeting, the Synod Assembly also represents a time of conversion. We should never forget that our Lord identified Himself with the poor, saying to us: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (cf. *Mt 25*). He also said, , "Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?" (cf. *Acts 9:1-30*).

Christians always should bear in mind that God became incarnate in a family; in fact, in a poor family! Indifference toward the poor is indifference toward God Himself!

For many years, a large number of particular Churches have made the family a pastoral priority. So, should we not consider the upcoming Synod to be an opportunity to take stock, not only in terms of progress made, but also looking forward to a new departure?

In Africa, Latin America and some Asian countries, such as the Philippines, the experience of grassroots Christian communities is worth revisiting as a place of fulfilment and evangelization of and by the family. These communities aimed to be, and still are, privileged spaces for living out evangelical fraternity and solidarity.

Pope Francis urges us to take action to safeguard the dignity and identity of the family and to protect it from all ideological and other threats, by affirming the moral, spiritual, cultural, human and natural values that underlie it, and by condemning and acting against the dangers that loom over it, including poverty in all its forms.

In preparation for and during the upcoming Synod, we should:

- Organise and strengthen grassroots ecclesial community life in order to go back to or continue moving forward together in prayer and sharing as the early Christians did;
- Strengthen the link between the pastoral care of the family and social pastoral ministry so that families suffering from extreme poverty may be welcomed and supported through human promotion initiatives in a spirit of solidarity;
- Promote collective social action in our dioceses to help families in need;
- Organise awareness-raising spaces for families suffering from great or absolute poverty, to help them develop their inner potential which marginalisation prevents from being realised;
- Advocate with public authorities and propose appropriate solutions for facilitating families' access to basic needs;
- Pay special attention to children from poor families so that they may access schools and educational institutions at all levels;
- Avoid neglect of the elderly and treat them with respect and humanity; their wisdom and knowledge should also be valued;

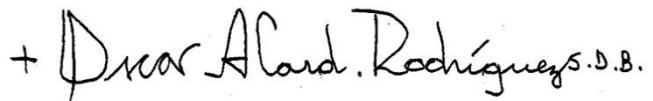
- Organise a dignified welcome for women and girls, especially those who are victims of exploitation and trafficking who are sometimes left to their fate to bring up their children on their own.

We hope that our strategy will meet with your approval, and that these ideas will be useful in preparing the faithful and evangelization workers for the upcoming Synod.

With our complete devotion to the Lord and Our Lady.



+ His Exc. Msgr. Vincenzo Paglia
President of the Pontifical Council for the Family



+ Oscar Andrés Cardinal Rodríguez Maradiaga
President of Caritas Internationalis