

HOMILY AT SANTA CLARA (Thursday 22 January 1998)



1. "These words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way" (Dt 6:6-7). We have gathered in the sports field of the Manuel Fajardo Higher Institute of Physical Education, which today has become an immense open-air church. At this meeting we wish to thank God for the great gift of the family.

On the very first page of the Bible the sacred author shows us this institution: "God created man in his own image; male and female he created them" (Gn 1:27). In this sense, human beings, in the duality of the sexes, are, like God himself and in accordance with his will, a source of life: "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gn 1:28). The family is thus called to co-operate in God's plan and his creative work through the covenant of married love between man and woman which — as St Paul tells us — is also a sign of the union of Christ with his Church (cf. Eph 5:32).  
**(A gathering of close to 300,000 attended)**

2. Dear brothers and sisters: I am pleased to extend an affectionate greeting to Bishop Fernando Prego Casal of Santa Clara, the Cardinals and other Bishops, the priests and deacons, the members of religious communities and all of you, the lay faithful present in such numbers. I offer a respectful greeting to the civil authorities. My words are addressed especially to all the families here present, who wish to proclaim their firm resolve to carry out in their lives the Lord's saving plan.

3. In Cuba, the institution of the family has inherited the rich patrimony of virtues which marked the Creole families of the past, whose members were so active in every aspect of life in society and who built this country without counting the cost in sacrifices and adversities. Those families, solidly founded upon Christian principles, were true communities of mutual affection, joy and celebration, trust and security, and serene reconciliation. They were also marked — like many homes today — by unity, deep respect for their elders, a lofty sense of responsibility, sincere submission to parental authority, happiness and optimism, whether in poverty or in plenty, by a desire to work for a better world and, above all, by great faith and trust in God.

Today, families in Cuba also are subject to the challenges experienced by so many families throughout the world. Countless members of these families have struggled and devoted their lives to attaining a better life, in which fundamental human rights are guaranteed: work, food, housing, health, education, social security and participation in the life of society. The family, the fundamental cell of society and the guarantee of its stability, nonetheless experiences the crises which are affecting society itself. This happens when married couples live in economic or cultural systems which, under the guise of freedom and progress, promote or even defend an anti-birth mentality and thus induce married couples to have recourse to methods of regulating fertility which are incompatible with human dignity. There is even an acceptance of abortion, which is always, in addition to being an abominable crime (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 51), a senseless impoverishment of the person and of society itself. In such a situation, the Church teaches that God has entrusted to men and women the mission of transmitting life in a way worthy of man, the fruit of responsibility and love between husband and wife.

Motherhood is sometimes presented as something backward or as a limitation of a woman's freedom, thus distorting its true nature and dignity. Children are presented not as what they are — a great gift of God — but rather as something to be defended against. The social situation experienced in this beloved country has created not a few difficulties for family stability: for example, material scarcities — as when wages are not sufficient or have a very

limited buying power —, dissatisfaction for ideological reasons, the attraction of the consumer society. These and other measures involving labour or other matters have helped to intensify a problem which has existed in Cuba for years: people being obliged to be away from the family within the country, and emigration, which has torn apart whole families and caused suffering for a large part of the population. Not easily accepted and often traumatic are the separation of children and the substitution of the role of parents as a result of schooling away from home even during adolescence. These experiences place young people in situations which sadly result in the spread of promiscuous behaviour, loss of ethical values, coarseness, premarital sexual relations at an early age and easy recourse to abortion. All this has a profoundly negative impact on young people, who are called to embody authentic moral values for the building of a better society.

4. The path to overcoming these evils is none other than Jesus Christ, his teaching and his example of total love which saves us. No ideology can replace his infinite wisdom and power. For this reason there is a need to recover religious values at the level of the family and of society, and to encourage the practice of the virtues which shaped the origins of the Cuban nation, in the process of building its future "with all and for the good of all", as José Martí wanted. The family, the school and the Church must form an educational community in which the children of Cuba can "grow in humanity". Do not be afraid; open your families and schools to the values of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which are never a threat to any social project.

5. "An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said: 'Rise, take the child and his mother'" (Mt 2:13). The revealed word shows us how God wishes to protect the family and preserve it from all danger. So the Church, inspired and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, seeks to defend and to propose to her children and to all people of good will the truth about the fundamental values of Christian marriage and the family. So too, she proclaims, as an unflinching duty, the holiness of this sacrament and its moral requirements, in order to safeguard the dignity of every human person.

Marriage, with its character as an exclusive and permanent union, is sacred because its origin is in God. Christians, in receiving the sacrament of marriage, share in God's creative plan and receive the graces they need to carry out their mission of raising and educating their children, and to respond to the call to holiness. It is a union different from any other sort of human society, for it is based on the mutual giving and receiving of husband and wife in order to become "one flesh" (Gn 2:24), living in a community of life and love, the vocation of which is to be a "sanctuary of life" (cf. *Evangelium vitae*, n. 59). By their faithful and persevering union, the couple contributes to the good of the institution of the family and shows that a man and a woman are capable of giving themselves to one another for ever, without their freedom hindering a voluntary and permanent self-gift, since in marriage each personality remains unaltered and the great law of love takes form and grows: each one giving himself or herself to the other in order to give themselves together to the task which God entrusts to them. If the human person is the centre of every social institution, then the family, the first setting for socialization, must be a community of free and responsible persons who live marriage as a project of love, ever more perfectible, and which contributes vitality and energy to civil society.

6. In married life, the service of life does not end with conception, but continues in the education of the new generations. Since parents have conferred life on their children, they have a solemn obligation to educate their offspring. Hence, parents must be acknowledged as the first and foremost educators of their children. Their role as educators is so decisive that scarcely anything can compensate for their failure in it (cf. *Gravissimum educationis*, n. 3). We are speaking of an irreplaceable and inalienable duty and right. It is true that in the area of education public authority has certain rights and duties, since it must serve the common good. Nonetheless, this does not give public authority the right to take the place of parents. Consequently parents, without expecting others to replace them in a matter which is their own responsibility, should be able to choose for their children the pedagogical method, the ethical and civic content and the religious inspiration which will enable them to receive an integral education. They must not expect everything to be given them; they should assume their mission as educators while seeking opportunities and creating adequate structures within civil society.

Furthermore, families need proper housing and a united home life, so that they can pass on ethical values in an environment favorable to the fostering of high ideals and living the faith.

7. Dear brothers and sisters, dear married couples and parents: I have wished to recall a few essential aspects of God's plan for marriage and the family, in order to help you to follow with generosity and commitment that

particular path to holiness to which many of you are called. Accept with love the word of the Lord proclaimed in this Eucharist. In the responsorial psalm we have heard: "Blessed are those who fear the Lord, and walk in his ways! Your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Indeed, thus shall be blessed the man who fears the Lord" (Ps 127:1,3,4).

Great is the vocation to marriage and family life inspired by the word of God and modeled on the Holy Family of Nazareth. Dear people of Cuba: Be faithful to God's word and to this model! Dear husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, and the families of this noble country of Cuba: In your lives hold on to this sublime model, aided by the grace given you in the sacrament of marriage. May God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, dwell in your homes. Thus will the Catholic families of Cuba contribute decisively to God's great work of human salvation in this blessed land which is your country and your nation. Cuba: care for your families, in order to keep your heart pure!

May Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, Mother of all Cubans, Mother in the home at Nazareth, intercede for all the families of Cuba so that, renewed, refreshed and helped in their trials, they may live in serenity and peace, overcoming their problems and difficulties, so that all their members may attain the salvation which comes from Jesus Christ, the Lord of history and of mankind. To him be glory and power for ever and ever. Amen.

I wish to repeat the words of your poet, José Martí: in the course of building their future "with all and for the good of all", the family, the school and the Church must form an educational community where the children of Cuba can "grow in humanity".

At the end of Mass the Holy Father spoke extemporaneously:

I have had the joy of celebrating my first Holy Mass in Cuba here in Santa Clara. We are under the gaze of the image of Our Lady of Charity. We have gathered as a great family, the Church, formed of so many families, which are little churches. God is great and you know he is also your God. The sight of this assembly is very beautiful, and its beauty increases when we see that the bond uniting us is faith. Bring my greetings to everyone and know that, in addition to the memory of this beautiful celebration, the Pope's love and affection are there in your homes. St Joseph, patron of families, and St Clare, for whom this city is named, will be happy with you and will intercede with the Lord. God bless you all!