

PASTORAL LETTER OF THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE ON THE YEAR OF THE FAMILY (MAY 1994)

The organisation known as the United Nations, or the UN, which endeavours to promote peace and cooperation between all the nations of the world, recommended to all the nations that they should observe 1994 as the Year of the Family. The countries of Southern Africa agreed to this.

The Catholic Church through Pope John Paul II, also agreed and, in order to urge Catholics all over the world to take an active part in the Year of the Family, his Holiness wrote a special letter to families on 22 February 1994.

So far, in many parts of South Africa, the Church has not given much attention to the Year of the Family, because of the elections that took place at the end of April and all the preparations that had to be made in regard to education for democracy and voter education. Now we can focus more on the family and make it the object of special concern during the remainder of the year and indeed into the future.

It is encouraging that efforts are made all over the world to emphasise the importance of the family. All nations, all cultures, all religions agree on the importance of the family. Some nations and cultures consider the small family of father, mother and children as the only kind of family that is important to them. We call it 'small', (although it may have many children) to distinguish it from larger family made up of a greater number of relations. This larger family is greatly appreciated in Africa and gives wonderful support to the smaller family.

The Catholic Church has the highest regard for families, whether the large or the small. Most of the teaching of the Catholic Church concerns the small family of father, mother and children: because that kind of family was the only one well known in countries where the Catholic Church became strong in years gone by.

The family of which we are speaking is greatly prized by the Church for several reasons. Firstly, because it is so beautifully described in the Bible where we read: 'God created man in the image of Himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female He created them. God blessed them, saying to them, 'be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it'. (Genesis 1: 27-28). We also read that, after the creation of Eve, Adam exclaimed: 'This at last is bone from my bones, and flesh of my flesh. That is why a man leaves his father and mother and joins himself to his wife, and they become one body' (Genesis 2: 23-24).

Both man and woman are made in the image of God. That image is even greater and more beautiful in marriage, because marriage gives man and woman the right to share a special way in God's work of creation by bringing children into the world. These children are new images of God and their parents endeavour by training and education to make the new images as perfect as possible.

Marriage is so great in God's eyes that frequently through his prophets he compares his love for his people to the love of a husband for his wife. 'As the bridegroom rejoices in the bride so will your God rejoice in you' (Isaiah 62:5).

Moreover, we believe that Jesus made marriage one of the seven sacraments of the Church, a sacrament so wonderful that, according to St Paul, the union of love between husband and wife in marriage is like the union of love between Jesus and His Church. (Ephesians 5:32).

Again, as Pope John Paul II says in his letter to families, from the earliest days of the Church the family has been called the 'domestic church'; because the word of God, prayer and worship are shared among parents and children and because, filled with the presence of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the family forms a loving community in imitation of the three divine Persons.

As this love overflows to neighbours and to the poor and suffering, the family makes its contribution to the 'civilisation of love'. Pope John Paul II reminds us that his predecessor, Pope Paul VI, began using this expression to indicate the kind of society that Christians, guided and helped by God, should try to create.

Families, of course, are not spared their own pain and suffering and often deep anxiety. They may be stricken by poverty, unemployment, sickness and death. Sorrow is sometimes heaped on sorrow. In these circumstances, Christian families find consolation and strength in the faith, which helps them to unite their sufferings to those of Jesus and through their suffering to grow in love and unity.

We have endeavoured to paint a picture of the ideal Christian family. We know only too well, however, that in our time family life experiences great difficulties. Besides the difficulties that have been briefly mentioned, other great problems arise because there are strong tendencies among many people to depart from the laws of God about marriage.

For instance, people involve themselves in love affairs and also live together without getting married. They are not really committed to one another. Children are born and all too often the mothers have to bear all the responsibility for them. Single mothers often have a very difficult time and experience great problems in bringing up their children.

Many say: 'What is the purpose of getting married? So many marriages end up in divorce. Does marriage do anything for people?' How do we respond to that? Divorce is indeed very common and is accompanied very much sadness and sorrow for wives, husbands and children. For many people who have had sad experiences of love affairs, of living together without commitment or are divorced, it must sound like a mockery to be invited to celebrate the Year of the Family. And yet, when we see what good families are like, we realise that family life is according to the plan of God, the will of God and the love of God.

Can we do anything to improve family life and help people to move away from the sad failings we have mentioned?

It is quite clear that the Church must do far more than it is doing at present. By the Church we mean not only the bishops and priests, deacons and religious brothers and sisters but also and especially the communities of lay people in our dioceses and

parishes. Bishops, priests, deacons and religious can assist but the lay people, with God's guidance and help, must do most of the work, the work of promoting the spiritual and practical education and training that will restore the image of the family, its honour, its dignity, its unity and its beauty.

We call upon all members of the Catholic Church in South Africa to play their part in programmes promoting family life during the remainder of this year.