

(Translation)

**International Congress**  
**FAMILY AND SOCIETY:**  
**The family centred on God is open to all humanity**

Castel Gandolfo April 8, 1989

**The Family and Prayer**

(Chiara Lubich)

Our congress, as you know, is entitled: "Family and society: the family centred on God is open to all humanity".

Centred on God. In this part of our program today we will say something about the relationship that the family has, or should have with God, the Absolute - so it is a rather special theme. 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. Therefore, this morning's talk is like a meditation.

However, to discuss this theme in depth, 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. So I am also speaking for those who have just recently met the Movement, to whom I extend my special greetings.

**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 so threatened, if not ruined, by the decline of traditional moral values, by theoretical and practical materialism, by the hedonistic mentality favoured by a consumer society, that many people are forced to ask themselves: what meaning, what importance does the family have?

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, and the importance he gives to it.

A few considerations will suffice to understand this. When God created humankind, He formed a family. When the Word of God came on earth, He chose 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; He considered it to be of such importance that He impressed 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 towards the children, filial love toward the parents, the love of grandparents for their grandchildren, of the grandchildren for their grandparents, for their uncles and aunts and vice versa. The family is therefore a treasure chest, a jewel, a mystery of love.

This is how God thought of and created the family. Moreover, his Son, in redeeming the world, turned this natural love, which permeates the members of a family, into something sublime through the divine love he brought on earth, through the fire he wants to set alight 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 his 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".

## **Prayer**

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.

This is true because we have been created in the image of God. This means that we have the possibility of putting ourselves in the presence of God, certainly, as creatures in front of our Creator, but also as the "you" of God. We are capable of establishing a relationship with God, of being in communion with him. This possibility is so characteristic of human beings that it constitutes our very being - it expresses who we really are. We are not truly ourselves if we do not fulfil this specific vocation.

However, to grow in our relationship with God, to be in communion with him means to pray. Therefore, only if we pray are we fully as God planned us to be when he created us.

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 dechristianized world, where the centre of life is no longer God but 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 in the image of God.

Is prayer only a personal concern? Prayer is basically a personal concern, but 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. We can understand this mystery to a certain extent by thinking of communicating vessels. When water is placed into one of the vessels, the water level increases in all of them. The same thing happens when we pray. Prayer is the holding up of our soul to God, and when we are held up to Him, others are held up too. 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 itself.

I began by giving a few ideas on the family and on prayer 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 for this 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 a child, 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 life 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", on the "ecclesiola".

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

How can parents effectively carry out their task as teachers of prayer? For children to learn to pray to God, the reality of God needs first to be revealed to them. They must discover His existence. They must know that He exists.

Parents have an extraordinary opportunity: they can instill this knowledge into their children by bearing witness to Him.

"May they all be one," (in love and in truth) Jesus says in the Gospel, "that the world may believe" (John 17:21). May Christians love one another so that the light of faith may radiate in others.

If the often unbelieving world of adults, fossilized by materialism, secularism and other forms of evil, can be touched by the unity of Christ, by our reciprocal love, to the point of making them believe, all the more will the innocent, small world of our children be touched by this witness. It will make them understand that there is Someone who envelops us all with His love; and they will spontaneously turn their minds and hearts to Him with confidence.

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 which future events in life will never be able to cancel.

However, mutual love must be put into practice in the right way, so that it responds perfectly to what Jesus commands. Jesus wants the husband to see and love in his wife, not only the person with whom he shares his life, but to see and love Christ himself in her. In fact, Jesus considers done to Him the way the husband treats 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, "Love one another as I have loved you" (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 sharing a meal, whether they are resting or studying, laughing or playing with their children, 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, "When I am lifted up from the earth, (and in some measure this applies to Christians too) I will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). They will become models for their children.

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 too will say something, without understanding anything, but simply led to do so by their parents' example. Then the time will come to teach them to pray orally. The short prayers that children learn are the beginning of their dialogue with God.

Then, as the years pass, children can learn prayers that are more specific. 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 extraordinarily valuable act of worship."<sup>1</sup>

Thus, prayer in the family begins and grows into a splendid habit.

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

Prayer in the family is a special prayer. It is not just like any other personal prayer. It is exceptionally effective. In fact, Jesus promises to those who pray together united in his name, his very own presence: "Where two or three," he affirms, "are gathered in my name, I am there in their midst" (Mt. 18:20). He is there to pray with the family, in the family, Jesus himself, the almighty, who 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 faith, 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. Mt. 6:7) and "pray always" (Cf Luke 21:36).

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. There are various prayers that 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 into the supernatural world we became part of 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, we are involved in the things of the world (work, study, recreation, sport). However, 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 St. Paul would say, "the things that are above" (Col.3:1).

It means that we think of the world of our faith and penetrate it. It means that we meditate, or as our young people say, that we go in-depth. It

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1. Discourse at the general audience, August 11, 1976, teachings of Paul VI, XIV, 1976, p.640.

also means that we read some phrases from Scripture, especially from the Gospel, pausing to reflect on one point or another, which has struck us, and drawing useful resolutions for our life. What is fundamental in this kind of prayer is seriously to put ourselves in contact with God, as his children, in order to draw strength and light.

In the past, the rosary was said in the family too. This is understandable because by doing so we are able to review the mysteries of our faith every day. We are able to praise 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 a person who loves never grows tired of expressing words of love to the person loved.

The Church still advises us to say the rosary. But if this seems to be too much for us, can we not say a part of the rosary? At root, this prayer develops our relationship with the person who, in God's plan, is the way, the gate that unites us to God; and to hope, also because she is the mother 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 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, and for those who can, there are many other wonderful initiatives, like going to Church to visit Jesus who is always too alone....

And on days which present different needs, the family has many opportunities to meet together and invoke 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 to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you"(Mt. 7:7). And if he said this, it is true.

## **The Mass**

Then there is Mass which is the apex of all prayers. On Sunday, the Lord's day, the family, this small church, immerses itself in the Christian assembly which gathers together. The family listens to the Word of God. It partakes in the bread and cup of Christ and then it extends its communion with the Eucharist to fraternal communion.

Through the Mass 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. However, our offering is so out of proportion to his greatness that it is very consoling to know that in the Mass, together with

the priest, 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 says, "Pray always and never lose heart" (Luke 18:1).

Pray always. How can we do this? And how can we do this especially in the vortex 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 actions, 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 heart and our entire life to God. We should study for him alone, work and exert every effort, suffer, rest and also die for him 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 towards the achievement of God's plan for the world. Thus all our actions can be transformed into sacred actions.

And this way of praying is very much in tune with our times. Today we see the world and all the 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. 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 in front of 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 and Mary our innermost secrets. We can tell them how much we want to love them and how much help we need. We can tell them our difficulties, our hopes and plans.

We should pray with faith, "If you have faith and never doubt.... even if you say to this mountain: be taken up and cast into the sea, it will be done" (Mt. 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 of neighbor: way to union with God**

I would like to add a consideration and a suggestion.

In our times, we are stimulated more than ever before by a thousand factors. We live in a world that offers continuous amusements, news and images. The television, radio, telephone and so much noise deafen us. Even without wanting it, even with a certain amount of control, we are all subjected more or less to the many sounds that reach our ears. We can hardly help receiving the many ideas supplied by the media. It is difficult to free ourselves from what we could justifiably call a bombardment. It is more than likely that we end up being attracted by these ideas, if not totally dominated by them.

How can we withdraw ourselves 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 *Christifideles 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 penance or make prolonged fasting in order to guarantee an authentic Christian life, as might have happened in the past. Rather, they encourage the laity to find their way to God right here in the midst of the world, where they live shoulder to shoulder with neighbors of every kind.

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

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

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 towards the sky. Here, the more we enter into the heart of our neighbor to share his or her sufferings and joys, the more our soul rises to union with God.

## **Conclusion**



Are there forces and stimuli in today's society which strongly attract people towards the outside world, often made up of vanities that almost hypnotize people, that deaden their creativity - their thoughts, for instance - that imprison and deceive them by promising an easy happiness?

Well there is also an inner force in the depths of people's hearts which attracts them 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 that the Holy Spirit is pointing to in our day in order to reach the Lord. 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 to God always more, 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 sons and daughters of God, who are linked by the love brought by Jesus and who bear witness to how the entire human family should be in the world.

May Mary, vessel of devotion (prayer) beyond compare, look at all our families. May she enfold them with her maternal love. May she make them similar to her family, the holiest family that ever existed or will ever exist - the family with Jesus, her son, and Joseph, her husband.