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## A MESSAGE TO FAMILIES

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Throughout this magnificent summer I urged you to often fix your gaze on Jesus; at the dawn of the year 2000 it is good to focus on the One who has come to dwell among us. At the beginning of the present pastoral year, allow me to address myself especially to the families of our diocese.

### FAMILIES

Throughout the Pentecost, 1999 pastoral letter, I have been challenging you, because I count on you to make our Christian communities even more active and more missionary. Pope John Paul II has very often called the family the domestic Church, the Church-family. Accordingly, he states that *'in order to be a true domestic church the Christian family needs to be a setting where parents pass on the faith, since they are for their children, by word and example, the first heralds of the faith. Families should not fail to set time aside for prayer, in which spouses are united with each other and with their children.'* And he continues: 'There is need to encourage shared spiritual moments such as participating in the Eucharist on Sundays and Holy Days, receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation, daily prayer in the family and practical signs of charity. This will strengthen fidelity in marriage and unity in families.[Pope John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America*. Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1999. Page 81, No. 46] Within such a family framework, children will be able to easily learn, especially through the example of their parents, that family life is a way of living one's universal call to holiness.

### THE POWER OF FAMILIES

There are over seventeen thousand families in our diocesan Church, an unparalleled richness. Imagine the power for renewal and even transformation that our communities can live through you, if you continue to carry out all those responsibilities which the Church gives you. I know that much is asked of you, but can we keep faith, hope, and love from growing? Can you hide the light that is in you under a bushel basket? The talents which the Lord gave you at baptism and confirmation, at your marriage and when you received other sacraments, are both for you and for others. Your mission is a demanding one, but so very great and noble. Christian parents, by the love you have for one another, by the harmony you develop in and around you, by the unity you constantly work at, you are accomplishing an indispensable task in our midst, at the heart of our communities and of all the Church. Your life witness is a precious jewel for your children and your neighbours. Your way of living, loving, praying, and forgiving speaks more than any other language. Through the sacrament of matrimony you are signs of the love of Jesus for his people.

### URGENCY OF THE MISSION

These challenges incite us to respond resolutely and courageously; they do not dispense any baptised, confirmed, or ordained person from commitments made before the Church and the community. Quite the opposite. They are inseparable from the mission given by Christ to go out to the whole world, to carry the Good News of the Gospel.

## THE VISION OF LOVE

In his allocution to the families gathered in St. Peter's Square on October 4, 1994, the Holy Father stated that spouses are dedicated to creating an environment of love and life. Along with their children, Julie and Paul Arsenault of the diocesan marriage preparation service; they have this to say about their convictions: "The kind of love proposed by the Church holds four great signs: 1) A sign of unity - the couple is a sign of unity when they do things together, when they care for their children together, when they share household tasks together, when they communicate with one another, when each accepts the other for what he\she is. 2) A sign of promotion - promoting someone is to affirm that person, it is to congratulate and encourage, speak well of the other. A couple is a sign of promotion when they act kindly toward one another and their children, and when they speak well of marriage and the family. 3) A sign of fidelity - faithfulness to the vows they have made to one another to love and to make their love grow; wanting their commitment to their chosen one to last always. The couple is a sign of fidelity when the two work at living out better the sacrament of their matrimony. 4) A sign of fruitfulness - to be fruitful is to be life-giving; but there are a number of ways of giving life, besides physical life which is the consequence of biological fruitfulness."

## PRELIMINARIES TO BIOLOGICAL FRUITFULNESS

Prior to biological fruitfulness, there are four kinds of fruitfulness that need to be developed. First of all is affective fruitfulness which includes love and friendship. Being loved and loving in return are life-giving. Before having children, it is important for a couple to develop strong bonds of love. Then there is intellectual fruitfulness, learning new things nowadays when technology is ever changing, we are bound to be in a perpetual state of learning. If parents are not interested in knowledge, how can they pass it on to their children? Thirdly, there is social fruitfulness - even if love is beautiful, we cannot live in isolation, we need others, completeness, friends, colleagues, neighbours, involvement in social organisations. Our children will be part of that society, so it is important for us to be involved in the areas which concern us. Finally, spiritual fruitfulness - it is not the least important for being listed last. Our baptism obligates us to grow in the faith through prayer, participation in the sacraments, especially those of the Eucharist and of Reconciliation, and through the reading of Holy Scripture and Gospel sharing. We are responsible for passing on the faith to our children, for teaching them in the ways of faith; hence it is important for parents themselves to grow in the faith. In one of his writings on the tasks of the Christian family, Pope John Paul II writes: *"To marry is to give birth to a new cell of the Church called the family. To marry is also to receive the mission of education and evangelisation. This mission extends beyond the four walls of the home, it extends outwards: welcome of others, hospitality, witness, mutual help, liturgy, catechesis. To marry is to belong to a greater body: from a couple we grow into a family, from a family to a society. The dynamics of the sacrament are also those of union and of service."* If we compare these four characteristics or signs of love to the four legs of a table: What happens when one of the table's legs is missing? Everything will be wobbly. Well, it is the same with the couple who lacks one of these signs: survival is jeopardised.

## FAMILY VALUES

One of the great values which the couple must pass on to child to experience love he or she must be able to see his or her parents exchange signs of this love; One should not be embarrassed to express one's love in front of one's children, to speak the love we have for one another, and to kiss and hug one another in the presence of one's children. Comedian Yvon Deschamps, a man from whom words seem to come out effortlessly, had to undergo therapy so as to be at ease in telling his wife and children how he loved them. Even if it seems hard to do, one must make the effort to express one's love to one's spouse and children. We sometimes give gifts, material things, but this is not what is needed. What is needed is emotional fruitfulness. Hug your children, show them affection. We often do this with girls, but with boys we seem to feel that they must be "hardened" - a-boy-doesn't-cry kind of thing. Awful words often come out of parents' mouths, at these games. How can you expect

these boys to express gentleness to their wives once married, if they were never taught this value? In marriage preparation sessions participants are invited to reflect on how they learned about love, at home, and several young people do not remember having ever been hugged by their father or shown other kind of affection. All gestures of affection and love are important for the child to feel loved by his or her parents, and the child must also hear the words spoken.

#### **HOURLY OF THE FAMILY**

In the Church and society we have reached the hour of the family, because the family is expected to play a leading role in the task of the new evangelisation. It is from the families given to prayer, to apostolic works and to life in the Church that authentic Christian vocations will arise.

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