

Transcription

(For simultaneous translation of video)

Rome, October 12, 2000
Jubilee of Families

**Chiara to the Theological-Pastoral International Congress
“Children, Springtime of the Family and of Society
Evangelization of Children”**

Speaker:

Some images of the Jubilee were certainly unforgettable, like St. Peter's Square and Via della Conciliazione overflowing with flickering candles on a mild Roman night, and completely covered with colorful umbrellas the following morning beneath an autumn downpour; the Pope's long conversations with the children... But an important message was also printed indelibly in the participants' minds and hearts, beginning with the very title of this event, chosen by the Pope himself: “Children, Springtime of the Family and of Society.”

The immediate preparation of the event was an international “theological pastoral” Congress held during the preceding days in Paul VI Hall. Presentations by experts on the family highlighted different perspectives from which the human family and the formation of children can be viewed.

“We find ourselves faced with an anthropological void” – said Cardinal Lopez Trujillo of the Pontifical Council for the Family, in the opening session – “the emptiness of the human person who lives in an inhuman way”. “It is a cultural winter, an enemy of life, of the family, and of children. But,” he concluded, “springtime will come, indeed, it is already at the door....”

The talks of several founders and leaders of ecclesial Movements made a special impact on the 4,000 participants at the congress. They enriched the fundamental theological considerations with their passion for living the Gospel in a radical, wholehearted way, capable of inspiring others to do the same and of opening up new and hopeful prospects for the future.

Chiara Lubich opened the session on the second day with an address that was much appreciated because – as Cardinal Martinez Somalo said – it was full of depth, vitality and the freshness of the Gospel.

Chiara:

Ecclesiastical Authorities, Civic Authorities, Ladies and Gentlemen,

(1. Premise)

The theme proposed for this part of our congress (the evangelization of children) is most important for our children, for families, for the ecclesial community and for civil society itself. In fact, transmitting Gospel values to the new generations is equivalent to building a society in which there is greater solidarity and higher ethical standards today; above all, it lays the foundations for this to continue in the future as well.

The Gospel can be transmitted in a number of ways.

I will limit myself here to speaking of what I know, that is, the experience of Gospel education with the children of the Focolare Movement over which I have the honor of presiding.

(2. Jesus loves children)

The Gospels reveal to us Jesus' great love for children.

St. Mark's Gospel says: "People were bringing children to him that he might touch them, but the disciples rebuked them" (Mk. 10:13-16). And the evangelist Matthew: "When the chief priests and the scribes saw...the children crying out in the temple area, 'Hosanna to the Son of David,' they were indignant and said to him, 'Do you hear what they are saying?'" (Mt. 21:14-16).

In the face of the intolerance of the disciples and the indignation of the high priests, Jesus assumes another attitude. As a matter of fact, there is a real difference between the way Jesus considers persons and events and the way they do. He even holds up the "child" as a model of the disciple he has in mind. He says: "Unless you convert and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 18:3).

(3. Children love Jesus)

Jesus' love for children is immediately reciprocated. They are fascinated by him. They are constantly beside him in his public life, and precisely because he loves them and is loved in return, he becomes their friend and true "teacher". This was true not only two thousand years ago along the roads of Palestine, but it continues to be true today, too, and will always be true for all the children of the world.

A mother recently wrote to me that her five-year-old girl was torn between the desire to participate in a meeting of formation on the Gospel and the fact that this meeting (four days long) would be held far from Bari, her city. For the first time, she would have to sleep away from home, without her Mom and Dad. "One day," this mother tells us, "Angela came home determined. She had heard how other children were living the Gospel. 'I want to do what they are doing. Give me the suitcase,' she said to me, 'I'll put the shoes without laces and the dresses without buttons, because you won't be there, Mommy, to help me...'" These are experiences which make us smile, but it brought tears to the eyes of that mother, "because," she wrote, "I felt that Jesus had taken her heart."

(4. Parents, first educators)

"Education" intended as "a journey towards an objective" in the religious, moral, behavioral, cultural and social fields, is provided by different agents who often work in collaboration with one another. These are, first of all, the parents and the family, then nursery and elementary schools, the Church community with its various environments and experts in formation, other informal groups, and the means of social communication.

I would like to limit this reflection of ours to the family.

How can parents and families carry out most effectively their mission as educators?

First of all, by using to the best of their ability the special pedagogical resources of parenthood, resources potentiated by their personal experience and by the cultural patrimony offered by their social context. This is the first and irreplaceable educative tool which all parents possess by nature.

(5. Helping them to encounter Jesus)

However, there is also a wider and higher perspective. Christian parents believe that their child enters into the existential dimension as a "project of immortality". God's plan for the human person is a life that begins weak and helpless, that grows and develops through interaction with other persons and with creation, that overcomes death and enters into the everlasting novelty of the divine condition, becoming and living as a "child of God".¹ Such was the human adventure of Christ. In order to live it, he needed to be "welcomed and helped to grow"² by a simple and poor family, as John Paul II said; "simple and poor", yes, but surely in possession of those spiritual and human resources which made them a suitable *environment* for the formation of that Man.

Each family must believe in the love of God, who not only gives the gift of life but also prepares for each of his children the environment in which to grow and the way to follow.

But what is the way? We know it: "I am the way," affirmed Jesus himself. "No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn. 14:6).

Ultimately, to educate a child means to help him or her encounter Jesus.

The words, "Let the children come to me..." (Mk. 10:14) is a sublime synthesis of the Gospel's method of education towards a formation which is not only religious but fully human.

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1. Cf. L. Macario, *L'educazione religiosa*, in N. Galli (a cura di), *Vogliamo educare i nostri figli*, Vita e Pensiero, Milan, 1985, p. 272.
 2. John Paul II, Angelus December 26, 1999, "L'Osservatore Romano", December 27-28 1999, p. 9.

Could it be that it was easier to meet Jesus two thousand years ago? I don't know... The history of salvation goes on and Christ continues to be with us, as he promised. He promised to be present in different ways and these are points of contact between him and the family.

I would like to examine briefly two of these ways which are particularly suited to the reality of the family.

(6. His presence)

One way Jesus is present is found in that well-known and explicit declaration of his: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt. 18:20). Therefore, he is present where people are united, which means, according to many Fathers of the Church and the traditional interpretation of the magisterium, being united in him, in his will, that is, in mutual love which is his commandment.³

Now, can a family, can a couple fulfil that condition for which, according to Origen, Christ is "attracted and called"⁴ to be present among them?

Everyone recognizes that the family is already an interlacing of love, of human love which links the father to the mother; the two of them to their children; the children to their parents, the children among themselves and then with aunts, uncles and grandparents and then the aunts, uncles and grandparents with nieces, nephews and grandchildren. Now if the family also draws from the divine love offered by the Christian life, that divine love infused in hearts by the Holy Spirit, then Christ can truly be in their midst, potentiating as well the grace of the sacrament of matrimony.

Parents who love one another in this way bring Jesus into the home.

3. Cf. C. Lubich, *Scritti Spirituali /3, Tutti uno, Città Nuova* 1989, p. 173 e seg.

4 . *Commento al Cantico*, 41, p. 13, 94B.

(7. The art of loving according to the Gospel)

How can we describe this human-divine love, this “Gospel love”? In practice, how can we love as Jesus wants us to love?

We must really focus our attention and try to understand what, in a sense, we could call Christ’s *art of loving*. It is demanding.

It is a love that *loves everyone*.

It is a love that is *the first to love*.

It is a love that *loves always*, which never ends.

It is a love that enters into the reality of the other person, which *makes itself one* with the other person.

Finally, it is a love which sees and loves Jesus *in the other, in any other person*, according to his words: “You did it for me” (Mt. 25:40).

(8. The Teacher at home)

If husband and wife love one another and love others in this way, always starting over, knowing how to die to themselves out of love for the other, their mutual love, which brings the Teacher into the home, attracts the children.

Children naturally tend to imitate the behavior of their parents.

If this is so considering the family only from a human viewpoint, what could happen when the parents are imbued with the grace of the sacrament and the mystical presence of Jesus himself among them?

I have the fortune of receiving many letters from children, because the youth sector of our Movement also include the very young; and I notice the spontaneous educative action, so to speak, of a family that seeks to live out this love based on the Gospel.

Betty, a six-year-old from Milan writes to me: “Yesterday Daddy asked me to go down to the cellar to get the wine. The staircase was dark and I was afraid. I prayed to Jesus and I felt that he was close to me. Sometimes I talk with Jesus. The other day I was in my room doing my homework and I began to talk with him. I told him many things and I didn’t want to stop talking to him. You know, when I make an act of love, I feel something beautiful inside, like someone who pays me a compliment and who says ‘thank you’ to me. I think it’s Jesus.”

And a French mother writes to me: “Before putting them to bed, I kneel down on the carpet with the two older children. Last night, Ruth pointed out to me that David, the youngest, kept on playing. “Let him be,” I said, ‘it’s his way of praying.’ So we recollected ourselves to say our evening prayers. When we opened our eyes again, David was beside me with his hands folded. ‘You see,’ said Catherine, ‘if we love, Jesus teaches him too’.”

(9. Jesus in his Word)

Another presence of Jesus, significant for the theme we are dealing with, is in his word. Jesus is present in his word.

With regard to our spiritual experience we can say, as we often repeat, that we were “born with the Gospel in our hands” and we go ahead in the same way. We choose a phrase at a time and we put it into practice in our daily lives for a month. In this way our life becomes “evangelized” and immersed in God, who is *completely* present in each fragment of his word.

With this very simple pedagogical technique of gradualness and fullness, God led us to living a strong educative and spiritual experience, one that is in continual expansion. It is an experience which involves our families too and the families of the communities that gather around the focolares and which share our own spiritual adventure.

(10. *Breaking up the Gospel for the children*)

In these families, just as they break up bread for the little children every day, they must also *break up* the Gospel. How? Just as we adults do. As I said, we take one sentence every month, with a commentary approved by the Church that is comprehensible to everyone, and we try to live it out during the small and big events of the day, almost vying with the children in a holy and joyful spirit of competition. If in the evening, Mom and Dad share episodes of how they were able to live as Christians on that day, the children will naturally do the same and tell their own experiences. These are moments in which responsibility and reciprocity wonderfully weave together family relationships.⁵

Children who grow up in families like these are spontaneously formed day after day in a mentality that is in conformity with the Gospel, which will lead them to view persons and situations as Jesus, in line with his way of thinking. They will learn to see humanity as the large family of the children of God, to use the things of this world with a pure heart and a spirit of solidarity. They will have a proper hierarchy of values which will always guide them in life.

Certainly, they too will have their trials and periods of crises and searching. Especially as adolescents and in the early years of their youth, we will have to deal with their rejection and protesting, but no attitude, however serious, should block or turn off our charity towards them. The art of loving which Jesus taught us will indicate the way to “make ourselves one” in every way possible during the various stages of their growth. It will put on our lips the right words of advice, it will always keep us open to dialogue and to sharing in their interests. We will learn to “waste time” with our children, we will succeed in making them our friends and winning their confidence.

5. Cf. G. Milan, *Disagio adolescenziale e strategie educative*, Cleup Padova 1999, pp. 56 e segg.

But even if the rejection persists, we will always keep the door of our home open, and we will recognize in our suffering a trace of the suffering of Christ crucified who also lived the abandonment on the part of everyone, even on the part of the Father. And we will accept it as he did, remaining serene.

We know, however, (and many experiences confirm this) that all the values instilled in them will remain because in the most important moment of their lives, when the foundations of one's personality and character are laid, they had the great fortune of meeting Jesus, present in the midst of their parents and present in their lives through his word.

(11. *Children know how to live the Word*)

Children really know how to live the word of God, even better than we do, with generosity and total commitment.

Last year I got the idea of proposing a game to them: to write on the sides of a cube the rules of the *art of loving* which I spoke about before. I invited them to "throw" the cube in the morning when they wake up and to choose how they will love all those they meet on that day. There was an incredibly enthusiastic response from all over the world.

One father wrote to me from Genoa: "I was washing the dishes when Luke came into the kitchen. He took a dishtowel and began to dry the dishes. 'Be careful, don't drop them,' I said a little surprised by his generosity. With a sense of satisfaction, he replied: 'When Mommy comes home, she'll find everything clean. You know, Daddy, when I go to heaven, Jesus will say to me: that time you helped your Daddy, you helped me.'" (Applause)

Irene, Hillary and Laura, three little sisters who live in Florence, go with their Mom in the car to do the shopping. They pass in front of their grandfather's house and ask to go up to the house and greet him. "Go ahead," said the mother, "I'll wait for you in the car."

When they returned, they asked her: “Why didn’t you come in with us?” She replied: “Your grandfather wasn’t very nice to me: so he’ll understand...” Hillary interrupted her: “But Mom, we’re living the Word: love everyone, so even enemies...” The Mother didn’t know what to say. She looked at her and smiled: “You’re right. Wait for me here.” And she went up to greet the grandfather. (Applause)

And to conclude, you might enjoy listening to two more episodes of these children who are educated in living the Gospel. They are meaningful episodes which make us smile at times.

We have thousands of poor people whom we help in a special way and the children contribute. This is what Mark wrote to me: “Dearest Chiara, I’m Mark from Cosenza (Italy). Mommy and Daddy told me that you have been doing some special bookkeeping” – I was calculating how many people we would be able to help. “I’ve understood the situation, so I’m sending you...”

He refers here to something that is done in Italy. Parents tell their children: “When you lose one of your baby teeth, hide it somewhere, and a little mouse will pass by and leave some money there for you. Of course, the parents are the ones who put the money there. But Mark believes this.

And so he writes to me: “Dearest Chiara, I’m Mark from Cosenza (Italy). Mommy and Daddy told me that you have been doing some special bookkeeping for these poor people of ours, and I’ve understood the situation, so I’m sending you the money that the little mouse left me for the first tooth that fell out. You know, Chiara, I did some counting too: I have eleven more teeth that will fall... Chiara, I’m sure we’ll make it, and then we won’t have any more poor people in the world!” (Applause)

Kanna is a gen 4 from Nagasaki in Japan. She goes to nursery school; many of her friends belong to other religions and so does her teacher. At the end of the year, the teacher greets all the children one by one. When she came to Kanna, she told her: “Thank you for telling us about Jesus. When you spoke about Jesus, we could feel that he was close to you. You taught us the prayers you learned at home; they’re beautiful.

This morning I saw you when you gave the prize you had received to one of your friends: I was moved! I'm going to get married soon, but before that, I want to be baptized. I'm preparing for that now because I want to believe in Jesus the way you do."

Let us ask Mary, who educated the Teacher, to transmit to us a little of her maternal pedagogy.

Thank you all for listening to me. (Applause)