

## FAMILY AND PRAYER

*Talk of **Chiara Lubich** at the Congress Family-Society:*

*Rooted in the Absolute is open to all*

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Our congress, as you know, is entitled: "Family and society: The family rooted in God is open to all humanity.

**Rooted in God.** We would like to say something this morning about the relationship that the family has, or should have, with God, the Absolute, so it is a rather special theme. And since this relationship can be defined with one word, prayer, we will speak about "the family and prayer". It is an important, urgent, demanding and decisive topic that can help the family to carry out its role in a truly effective way. So this talk is like a meditation.

To discuss this theme in depth, however, I think it will be helpful, considering today's society, to begin by looking briefly at the reality of the family. Likewise, it will be useful to reflect on the meaning that prayer generally has in the life of individuals.

**The family.** The family! Today there is a head-on attack against the family, and the situation seems to be getting worse. The family is threatened, if not destroyed by the decline of traditional moral values, by theoretical and practical materialism, by the hedonistic mentality that grows out of consumerism. And this happens to such an extent that many people are forced to ask: does the family have any meaning, how important is it?

Sociologists, educators, politicians and moralists could offer their opinions. I believe that we Christians are interested above all in trying to understand God's idea of the family, what importance God gives it.

A few basic thoughts will suffice to understand this. First of all, God created the human race with the formation of a family. And when the Word of God came on earth, he willed to be born in a family. Jesus began his public life during the celebration of a new family. God had the family so much at heart, considered it to be of such importance, to impress on it his own image. In fact, the family reflects God's very own life, the life of the Holy Trinity. This is sufficient to say what the family means to God.

What was God's plan for the family? God who is love, thought of the family as an intertwining of relationships of love: nuptial love between the couple, maternal and paternal love for the children, filial love for the parents, the love of grandparents for their grandchildren, of the grandchildren for their grandparents, of children for their uncles and aunts and vice versa. The family is therefore a treasure chest, a jewel, and a mystery of love.

### **The family of God**

This is how God imagined and how he created the family. And the Son, in redeeming the world, turned this natural love, with which the members of the family are impregnated, into something sublime through the divine love he brought on earth, through the fire that he wants to burn everywhere. Through him, the family has

become not only the primary cell of humanity created by God, but also the basic cell of the Church founded by the Son. Because of the supernatural love that the members of the family have for one another through baptism and the other sacraments, particularly the sacrament of matrimony, they are called individually and collectively to the sublime heights of making the family a small church, an "ecclesiola".

### **Turning toward God**

And now, something on the meaning of prayer in general. What is prayer? Is prayer important? We might not believe it, or we may never have thought about it, but prayer is something essential to our very being. The reason is that we have been created in the image of God. This means that we have the possibility of being in the presence of God not only as creatures in front of our Creator, but also as the "you" of God: we are capable of establishing a relationship of communion with God. This possibility is so typical of human beings that it constitutes our very nature\_ It expresses who we really are. We are not truly ourselves if we do not fulfill this specific vocation.

But to grow in our relationship with God, to be in communion with God means to pray. Therefore, only if we pray are we fully as God planned and created us to be.

Our fundamental vocation to prayer becomes evident when we consider people of the most varied religions. Everyone feels inclined to turn toward God or toward a supreme being. In our contacts with brothers and sisters of other religious beliefs, we have discovered texts of prayers that are truly beautiful. They bear witness to the secret but effective action of God who urges people to pray.

Looking at our own experience, we can see that even in our times, in our de-Christianized world, where the focus of life is no longer on God but on human beings (or science, technology and progress), there is a return, a desire, a thirst for prayer, especially among young people. It is a sign that in every epoch our true nature emerges: our being made in the image of God.

But is prayer only a personal concern? While prayer is basically a personal concern, it would be a mistake, especially for us Christians, to consider it only in this way. We are united to one another in the mystical body of Christ. This is a mystery, which we can understand to a certain extent by thinking of interconnected containers. When water is placed into one of the containers, the water level increases in all of them. The same thing happens when we pray. Prayer is the elevation of our soul to God, and when we are elevated to him, also the others are elevated. So, although Christian prayer is a personal concern, it is also a communal, ecclesial reality.

This is true always, but it holds true especially for the various expressions of liturgical prayer, which is the apex of Christian prayer because it is the prayer of the Church herself.

I began by giving a few ideas on the family and on prayer so as to better understand both. Now let us look at prayer in the family, at the family's prayer.

## **Relationship between family and prayer**

Is there a relationship between the family and prayer? Does the family have anything to do with prayer? Yes, certainly!

The primary reason is that prayer begins in the family. It must begin in the family. Families are the first schools of prayer. Right from their earliest years, children should begin to perceive a sense of God and worship him. In fact, what we learn as children, also in this field, remains for the rest of our lives. If prayer is not taught in the family, it will be difficult to fill this emptiness later on.

We know that what children learn during the first three years of their lives concerning the supernatural or the divine is essential. Therefore, it is necessary to look after them, especially during their first years and at least until they reach the age of six.

Thus the evangelization of the young, of the world's future, depends largely on the "domestic church", the family.

## **Parents: bearing witness to God**

How can parents effectively carry out their task as teachers of prayer? For children to learn how to pray to God, it is necessary first of all to show them the reality of God. They must discover his existence, know he exists. And here parents have an extraordinary opportunity: they can instill this knowledge into their children by bearing witness to God. "May they all be one" (in love and in truth), Jesus says in the gospel, "so that the world may Believe" (cf. John 17:21). May Christians love one another so that the light of faith may radiate in others.

If our mutual love can bring the often unbelieving world of adults, which is fossilized by materialism, secularism and various other evils, to be touched by unity in Christ to the point of making them believe, all the more will the innocent, little world of our children be touched by this witness. It will make them understand that there is Someone who envelops us all with love, and spontaneously they will with confidence turn their minds and hearts to this Someone.

Thus only fathers and mothers who daily live mutual and constant charity, who strengthen and consolidate their human love and transform it into supernatural love, can effectively enter the hearts of their children, leaving traces that future events in life will never be able to cancel.

## **Models for their children**

Mutual love, however, must be put into practice in the right way, so that it responds perfectly to what Jesus commands. Jesus wants a man to see and to love in his wife not only the person with whom he shares his life, but Christ himself in her. In fact, Jesus considers done to him whatever the husband does to his wife and vice versa. Furthermore, Jesus in the husband or wife must be loved in the measure that Jesus requires, as he expressed with the words, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34). They must love one another to the point of being ready to give their lives for one another. If parents keep this in mind throughout the day, whether they are praying, working or eating, whether they are resting or

studying, laughing or playing with their children, whatever they are doing, every moment will be an opportunity for bearing witness to God.

Not only this, but through their testimony, which demands sacrifice, parents will be more convincing reference points for their children. Jesus said, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, [and in some measure this applies to Christians too] will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). They will become models for their children.

### **Parents are teachers of prayer**

If parents pray together, also making use of external expressions like kneeling down, making the sign of the cross or reciting vocal prayers, the little ones will imitate them. They too will try to kneel down, to make some kind of sign of the cross. Perhaps even in their early years, they will stammer something without understanding anything, but simply led to do so by their parents' example.

Then the time will come to teach them to pray with words. The short prayers that children learn are the beginning of their dialogue with God. Later, as the years pass, children can learn more specific prayers. Parents should take this task to heart. We should remember the grief-stricken invitation of Paul VI to parents: "Mothers, do you teach your children Christian prayers? . . . And you, fathers, do you spend a few moments of prayer with your children, with the entire domestic community? Your example, supported by a few common prayers, is worth a lesson of life. It is worth an act of worship of exceptional value". Pope Paul VI, General Audience, 11 August 1976: Thus prayer in the family is born and blossoms into a splendid habit.

### **Praying together united in the name of Jesus**

Prayer in the family is a special prayer. It is not like just any other personal prayer. It is exceptionally effective. In fact, Jesus promises to those who are united in his name (and here we assume that the children have been taught to love the rest of the family as the parents do) that he himself will be present: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matt. 18:20). He is there to pray with the family, in the family. Jesus himself, the Almighty, can do everything.

And if he is present, how can the Father not listen to him? The family will soon experience God's providence. Faith will grow and with it prayer will be given new value.

### **How and when to pray**

In teaching us to pray, Jesus mentioned two things that may seem to be contradictory, but they are not. He affirmed, "When you pray do not use many words" (cf. Matt. 6:7) and "pray always" (cf. Luke 18:1). Every family should follow these two directives.

Do not use many words. When? During the day there are precise moments in which the family is called to pray. And there are various prayers, which Christian piety has taught and teaches for these circumstances. It is not possible to list them here. Perhaps it would be more useful to say what we feel is fundamental in each one.

What is fundamental in the different prayers?

When we wake up in the morning, we immerse ourselves in the supernatural world that we entered through baptism, by saying brief prayers to our heavenly Father, to Jesus, to Mary... This is the moment to offer God our entire day. We must love God and to love means to give, so we give him every new day.

Then during the day, involved as we are in worldly matters (work, study, recreation) it is indispensable for the members of the Christian family, either together or individually, to find the courage to withdraw from the world around them and to devote a few minutes, to "seek," as Saint Paul would say, "the things that are above" (Col. 3:1) to think, that is, to penetrate the world of our faith. This means that we meditate, or as our young people say, that we go "in depth". We should read a passage of scripture, especially from the gospel, and pause to reflect on one point or another, which has struck us. Then we can draw from this reading, useful resolutions for our life. What is fundamental in this kind of prayer is seriously to put ourselves in contact with God, as children, in order to acquire strength and light.

In the past, also the rosary was said in the family. And this is understandable because by doing so we are able to review the mysteries of our faith every day. We are able to venerate Mary over and over again: "Hail Mary, full of grace . . . blessed are you among women". A person who feels just a little bit of love for Mary willingly says the rosary, because one who loves never tires of saying words of love to the loved one.

The Church still advises us to say the rosary. But if this seems to be too much for us, can we not recite a part of the rosary? Basically, this prayer develops our relationship with one who, in God's plan, is way and door to union with God, who gives us hope, also because she is the mother of a family, and indeed of every Christian family.

In the evening, before going to bed, the family can say another brief prayer together, as in the morning. We can give thanks for our day and also make an act of contrition for the mistakes we have made and resolve to do better the next day.

These are some of the prayers that can be said in the family throughout the day. For those who are able there are many other wonderful things that can also be done, such as going to Church to visit Jesus who is always too alone. And on those days when there is some special need, the family has many chances to gather together and call upon God's help: for the success of an exam, for instance, for the birth of a child, for a sick person in the family, for a financial problem, for the solution to a spiritual crisis.

Jesus said, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you" (Matt. 7:7). And if he said this, it is true.

### **The Church's worship**

Then there is the Eucharist, which is the climax of all prayer. On Sunday, the Lord's day, the family, this little church, immerses itself in the Christian assembly that gathers together. The family listens to the word of God. It partakes of the bread and the cup of Christ, and then it extends its eucharistic communion to fraternal communion.

Through the Eucharist the members of the family can feel that their hearts are satisfied; they can feel abundant peace.

In fact, we would always want to offer God something fitting to his majesty, something worthy of him. Our offering, however, is so out of proportion to his greatness that it is very consoling to know that in the eucharistic celebration, together with the celebrant, we can offer Jesus himself to the Father. We can offer his sufferings, which are of immense value, and we can unite our sufferings to his, to adore the Father, to love him, to praise him, to glorify him worthily, to thank him, to ask him for graces and to ask him in a suitable way to forgive our mistakes.

### **Pray always, pray well**

“Do not say many words” but Jesus also tells us “to pray always and not to lose heart” (Luke 18:1).

Pray always. How can we do this? And how can we do this especially in the hectic rush of our daily living? By making every action an act of love for him, possibly preceding every action, as we often do with the more important action, with the words, “For you,” as some of the saints have taught.

“To pray always” does not mean that we should multiply our prayers, but that we should direct our hearts and our entire lives to God. We should study for God alone, work and exert every effort, suffer, rest and also die for God alone.

And we should carry out every action in the best way possible, because we know that we can make it an extension of God’s creative action and the redemptive action of Jesus toward the achievement of God’s plan for the world. Thus all our actions can be transformed into sacred actions.

This way of praying is very much in tune with our times. Today we see the world and the entire universe in evolution, and human beings are reminded of their duty to “subdue the earth” (cf. Gen. 1:28). It is especially through this way of praying that we fulfill the command of Jesus: “Pray always” (cf. also Luke 21:36).

Of course, it is also necessary to pray well. We should always begin with a few moments of recollection in order to realize that we are before God. We should pronounce well the words suggested to us by the Church, in order to make them our own and to say them with all our heart. We can also pray spontaneously, confiding to Jesus our innermost secrets. We can tell him how much we want to love him and how much help we need. We can tell him our difficulties, our hopes and plans.

We should pray with faith. “If you have faith and do not doubt ... even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,’ it will be done” (Matt. 21:21).

These are some ideas on prayer in the family. If it is not possible to do everything, which is probably the case, let us do at least something. If we cannot gather together to pray with all the members of the family, let us do so with those who are willing. In any case, there must be prayer in the family. The family as such, especially today, needs the protection of heaven.

### **Love for others: way to union with God**

I would like to add a thought and a suggestion.

In our times, we have, as never before, thousands of forms of stimulation. Day by day we are continually presented with all sorts of amusements, news, images. Television, radio, telephone, so much noise deafen us. Even without wanting it, even with a degree of control, we are all subject, more or less, to the many sounds that reach our ears. We can hardly help receiving the various ideas supplied by the media. It is difficult to free ourselves from what we could honestly call a bombardment. It is easy to become dominated by these ideas, if not at least attracted by them.

How can we withdraw in order to devote some time to prayer? Yes, of course, we can use our reason and good will strengthened by faith. But we can also follow the indications of the Holy Spirit, who never ceases to help people of every epoch. We can follow the suggestions he gives precisely for people of our times.

We live in an epoch in which the role of the laity is highlighted in the Church. The laity was the particular object of study during the recent Synod, and the Apostolic Exhortation "Christi Fideles Laici" noted how the Holy Spirit looks at the laity with special love, by enkindling, for example, movements with spiritualities suited to them.

In order to bring the laity to full union with God, these spiritualities do not remove them from their environments. They do not ask them to do hard penances or to fast for long periods in order to guarantee a genuine Christian life. Rather, they encourage the laity to find their way to God right in the midst of the world, where they live shoulder to shoulder with all kinds of people.

These spiritualities emphasize that the heart of Christianity is love for others out of love for Christ, because in this consists the fulfillment of the law. They teach and urge us to live love and to restore it, if it has been shattered, because without such love not even one's offering to God is acceptable. They help us to put love into practice constantly, sharing the fatigues, anxieties, worries and joys with the people we meet in life.

These spiritualities invite the laity to make this love the reason of their lives. And this is the divine wonder: when such committed lay people, fully determined to love the people next to them throughout the day, forgetting about themselves, are recollected in prayer, they find God deep down in their hearts. God invites them to a profound union. They feel loved, and a spontaneous, loving conversation begins. This is a wonderful experience, which everyone can have.

What takes place is similar to the life of a plant, the more its roots sink deep into the soil, the higher its stem rises up toward the sky. Here, the more we enter into the hearts of those around us to share in their sufferings and joys, the more our soul rises to union with God.

## **Conclusion**

Are there, indeed, these forces and stimuli in today's society that create a strong attraction toward the outside world, so often made up of vanities that almost hypnotize people and deaden human creativity (in the intellectual sphere, for instance)? Are there forces and stimuli that trap and deceive people by promising easy happiness?

Well, there is also an inner force in the depths of the human heart that attracts people and immunizes them from the spirit of the world. It calls them to a special type of

prayer and offers them a peace, which the world does not know, joys, which are incomparable with those of the world, and consolations, which fully satisfy them.

May the family, the small lay church; learn to walk along these new ways to reach the Lord that, in our days, the Holy Spirit is indicating. May it learn to experience these sublime effects of love, through which every other prayer in the family acquires new depth. In this way, the family will belong more and more to God, and God will be able to accomplish his plan for the family. He will make it open to many other families, so that all together they may form the vast family of the children of God. They will be linked by the love brought by Jesus and will bear witness to how the entire human family should be in the world.

May Our Lady, singular vessel of devotion, look upon all our families. May she enwrap them with her maternal love. May she make them similar to her family, the holiest family that ever existed or ever will exist, the family with Jesus, her son, and Joseph, her husband.