



CANADIAN CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

**ELEMENTS OF A NATIONAL PASTORAL INITIATIVE
FOR LIFE AND THE FAMILY**

**A FUNDAMENTAL OPTION
FOR
LIFE AND THE FAMILY**

OCTOBER 2011

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Appendix II – Intervention of Archbishop V. James Weisgerber at the 32nd Meeting of the Bishops of the Church in America, San Antonio, Texas, 16-19 February 2004.

A NEW CULTURE

“At the beginning of his mission, we find Jesus at Cana in Galilee, taking part in a wedding banquet, together with Mary and with the first disciples (cf. Jn. 2-2-11). He thus wishes to make clear to what extent the truth about the family is part of God’s revelation and the history of salvation” (*Letter to Families*, II: 18).

During our own times, the Church – drawing on centuries of theological reflection – has presented a glorious and compelling vision of life, marriage and the family. It now proposes a major shift towards a culture in which every human person is valued not because of his or her perceived “usefulness” but rather because he or she has been loved into existence by God and is destined to spend eternity with God; a culture in which the well being of all is the goal of all, in which the authentic needs of one individual are never perceived as being in competition with those of his or her neighbour, and in which the impoverishment of one is seen as the impoverishment of all; a culture in which the well being of human persons is the measure of every endeavor, in which selfless service to the vulnerable – the sick, the weak, the marginalized – is recognized and experienced as the privileged path to wholeness and holiness.

We need to build this new and distinct culture, remembering that “the future of humanity passes by way of the family” (*Familiaris consortio*, 86). The family is the leaven of transformation for a world desperately in need of the Good News. It is also the key to the New Evangelization. More than ever, Christian families need to be encouraged and sustained as they strive to live and proclaim the Gospel.

“The role of the Bishops in this is to provide clear, consistent and vocal leadership in promoting this culture of life and family, while also offering guidance and inspiration”.¹ We must commit ourselves today to working together to bring about this cultural renewal; it can only happen through a profound spiritual renewal – a change of minds and hearts.

THE CHALLENGE

Even a cursory look at Canadian society suffices to convey the urgency of such a project. For several decades attacks against the family have not ceased to multiply: the decriminalization of abortion, the availability of assisted procreation, the promotion of euthanasia and assisted suicide, the liberalization of divorce, the redefinition of marriage and of the family, offences against freedoms of conscience, religion and education, etc.

The list is long and these new realities follow, in one way or another, from a dominant culture marked by a lack of the sense of the sacred, a culture in which individualism, subjectivism, materialism, hedonism, utilitarianism, secularism and relativism prevail. In this context, Pope Benedict XVI rightly commented to the bishops responsible for the

¹ Summary of Report by *Ad Hoc* Committee on Life and Family, 3 November 2010.

commissions for the family and life in Latin America and the Caribbean, in Bogota (Columbia) last March: “Families are increasingly suffering from adverse situations brought about by rapid cultural changes and social instability, by migratory flows, by poverty, by education programs which trivialize sexuality and by false ideologies. We cannot remain indifferent before such challenges.”

For many years, the Catholic Church in Canada has been aware of these threats and has also endeavored to think of initiatives capable of rebuilding and supporting the family. The interventions of the representatives of the CCCB at the 32nd Meeting of the Bishops of the Church in America (2004) reflect these concerns.²

A second consideration relates to the Church in Canada itself: here also the challenges are numerous. Among the baptized, without understanding its relevance, some have abandoned the faith, lapsing into religious indifference or open dispute. Others participate more or less regularly in Sunday Mass out of tradition or social convention. Others again remain faithful by conviction, but without having deepened their faith and without always understanding that it must transform their personal, family and social lives. Still others are resolutely engaged in the institution of the Church or in the world in the name of their faith in the living Christ and in response to his love.

Unfortunately, too many of the baptized continue to perceive their religion as a matter of rules and of restrictions, not grasping that the Christian faith is first and foremost a question of relationship – a relationship with Christ, God become man to reconcile us with his Father and to offer us eternal life.

In this double context – social and ecclesial – Pope Benedict XVI, following the lead of his predecessor Blessed John Paul II, calls us to a new evangelization – an evangelization “new in its ardor, in its methods, in its expression.”³ Therefore, “the time has come for preparing young generations of apostles who are not afraid to proclaim the Gospel. It is essential for every baptized person to pass from a faith of habit to a mature faith that is expressed in clear, convinced and courageous personal choices.”⁴

Our efforts for building a culture of life and family must be in line with the new evangelization – fruit of a wind of Pentecost which has blown on the Church since Vatican II – and must be undertaken remembering that we can count on an unexpected ally: the thirst for happiness which dwells in every human heart. As we articulate a Long Term Pastoral Initiative for Life and Family, it is good to recall that following the Resurrection, it was at the heart of families that the first evangelization began. It was there, with courage and strength, that the first Christians shared with their parents, with their brothers and sisters, with their children, with their friends – and that despite the threat of persecution – the joy of their encounter with the Resurrected Christ and the Good News of the love of God and of his plan for humanity.

² See Appendices 1 and 2 – Interventions of Archbishop Brendan O’Brien and of Archbishop V. James Weisgerber, at the 32nd Meeting of the Bishops of the church in America (San Antonio, Texas, 2004).

³ Blessed John Paul II, discourse at the 19th Assembly of C.E.L.A.M., 9 March 1983.

⁴ Blessed John Paul II, homily delivered in Berne, Switzerland, 6 June 2004.

Now, it is our turn! As the first Christians of the third millennium, we must make ourselves open to the Holy Spirit and learn to “promote the Christian meaning of life through the explicit proclamation of the Gospel, carried with gentle pride and great joy in the various areas of daily life.”⁵ To that end, we can count on the rich vision of life and of marriage and the family articulated by the Church in our time. The work of Blessed John Paul II, in particular, represents a huge “leap forward” – a compelling response to contemporary anxieties regarding the future of humanity.

“Humanity is loved by God! This very simple yet profound proclamation is the message that the Church must give to humanity. The word and the life of every Christian should echo this proclamation: God loves you! Christ came for you! Christ is for you the Way, the Truth and the Life!” (Jn 14:6).⁶

THE VISION

Seen through Christian eyes, the family is “the domestic Church” (*ecclesia domestica*). The Christian family, like the Church as a whole, should be a place where the truth of the Gospel is the rule of life and the gift which the family members bring to the wider community. The family is not simply the object of the Church’s pastoral care; it is also one of the Church’s most effective agents of evangelization. Christian families are today called to witness to the Gospel in difficult times and circumstances, when the family itself is threatened by an array of forces. To be an agent of evangelization in such a time, the Christian family needs to be genuinely “the domestic Church”, humbly and lovingly living out the Christian vocation (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 46).

This vision of the family is also a call to action. If we set out today to propose the Church’s vision of life, marriage and family to the young generations – fully aware that “Instruction” in Church teaching without an introduction to and an authentic experience of the living Christ will result in an impoverished experience of Catholicism – twenty years from now, the Catholic Church in Canada will be able to count on a new generation of young families “humbly and lovingly living out the Christian vocation” and being “effective agents of evangelization.” These young families will be aware that this vocation can be lived only in union with Christ who empowers them through His Word and Sacraments, and with the support of the believing community and the witness of those who know and love Christ.

For this new generation of apostles to come forward, we need to focus on three main elements: (1) our baptismal call, (2) the laity’s role, and (3) the “theology of the body”.

Our Baptismal Call

The Christian vocation and the Church’s vision of life, marriage and family must be understood in the light of the universal call to holiness issued by the Second Vatican

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, in the Basilica of Aquileia (Italy), 7 May 2011.

⁶ Blessed John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Vocation and Mission of the Laity*, n. 34.

Council (*Lumen Gentium*, V). Arriving at this understanding is a task of vital importance for three reasons: first of all, because the majority of the Baptized are called by God to seek this holiness precisely within the vocation of marriage; secondly, because outside the context of the call to holiness – apart from a relationship with Christ – the Church’s teaching is perceived and experienced as mere legalism, as imposing undue burdens; and finally, because personal holiness is the only effective remedy for the crises which confront contemporary society.

In order to remake the Christian fabric of society, we need to remake the Christian fabric of the family; we need to remake the fabric of our own ecclesial communities.⁷ Indeed, only healthy marriages and healthy families bring about a healthy society. In other words, it is only through the sanctification of the family that the crises which confront us – and specifically the anthropological crisis – can be adequately addressed.

Where does sanctification begin? Ultimately it must start with Baptism and with our answer to the question which Jesus poses to His disciples: “Who do you say I am?” (Mark 8:29). Each member of the Church needs to meet Christ and to freely choose his friendship and way of life. Each Christian also needs to discover that his or her life, and the lives of all the Baptized, are a participation in the life of the Church. We must hear with new ears the Baptismal call to holiness and the apostolate.

In embracing the joys and sorrows of married life, spouses walk together along the road to holiness. Their journey is, in itself, an apostolic work – a work on which the future well-being of the world and the happiness of countless souls is utterly dependent. Their vocation to marriage is a call to heroic virtue. Apart from Christ who is the Way, the Truth and the Life (John, 14:6), it is an impossible call. Yet, if we recognize that the call to holiness applies to spouses – specifically as spouses – we will exert every effort to sustain them in their calling.

According to the Second Vatican Council, it is the family’s specific “mission to become more and more what it is, that is to say, a community of life and love... to guard, reveal and communicate love... a living reflection of and a real sharing in God’s love for humanity and the love of Christ the Lord for the Church his bride” (*Familiaris Consortio*, 17). The family is the building block of society, of the Church, and as the Holy Father has observed “the cradle of every vocation.” It is absolutely fundamental, therefore, that parents and children be accompanied in their journey and brought to an understanding of their Christian identity and of the profound value of their vocation.

The Laity’s Role

Very often the participation of the Laity in the life of the Church has been equated with lay ministries – specifically with the assumption of liturgical and administrative roles. In truth, by virtue of Baptism, the life of the laity – even in the most ordinary of circumstances – is always a participation in the life of the Church. So, while lay

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Motu proprio Ubicumque et Semper*, by which the Holy Father instituted the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization 21 September 2010.

ministries merit our respect as a genuine service to the Church, the vast majority of lay people are not called to assume such roles.

Vatican II is quite explicit about the distinctive role of the laity and the field in which this role is to be exercised: The field proper to the laity is the world. It is in the world that they must sanctify themselves and their work, incarnating the spirit of Jesus Christ and penetrating every human enterprise with his saving power.

“The laity are given this special vocation: to make the Church present and faithful in those places and circumstances where it is only through them that she can become the salt of the earth” (*Lumen Gentium*, 33). “The characteristic of the lay state being a life led in the midst of the world and of the secular affairs, laymen are called by God to make of their apostolate, through the vigor of their Christian spirit, a leaven in the world” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 2).

In the same vein, the new pontifical Council for the promotion of the new evangelization wishes to assist families in becoming the protagonists of the new evangelization.

"The family can evangelize under its own roof, thanks to reciprocal love, listening to the Word, praying, catechising in the family and with reciprocal edification. The family can evangelize in its own environment through relationships with neighbors, members of the extended family, with their friends, their work colleagues, with their team mates and at school, etc. The family can evangelize in the parish through faithful participation in the Mass on Sunday, by collaborating in the catechising of children, by participating in meetings of families, of movements, of associations, by being close to families in difficulty, in the planning of marriage preparation and in the preparation of parents for the baptism of their children. But the family can also evangelize within civil society by giving it new citizens, by multiplying the social virtues, by helping the needy, by joining Christian-inspired civil associations to promote a culture and policies favorable to families and to their rights."⁸

Theology of the Body

Theology of the body is the Holy Spirit's solution to many of the problems which confront us. If effectively communicated through the witness of lived example, it can become the corner stone, the informing principle, of all our efforts to provide formation for individuals and families. And this, clearly, is our single greatest need – what Blessed John Paul II referred to as “solid and deep formation”.⁹ On that condition, the family can become “an effective agent of evangelization” in Canada.

⁸ Bishop Jean Lafitte, Secretary of the Pontifical Council for the Family, meeting with the Bishops responsible for Episcopal Commissions for Family and Life in Latin American and the Caribbean, in Bogota (Colombia), 29 March 2011.

⁹ Blessed John Paul II, to members of ecclesial movements and new communities, at the Vigil of Pentecost, *L'Osservatore Romano*, Spanish-language edition, 5 June 1998.

According to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, it is only in making a sincere gift of self that the individual can fully find himself (*Gaudium et Spes*, 24). The opposing view – the view which conceives of the person as radically autonomous – has led to the failure and redefinition of marriage, the hyper-sexualization of culture, and the explosion of pornography, together with contraception, abortion, and euthanasia. According to this view, I am always, in one way or another, in competition with those with whom I live, with those who ask for my assistance, or whom I carry in my womb.

Yet, this “for-the-other-ness” which defines us as human persons is inscribed in our very flesh. This is the central insight of Pope John Paul II’s “theology of the body” (TOB). This orientation toward-the-other is, in fact, the basis of all human fruitfulness – physical and spiritual. However, because of sin, human self-donation is sustainable in its purity only in union with Christ who is both the model and the means of its realization – Christ, the One “other” through whom and for whom we are all created. In Him and to Him I give myself – and find myself.

Our First Priority

It is obvious that many of the dominant cultural influences in our society are stacked against the Church’s vision. In the midst of such opposition, we must learn in the family to be credible witnesses to Christ. To be credible, we need to be united.

We can and must work to change laws, but our first goal must be to change hearts. While it is good and laudable to oppose abortion, euthanasia and polygamy – and we should, of course, work tirelessly in doing so – our efforts will ultimately be in vain if we do not, at the same time and with equal vigor, work with and through families to create a culture in which every person is valued, where responsible human sexuality is encouraged, and where the needs of the poor, the sick, the elderly, the lonely and the dying are addressed in a spirit of solidarity.

In order to advance and support the role of the family as the principal vehicle of the new evangelization, we must make the family our main priority. Concern for the family should permeate all of the Church’s evangelizing efforts.¹⁰

It would be good for every diocese to concentrate its energies in promoting evangelization by and through the family, utilizing the family itself. In focusing on the evangelizing role of families, it is recognized that there are gifts intrinsic to all families, and that all families are receivers and givers of support. Families that are thought of as “strong” have pastoral needs and families thought of as “broken” are frequently themselves resources for evangelization!

Let us make the family our fundamental option, remembering that virtually every form of poverty – material, emotional, moral or spiritual – has its origin in some kind of deprivation within the family. It will be essential that we use all available resources to support life and love specifically within the context of marriage and the family. Today’s

¹⁰ Bishop Jean Lafitte, *idem*.

efforts, whether they are directed to the engaged, to young married couples, children, youth, young adults, parents, grandparents or single parents, will bear fruit for current and future families.

ELEMENTS OF A PLAN

In order for this vision to become a reality, it will be necessary for us to help Christian families to discover or to deepen their prophetic, priestly and royal identity. The task is imposing. We must begin with the families already present in our parish communities. Together with them, it will then be possible to reach out to families distanced from the Church and, eventually, to families who do not yet have the joy of knowing Christ.

The Prophetic Role of the Family: Called to Witness

“The family is the center and the heart of the civilization of love... Only if the truth about freedom and the communion of persons in marriage and in the family can regain its splendor, will the building of the civilization of love truly begin...” (*Blessed John Paul II, Letter to Families, 13*)

It is first and foremost by its manner of life, by authentically living the word of God, that the family fulfills its prophetic mission to proclaim the Word. As Pope Paul VI observed in 1975, “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi, 41*). We cannot hope to evangelize society by simply proclaiming moral values. In order to witness effectively, the family needs to be brought to an awareness of itself as a basic evangelizing community, as a “Domestic Church” – of what it means to belong to the church, to belong to Christ. This awareness comes about only through formation.

Christian families give witness in many ways, according to the natural situation they occupy, first within their own homes and among their own family members, but also in their neighborhoods, on the job and in their various spheres of influence. As Blessed John Paul II observed in 2004, “Now is the hour of the lay faithful, who, by their specific vocation to shape the secular world in accordance with the Gospel, are called to carry forward the Church’s prophetic mission by evangelizing the various spheres of family, social, professional and cultural life.”¹¹

The Christian family is never more prophetic than when both in its individual members and as family it is configured to Christ Himself, when its members love one another as Christ loves each one of us.

The Priestly Role of the Family: Called to Celebrate

“...The Christian family too is part of this priestly people which is the Church. By means of the sacrament of marriage, in which it is rooted and from which it draws its

¹¹ Blessed John Paul II, speaking to youth in Bern, Switzerland, 26 June 2004.

nourishment, the Christian family is continuously vivified by the Lord Jesus and called and engaged by Him in a dialogue with God through the sacraments, through the offering of one's life, and through prayer. This is the priestly role which the Christian family can and ought to exercise in intimate communion with the whole Church, through the daily realities of married and family life. In this way the Christian family is called to be sanctified and to sanctify the ecclesial community and the world" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 55).

In union with the Eucharistic sacrifice, spouses offer themselves and their lives to the Lord and to each other on the altar of daily life, and from the Eucharist they draw the strength to fulfill the duties of their vocation. In the Eucharist "spouses encounter the source from which their own marriage covenant flows, is interiorly structured and continuously renewed" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 57).

Christian parents have the specific responsibility of educating their children in prayer and of encouraging in them the development and growth of a sincere love for Christ and of a spirit of service in union with Him. At the same time, Christian parents should strive to make their homes places of repentance and pardon. It is their role to bring their children to the awareness that they are called to become saints. "Nothing complicated is required to sanctify one's work and, at the same time, to sanctify oneself. Just a few ingredients are needed: to accomplish one's work as perfectly as possible (...), with a love for the will of God, and to serve others.¹²

The Kingly Role of the Family: Called to Serve

"While building up the Church in love, the Christian family places itself at the service of the human person and the world... Another task for the family is to form persons in love and also to practice love in all its relationships, so that it does not live closed in on itself, but remains open to the community, moved by a sense of justice and concern for others, as well as by a consciousness of its responsibility towards the whole of society (*Familiaris Consortio*, 64).

Christian families are called to experience the kingly freedom of the children of God – freedom from sin and freedom from the fear of death which plagues mankind. Christ the King came in history as one who served and so, following His example, we see our "kingly" duty, as individuals and as families, as being of service to humanity.

As families, we serve society best when we work to "become what we are": communities of life and love, when we are open to life and when we allow our love to radiate out into society, enhancing the personal dignity of all. By training their children to embrace roles of kingly and queenly service, Christian families contribute immeasurably to the future good of society. When the Christian family seeks its own well-being, then, it does so only because it knows and knows too well, that it is only in a climate of love that

¹² Catholic Organization for Life and Family (COLF), *Work + Love = Holiness!*, 2010.

the spirit of generosity and self-donation, on which the future of humanity depends, can be cultivated.

PROPOSED STRATEGIES

Due recognition must be given to the fact that a great deal of work has already been done on behalf of life, marriage and the family by the Church in Canada – and often with very limited resources. The best strategies for advancing a culture of life are those which reach the largest number of people – both within and outside the Church – and those which meet people and families where they are in their spiritual development (acknowledging their daily preoccupations and educational deficits).

For example, long experience has shown that even among Catholics whose connection to the Church is tenuous and who practice the Faith irregularly, there is a tendency to see-to-it that their children receive the Sacraments of Initiation. In many instances, the preparation which individuals and families undergo in anticipation of receiving the sacraments constitutes their only structured religious formation. For these reasons, periods of sacramental preparation offer unique pedagogical opportunities; for instance, mandatory baptismal prep classes provide an ideal opportunity for introducing the concept of Domestic Church, together with an offer of access to literary and other resources.

All our strategies should be formulated with a view to assisting families in dealing with the cultural, educational, social, and political challenges which confront them. In the current climate – and for at least the immediate future – most Canadian Dioceses are confronted with shrinking human resources. Added to this challenge is the fact that, even where sound programs are available, together with opportunities for implementation, it is very difficult to control the quality of instruction. In order to overcome these challenges, at least for the foreseeable future, extensive use could be made in parishes of pre-authorized programs made available on DVDs.

Subject to the approval of the Diocesan Bishop (and in certain instances of the CCCB), the following recommended strategies, and others which will be developed in response to new pastoral needs, will be best implemented and overseen by a Diocesan Life and Family Office – ideally by a married couple trained in and living the Church's vision of marriage and family life. In the absence of such an office, the strategies could be implemented and overseen by a Life and Family Committee based in each parish or pastoral region (or, where it is not possible to establish such a committee, by a responsible individual). In no instance is it anticipated that these strategies should create additional work for pastors. These initiatives should be viewed primarily as an expression of the kingly role of the Baptized and of the family – in other words, of individual members of the laity and of families working with and for each other.

I. Formation

- Mandatory Marriage preparation consistently based on Blessed John Paul II's Theology of the Body.
- Baptismal preparation highlighting the double call of Baptism (to holiness and the apostolate), and the concept of Domestic Church (and making available resources which assist in living as Domestic Church).
- National support for ongoing opportunities for training in Natural Family Planning.
- Confirmation preparation highlighting chastity as self-possession for self-donation (in one vocation or another).
- Formation in evangelization and in witnessing to Christ (to assist the Baptised in giving an account of their hope and of their love for Christ).
- Marriage mentoring programs.
- Marriage counseling/crisis intervention.
- Workshops and sessions addressing the concerns of parents (concrete challenges in education, education in the virtues, sexual education, etc.).
- Formation in Life Issues (workshops and sessions on various themes, e.g. euthanasia, assisted procreation, abortion, etc.).
- Formation in the use of the media.
- Formation in the common good and civic responsibility (engaging in public debates).
- Formation in prayer for couples and families.
- More emphasis in seminary formation and ongoing formation of clergy, on the call of the laity, the role of the family and life issues.
- Establishment in Canada of a French-language session of the John Paul II Institute for Studies in Marriage and the Family.

II. Promotion of Life and Family

- Annual National Week for Life and Family.

- Participation of members of the CCCB in the National March for Life (Ottawa) and comparable local events, and encouragement addressed to all members of the Church to participate.
- Annual or bi-annual meeting with representatives of pro-life and pro-family movements and associations.
- Promotion of World Meetings of Families with the Holy Father.
- Intervention of the CCCB in the public sphere when bills are introduced in Parliament or when the Supreme Court is hearing cases which touch on issues relating to life and the family.
- Encouragement of the faithful to participate in public debates which touch on issues relating to life and the family.
- Encouragement of the faithful to create associations of families actively engaged in society.

III. Outreach for Life

- Promotion of existing crisis pregnancy centers and services.
- Promotion of post abortion healing organizations.
- Organization of visits to schools of women and men, witnessing to the impact of abortion.
- Establishment of parish teams to visit the sick, the elderly, the house bound and the dying.
- Support and promotion of local hospices and palliative care facilities.
- Development of pastoral care initiatives for families wounded by life.
- Outreach geared to single mothers and fathers.

IV. Youth

- Collaboration with Catholic schools – in provinces where they exist: providing TOB-based sex education programs, introductory parenting courses, etc.
- Increased outreach on university campuses (collaboration with existing groups dedicated to Catholic evangelization and respect for life).
- Creation of and promotion of parish-based Catholic youth and young adult groups and associations offering (1) formation to prepare them for living their

vocation to love, whether it be in marriage, priesthood, consecrated life or apostolic celibacy; (2) educational opportunities regarding respect for life and authentic sexuality; (3) social networking; and (4) faith sharing opportunities. (Working in collaboration with the Diocesan director of Youth Ministry or with the individuals responsible for youth activities.)

- (See also “Formation” above)

V. The Elderly

- Creation of mentoring opportunities for the retired and the aged especially in areas related to faith development and parenting.
- Establishment of an apostolate of prayer by and for the elderly.
- Establishment of programs of faith formation and sharing for the elderly. Increased outreach to the elderly, particularly to the housebound and those living in a variety of facilities: assisted living, seniors’ homes or extended care units.

VI. Celebrations

- In the context of the celebration of Sunday Eucharist, an increased emphasis on preaching which relates the readings to life and family issues (abortion, euthanasia, natural family planning as they relate to the Gospel call to self-donation, the family home as a place of forgiveness, etc.)
- Promotion of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, fountain of self-giving love.
- Use of Prayers of the Faithful to increase awareness of the mission of the family and of the urgency of life issues, with a focus on current issues.
- National campaign of prayer and fasting for life.
- Public acknowledgment of significant wedding anniversaries during special Masses.
- Creation of opportunities for couples and families to witness to their Christian experience as families.
- Increased emphasis on liturgical feasts which relate to and support the role of the family (for example: Mary, Mother of God, Feast of St. Joseph, Feast of Sts. Anne and Joachim, Feast of the Holy Family).

VII. Communication *ad intra* and *ad extra*

- Addition to the CCCB website of a page focusing on life and family.

- Appointment of one or two CCCB spokespersons for issues relating to life and family.
- Promotion of Catholic media presence (particularly incorporating use of new social media) with a greater emphasis on the role and pastoral needs of the family and of life issues.
- Creation of a virtual life and family magazine, accessible through the CCCB website and promoted regularly, among other ways, in parish bulletins.
- Development of a virtual national consultation service for bioethical and parenting issues (including ongoing information and commentary on developments in popular culture and ongoing maintenance of resource inventory for couples and families in crisis).
- Increased involvement in the secular media, especially local newspapers, radio, television and social media, on the part of the local Church and parishes (particularly with reference to issues relating to life and family). In some places, this could be done as an outreach activity of parish-based Life and Family committees.
- Promotion of important events organized by national and local pro-life and pro-family organizations.
- Formation in the use of the media.

VIII. Collaboration of parishes and dioceses with ecclesial movements and new communities

As the late Blessed John Paul II observed, these groups have become true “laboratories of faith” and authentic schools of Christian life, holiness, and mission for thousands of Christians in every part of the world. They have come about as an irruption of the Spirit in the life of the Church, proposing not only personal example, but also the direct announcement of the Christian message, thereby rediscovering the value of the kerigma as a method of evangelization and catechesis. Their evangelizing potential is urgently needed by the Church today.

“Notable among the characteristics of missionary commitment found in ecclesial movements and new communities is the indisputable ability to awaken the apostolic enthusiasm and missionary courage of the laity. They know how to draw out the spiritual potential of the laity by helping them smash the barriers of timidity, fear, and false complexes of inferiority which today’s secular culture creates in the hearts of so many Christians.”¹³

¹³ Archbishop Stanislaw Rylko, President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, at the first Latin American Congress for ecclesial movements and new communities, Bogota (Colombia), 9 March 2006.

Pope John Paul II never tired of insisting that the ecclesial movements and new communities are called to take their place “humbly” in dioceses and parishes, while pastors – Bishops and priests – ought to welcome these groups “cordially”.

Speaking to members of these groups at the vigil of Pentecost 1998, he said: “Often in today's world, which is dominated by a secular culture that proposes models of life without God, the faith of many is greatly tested and often suffocated and put out. Therefore there is an urgent need for a strong testimony and a Christian formation that is solid and deep. What a great need there is today for mature Christian personalities who are aware of their baptismal identity, of their call and mission in the Church and in the world! What great need there is of living Christian communities! This is where the ecclesial movements and new communities appear: they are the answer which has been raised up by the Holy Spirit to this dramatic challenge at the end of the millennium. You are this providential answer!”

RESOURCES

Admittedly, on a human level, our resources are not up to the task before us. The needs are almost without measure. In our efforts on behalf of life, marriage and the family, it may not be possible or even advisable to depend only on those resources which are readily available in our own dioceses or parishes, even though these may be much greater than we first realize.

Episcopal Conferences, dioceses, parishes, pro-life and pro-family groups, movements and associations must share their initiatives and resources. Where parishes and dioceses have been blessed with greater resources these resources should be shared with parishes and dioceses in greater need. What has worked or is working in one diocese may work equally well in another; there is no need to reinvent the wheel!

The resources provided by the Catholic Organization for Life and Family (COLF) respond to the demands of the new evangelization and can also be used even more by parishes, movements and families. Apart from marshaling our resources, we will need to develop more, while parishes and dioceses will also benefit immeasurably from the freshness and energy of ecclesial movements and new communities.

CONCLUSION

In order to build a culture of life and family in Canada, it will be necessary to proceed by steps and by priorities. To collaborate, in the beginning, with the individuals and families who regularly participate in the life of our parishes, especially those who are already aware of their Baptismal call and of their mission in the world.

If we hope that a new generation of families will be actively engaged in the new evangelization in twenty years, without delay we must take action and give priority to the three following recommendations during the next five to ten years:

1. Employ every means possible to promote our fundamental option for the family and its well-being;
2. Base all marriage preparation programs on the Theology of the Body;
3. Invite all the faithful to deepen the double calling of their Baptism: to become saints and apostles.

In all things we must work together in union with Christ who is both the model and the source of inexhaustible self-giving and in whom our shortcomings can and will be overcome.

Most importantly, we must be ready to let ourselves be surprised by the Holy Spirit who “blows where he wills” and never stops renewing the face of the earth!

32nd MEETING OF THE BISHOPS OF THE CHURCH IN AMERICA

SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

16-19 February 2004

**Notes for Archbishop Brendan M. O'Brien, President
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB)**

With reference to no. 46 of *Ecclesia in America*: What are the “forces [that] are endangering the solidarity of the institution of the family in the different regions of America?”

Introduction

I would first like to thank the organizers of this important meeting on the family in America, and particularly the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops which has welcomed us so warmly to San Antonio.

In Canada, building a strong union and a loving family is still an ideal for the majority of young adults, perhaps because of the example of enduring couples who witness to the possibility of a happy married life. Happy families are also an encouragement in that they prove the importance and impact of self-giving and unconditional love.

There is much we can celebrate about the family in Canada. Parents who transmit to their children fundamental values so they will develop their full human potential. Families who build a life together in which each member feels responsible for the others and shares their joys and sorrows. Parents who witness to their faith in all aspects of their lives, be it with friends or colleagues. Families who are involved in their parishes and communities. The increasing respect for the equality between men and women. However, the focus of my talk is about the particular challenges the Canadian family faces today.

Canadian families see their unity, solidarity and survival threatened in ways that are not always evident to the primary players. Some of these pressures compromise the very future of this institution that has been desired by God since the beginning.

Families grow or change with the rhythm of evolution and social disruption. As society's basic unit, families are subject to all the cultural forces, events and phenomena that mark the life of a country. Even though the federal and provincial governments in Canada state that they want to help the family, and even establish some family policies, there is still much to be done in this area.

In our overly sexualized society, the family and life in general are often scorned as much by laws as by individual behaviour. Materialism and individualism, mixed with a false conception of freedom and the relentless pursuit of personal and sexual pleasure, push many Canadians toward extravagant consumption and the seeking of comfort at any price. Many flout what is essential. Many have lost respect for life and human dignity as well as a sense of the meaning of life.

Today, many social and moral factors threaten the integrity of the family. We will examine some of the factors that confront couples who rise to the challenge of giving life to and educating children. Let us first look at the results of the 2001 Census from Statistics Canada so we can consider the demographics of Canadian families.

Portrait of Canadian families

The description of Canadian families and households offered by the 2001 Census says quite a bit about the state of the basic unit of Canadian society. Despite much negative news about marriage, it still remains the number-one choice for most couples. Therefore, 70 percent of families are made up of married couples, 16 percent are headed by single parents, and 14 percent by common-law couples. Out of all Canadian households, only half a percent are made up of same-sex partners. When a young man and a young woman decide to make a commitment, they often start out by living together, but 75 percent of these couples eventually marry.

In this context, it is interesting to note that 68 percent of children, ages 0 to 14 years, live with their married parents, while 13 percent live with common-law parents. The remaining 19 percent live with one parent or the other. These figures give a glimpse of one of the dangers Canadian families face. Each year separation and divorce cause extensive damage with serious consequences for individuals, families and society as a whole. In 2000 there were 71,144 divorces compared to 157,395 marriages. In addition, the proportion of marriages expected to end in divorce by the 30th wedding anniversary was 37.7 percent

If one still needed convincing about the importance of marriage for children, it is found in the national survey on children and youth conducted in 1999. According to the results of this survey, 13.6 percent of children born of married parents who did not live together before the marriage see their parents split up. It is a much more serious picture for children of common-law parents, as 63.1 percent of them will live through the break-up of their family. As for children born of married parents who first lived common-law, they form an intermediary category: about 25 percent of them will experience family breakdown.

Demographic free-fall

An interesting phenomenon has been noted in Canada over the last few months: sociologists, demographers, economists, politicians, psychologists and university researchers are seriously questioning themselves about the demographic future of the

country.

As in almost all other Western nations, Canada's population is aging. The number of live births is no longer high enough to ensure a renewal of the population. From 1970 to 1993, the fertility rate of Canadians dropped from 2.3 live births to 1.7. This means our country must look toward immigration to maintain a reasonable demographic level and avoid economic collapse.

The concern about the decrease in birth rate is so acute that last December, two important players in the Canadian media, the French-language television network **Radio-Canada**, and the daily French-language newspaper **La Presse**, thought it important to use this theme for the first in a series of conferences about what is at stake in today's society.

On this occasion, Dr. David K. Foot, an economics professor from the University of Toronto and co-author of the bestseller **Boom, Bust and Echo**, referred to the "revenge of the Pill" and came back to this idea numerous times while presenting statistical tables on population ages in Western countries. Thirty-five years after the publication of **Humanae Vitae**, Pope Paul VI's controversial encyclical on family planning, it is very interesting to hear the analysis of this demographic specialist.

In Canada, where the vast majority of couples including Catholics use one form or another of artificial contraception, the dangers that Paul VI foresaw with the arrival of the Pill have become real: marital infidelity, sexual promiscuity and pre-marital sex. It goes without saying that contraception is not the only explanation for these phenomena, nor for the demographic free-fall currently seen in the Canadian population. Worry about the future, an increasing workload, consumerism and many other reasons also come into play.

Abortion

Abortion is another danger for the family. A logical consequence of the failure of artificial contraception, abortion is also used as a method of birth control.

Since 1988 there has been no law against abortion in Canada. It is available on request at any stage of the pregnancy. In 2000, there were 32.2 abortions for every 100 live births, for a total of 105,427 abortions.

One rarely or never hears about "post-abortion syndrome", the name given to the devastating consequences that abortion has on many women whose lives have been marked by regret, feelings of guilt and shame, as well as suicidal thoughts; women who were not able to find the moral or material support they needed to carry an unexpected pregnancy to term.

This syndrome also threatens families, just like the infertility that can result from an abortion. Is this told to girls 14 years of age and older who are legally allowed to have

an abortion without their parents being told by the school or the doctor?

Sex education

It is important to mention another factor that impacts on future families: too often sex education as taught in public elementary and secondary schools is inadequate and often inaccurate.

Under the guise of “protecting love” in the context of the AIDS epidemic which threatens heterosexuals as well as homosexuals, the condom is being promoted as the miracle solution for avoiding sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) as well as AIDS. Unfortunately, little attention is being paid to studies that cast doubt on its real effectiveness, and to statistics about its failure.

Hardly a word is spoken about chastity and abstinence. Furthermore, little real education is given about love and fidelity, which would allow youth to discover the greatness of a family project founded on marriage.

The message that is given most often is: “It’s normal to be sexually active, and because you will eventually have sexual relations, here’s how you can protect yourself...” This constitutes a threat not only to young people’s physical, emotional and moral health, but also to their capability to make a long-term commitment.

Encouraged to be sexually active, young people multiply their pre-marital experiences, and accumulate many disappointments in love. Their bodies and souls are injured, and their ability to trust is slowly worn away – the trust that is so fundamental when building a lasting marriage.

When faced with the inevitable conflicts that are a part of married life, how can we be surprised to see them run away from marital difficulties in search of new sexual adventures for which their sexual education, based on instant gratification, has prepared them?

Reconciling work and family

On a day-to-day basis, Canadian families face other realities that get in the way of their hopes for a lasting commitment. The difficulties of reconciling work and family preoccupy an ever-increasing number of citizens and have become an issue that can no longer be avoided. In wanting to take both their professional and family responsibilities seriously, many parents feel as though they are just managing to survive instead of living.

In 2002, in the National Study on Balancing Work, Family and Lifestyle, Canadians defined as follows the conflict between work and home:

“It is having a job that interferes with your family life. It is when your family interferes with your career and your ability to get ahead at work. It is when housework interferes with time for yourself. It is having a long commute to and from work that takes a toll on your energy. It is role overload – having too much to do in the amount of time available. It is being crunched for time – constantly. It is going it alone as a single parent or living with a workaholic. It is balancing two or more jobs with a life. It is balancing work and education with a life. It is postponing having children (perhaps forever) because you cannot see how you can manage one more thing.”

Time: A precious commodity

Time is a rare commodity for families, especially when both parents are working outside the home, or when a single parent is responsible for the children’s upbringing while working as well. Overburdened by their heavy schedules, parents are exhausted. They have almost no time to be together. They have little time to spend with their children or teens. Several studies have shown that parents spent 11 hours a week with their children in 2001, compared to 16 hours per week in 1991.

By constantly reducing the amount of time they spend together, the ties that bind family members become looser and are worn thinner. It would be much more advantageous to everyone in the family if they could rediscover the joy of sharing 1001 everyday activities, such eating together, going for a walk or participating in a sport, praying together, or discussing current events.

Families that put their life together first, often by making very real sacrifices where their career or lifestyles are concerned, give each other a remarkable gift. Less stressed and less tired, parents and children benefit from the joy of spending time and growing together.

The working world

The working world is not always well adapted to the reality of family life. Even though the public sector offers well-defined advantages to employees to help them fulfil their commitments to their families, the private sector often does not.

Some examples are: flex-time, childcare at work, parental leave when a new child arrives in the family, and also a federal government proposal that would allow six weeks of compassionate leave to family members forced to leave work to be with another family member who is gravely ill or dying.

The disproportionately high productivity requirements of some employers in the private sector, and their efforts to address the challenges of globalization, have a negative impact on many families. The insecurity and financial vulnerability that go hand in hand with a lack of job security, and the worry and ensuing poverty that can come from the loss of a job, combine to discourage young people from getting married and having a family. For them, it is often simpler just to live together and put off having children until

much later. We must make the private sector more aware of the responsibility it has to respect the demands of the family lives of its employees.

The media

Media also share a real responsibility for the current state of the Canadian family. They are no strangers to its past or its future since, as the Holy Father reminded us on the occasion of World Communications Day, “each message has a moral dimension.” The messages we hear can urge us to do good or evil.

Though it is true that the media can present a convincing portrait of the importance of family and can be a powerful educational tool, they far too often present a reductive view of family life.

It is impossible to overestimate the impact of the media on our mentality, particularly television, which often is the sole source of information and learning for many Canadians of all ages. The content of television shows frequently leaves much to be desired, and the program design is hardly better. Think for a moment about reality TV, or even soap operas or sit-coms that feature people whose moral behaviour goes against fundamental human values and, consequently, Christian values.

Too often, marital infidelity and pre-marital sex are presented as everyday behaviour – with all the consequences this can have on family life and on the minds of impressionable children and teens who see these shows as a reflection of “normal life”. The same can be said about divorce, contraception, abortion and homosexuality.

Many Canadian families today realize the media can have a negative impact on their solidarity and unity. The Internet is another powerful invader, often capturing too much of a young person’s or even an adult’s mind and time, resulting in isolation from the rest of the family and even leading to unhealthy things such as pornography.

The State and subsidiarity

Contrary to what we might hope, the State does not always accept the rule of subsidiarity where families are concerned. Instead of helping parents to assume their primary responsibilities as educators, it sometimes takes over their role.

As an example, I will use the childcare policies put in place by the Government of Quebec to respond to the needs of the poorest families. At first glance, it seems like a shining example of inexpensive daycare that meets the needs and desires of many families. Upon closer examination, it is clear that it does not satisfy all parents.

This policy supports families where both parents are employed outside the home. In 1998, the Vanier Institute of the Family reported that 64 percent of mothers who had children under three years old were employed. As for couples choosing to live on one salary to allow one parent or the other to stay home and educate their children, they

receive hardly any government assistance. This is unfair.

A government that is truly aware of the irreplaceable role of parents in the raising of future citizens should devote a greater portion of its tax money to help parents in this difficult task. True family-related policies, respectful of the choices of all parents, are sorely needed in Canada.

I now turn to the most significant and immediate threat facing families in Canada and that is the redefinition of marriage.

Marriage

At the meeting of Presidents of Episcopal Conferences that took place in Santo Domingo in September 2002 on life and family, the CCCB President at that time, Bishop Jacques Berthelet, C.S.V., stated that the most radical challenge to marriage and family in Canada was from those seeking to redefine marriage to include same-sex partners. Since that meeting, the Appeal Courts in two of the most populous provinces (British Columbia and Ontario) have decided that same-sex partners have the constitutional right to marry. Hundreds of same-sex partners have now been legally married in Canada. How did this happen?

1. Social Benefits for Same-Sex Partners

The social revolution that has occurred in Canada about the recognition of same-sex relationships has been largely driven by the courts. As a result of a series of legal challenges that began about 15 years ago, the provincial human rights codes in all the provinces and the Canadian Human Rights Act have been amended to prohibit discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation in the areas of employment; the provision of goods, services or facilities customarily available to the public; and accommodation. These gains were then used to challenge the historical understanding of spouse and to obtain health, pension and other benefits available to married and heterosexual common-law couples.

Most provinces and the federal government have now given to same-sex partners almost the same economic benefits and responsibilities as previously reserved to common-law and married couples. The only difference is that common-law and same-sex partners only acquire their rights following a period of cohabitation that varies from province to province. Married couples acquire these upon marriage.

2. Domestic Partnership/Same-Sex Unions

In 2000, the Province of Nova Scotia introduced a registered domestic partnership regime where common-law and same-sex partners immediately upon registration of their relationship can obtain the same rights and obligations as married people under 12 provincial statutes dealing with such areas as property, inheritance rights and pension benefits. In June 2002, the Province of Quebec introduced legislation that

allows common-law couples and same-sex partners to enter civil unions with rights similar to married couples. The Quebec legislation also confers full adoption and other parental rights on same-sex partners. The Province of Manitoba has legislation which provides for the registration of two unmarried opposite or same-sex adults as common-law partners. The Province of Alberta has proposed legislation that would allow for the legal recognition of partnership contracts between two unmarried adults, whether or not they are in a “conjugal” relationship.

3. The Law on Marriage in Canada

The Canadian Constitution divides the power to make laws between the federal Parliament and the provincial and territorial legislatures, and sets out the basic rights and freedoms of each individual in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

In Canada, the legal definition of marriage comes under federal jurisdiction, with the provinces having jurisdiction over the solemnization of marriage (that is, licences, determining who can conduct the ceremony and how, registration).

Marriage is not created or defined by law but simply recognized by the law as a pre-existing institution which is the “voluntary union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others”. In all of the provinces and territories except Quebec, this is known as the common-law (judge-made) definition of marriage. The Quebec Civil Code and the Federal Law-Civil Law Harmonization Act contain a similar provision.

4. Marriage – A Matter of Social Policy or Human Rights

Gay rights advocates in Ontario and British Columbia have been able to convince the Courts of Appeal in these two provinces that marriage is a human right rather than a question of social policy.

During the last year, judges have held that the opposite-sex definition of marriage discriminates against same-sex partners by violating their human dignity and right to equality, and redefined marriage to be “the voluntary union for life of two persons to the exclusion of all others”.

Respecting human dignity is integral to the right of equality under the Charter. The Supreme Court of Canada has elaborated the concept of human dignity to mean:

Human dignity means that an individual or group feels self-respect and self-worth. It is concerned with psychological integrity and empowerment. Human dignity is harmed by unfair treatment premised upon personal traits or circumstances which do not relate to individual needs, capacities, or merits. It is enhanced by laws which are sensitive to the needs, capacities, and merits of different individuals, taking into account the context underlying their differences. Human dignity is harmed when individuals and groups are marginalized, ignored, or devalued, and is enhanced when laws recognize the full place of all individuals

and groups within Canadian society.

The Ontario Court of Appeal found that “*denying same-sex couples the right to marry perpetuates the view that same-sex couples are not capable of forming loving and lasting relationships, and thus same-sex relationships are not worthy of the same respect and recognition as opposite-sex relationships.*”

The Court also held that exclusion of same-sex couples from marriage “*perpetuates the view that same-sex relationships are less worthy of recognition than opposite-sex relationships. In doing so, it offends the dignity of persons in same-sex relationships.*”

The Ontario Court also found that the three specific purposes of marriage identified by the Government of Canada were not pressing and substantial so as to justify overriding the equality rights of persons in same-sex relationships.

- a) It said that the purpose of uniting the opposite sexes favours one form of relationship over another, suggesting that uniting two persons of the same sex is of lesser importance, thereby demeaning the dignity of same-sex couples.
- b) The second purpose of encouraging the birth and raising of children was found not to be a reason for maintaining marriage as an exclusively heterosexual institution. In the Court’s view, heterosexual couples will not stop having or raising children because same-sex couples are permitted to marry, and same-sex unions can have children by other means such as adoption, surrogacy and donor insemination. The Court also noted that a law that restricts marriage to opposite-sex couples on the basis that a fundamental purpose of marriage is the raising of children suggests that same-sex couples are not equally capable of childrearing. The Court said that the objective is based on a stereotypical assumption which is not acceptable in a free and democratic society that prides itself on promoting equality and respect for all persons.
- c) The Court held that the third objective of promoting companionship perpetuates the view that persons in same-sex relationships are not equally capable of providing companionship and forming lasting and loving relationships.

Finally, the Court held that freedom of religion under the Charter ensures that religious groups have the option of refusing to solemnize same-sex marriages. It also noted that “the equality guarantee, however, ensures that the beliefs and practices of various religious groups are not imposed on persons who do not share those views.”

5. The Next Legal and Political Steps

The Government of Canada chose not to appeal the British Columbia and Ontario court decisions. This means that same-sex partners may marry in those two provinces and that for the first time in our country the core definition of marriage for civil purposes is different from what it is for most religious groups. These decisions only apply to the

provinces in which they were made. For same-sex marriage to be legal across Canada, there would have to be either federal legislation or a binding decision of the Supreme Court of Canada.

The federal government has referred the matter to the Supreme Court of Canada and asked it for a non-binding advisory opinion on a number of questions, including: 1) the constitutionality of a definition that marriage is the “lawful union of two persons to the exclusion of all others”, 2) the constitutionality of the opposite-sex definition of marriage and 3) whether freedom of religion as guaranteed under the Canadian Charter will protect religious officials from being compelled to perform a marriage between two persons of the same-sex that is contrary to their religious beliefs.

The Government of Canada has made it clear that it will not defend the traditional definition of marriage in the Court, and that regardless of the opinion rendered by the Court it will introduce legislation that supports a definition of marriage that includes same-sex couples. The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, as well as other groups, has been granted the right to intervene in the Supreme Court of Canada and will argue in favour of the traditional definition. The federal government has also granted a free vote to members of Parliament on the eventual legislation, which means they do not have to vote along party lines.

Some key questions and challenges to maintaining the traditional definition of marriage

- a) The Government of Canada has stated that it promotes allowing same-sex partners being allowed to marry because it reflects values of tolerance, respect and equality consistent with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. At the same time, the government has stressed that religious groups are free to refuse to perform marriages which are not in accordance with their religious beliefs. This gives the impression that faith groups that oppose marriages between people of the same sex do not believe in tolerance, respect or equality. The government has also managed to position the redefinition of marriage as a religious issue, rather than a social issue. In our country, the definition of an issue as religious usually results in its being marginalized or banished from the public square.
- b) Canadians are used to rapid change. For many, changing the definition of marriage is just one more change among those that have been made to reflect the equality of men and women. Many Canadians do not seem to appreciate that previous developments within the institution of marriage have not been in conflict with the basic purpose and nature of marriage.
- c) Many, particularly those who are young, do not understand why two people cannot marry if they love each other. They do not readily see that marriage recognizes not only love and commitment, but also the natural capacity to create children, and that there is a fundamental difference between a relationship which has the potential to create a child and one that does not.

- d) The strong individualism in Canada has paved the way for an approach to many moral questions – be it abortion, assisted suicide or marriage – in which individual practices govern, rather than principles or ideals. Therefore, many Canadians assert that procreation is no longer a valid objective to marriage because not all married couples have children, and same-sex partners can have children through the new technologies or adoption. For these Canadians, exceptions redefine the purposes of an institution.
- e) The argument is also made that there is little point in trying to save an institution when fewer and fewer people are choosing it and when many do not live up to its ideals. It is as though failure to live up to ideals is reason to abandon them.
- f) It is often claimed that the marriage of same-sex partners will have no impact on traditionally married couples. This reflects a common failure to differentiate between the individual and societal perspective. The legal fact of a number of same-sex marriages in some areas of the country probably does have little impact on married men and women. Exactly what the social impact of such a change would be cannot be measured at this time. We do know, however, that we would no longer have an institution that symbolizes our commitment as a society to our future: our children. Instead, we would have an institution that symbolizes our commitment to the present needs and desires of adults. This reflects the marked individualism of our culture.
- g) Given that same-sex partners in Canada have almost all the social benefits of married couples, it seems to many that we are just fighting over a word. This is again a symptom of the rootlessness of our culture which seems to have so much lost its appreciation for the sense of the history, meaning and symbolism associated with marriage. We appear to have lost the sense of being connected to the generations that have gone before us.
- h) For Canadians, the values of equality, tolerance and respect are extremely important. No one wants to be or appear to be against human rights. By characterizing access to marriage as an issue of human rights, those in favour of extending the definition of marriage have won half the battle. Catholics wonder why the Church appears to be supporting what the courts have described as discrimination.
- i) Canadians have a highly developed sense of fairness, and our increasingly multi-cultural society has made us more sensitive to differences. People are therefore becoming more aware of the variety of adult relationships other than marriage that involve commitment, caring and mutual emotional and financial support – common-law unions, same-sex unions and other adult non-sexual relationships; for example, sisters or brothers who live together. There is an expectation that there will be a response to the needs and aspiration of these groups.
- j) Some have challenged the right of the Church to participate in this debate on the basis that it concerns only civil marriage and that the sacrament of marriage can

continue to be celebrated in accordance with our beliefs. This view is being promoted by those who wish to see a stronger separation between Church and State. There is also an attempt by some to inhibit the Church from speaking out because of the sexual abuse scandals.

- k) When all is said and done, however, surveys show that the Canadian population is quite divided on this matter. There is no doubt that the cultural elites – media, public servants and the courts – support the redefinition of marriage and are doing their utmost to shape public opinion. But they may have miscalculated or disregarded where many people are on this question.

Conclusion

I believe that I have given you a glimpse of the principal challenges faced by the traditional family unit in Canada today. These challenges compromise the very existence of the family and are part of the worrying trend of secularization in Canada. Because the family is the first place in which today's children learn how to become the women and men of tomorrow, it is essential that re-evangelization begin here.

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32nd MEETING OF THE BISHOPS OF THE CHURCH IN AMERICA

**SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS
16-19 February 2004**

Speaking Notes for Archbishop V. James Weisgerber

With reference to no.46 of Ecclesia in America, what is the pastoral response of each of the three regions of America to the challenges faced by the family?

Introduction

The personality of tomorrow's women and men is formed in their family of origin. This is where they learn the fundamental values that will guide their choices later in life, and influence their involvement in society. This is also where they discover that their faith must penetrate all aspects of their daily lives.

For these reasons, and Archbishop O'Brien mentioned it this morning, it seems urgent to devote renewed efforts to the evangelization of the family, life's first school; to multiply pastoral initiatives capable of helping the family discover the greatness and dignity that God himself gave to it.

Allow me to dream for a moment about a true *Domestic Church*. Let's imagine a Christian family whose parents pass down to their children the certainty that God loves them madly and wants them to be His collaborators; that He needs them in order to build a world that is fairer, more loving and more human; that He is calling them to be saints and apostles.

Let us imagine that these young people understand that God is calling them to be co-creators with Him – through their openness to life and in their daily work – and co-redeemers with Him – thanks to their life which is offered up day by day, in joy as in sorrow.

Take a moment to imagine the moral strength and the joy of these parents and their children, conscious of God's constant presence at their sides, a God so human that they can talk to Him at any time, under any circumstances. What power with which to confront life's difficulties! This is the outcome that the Catholic Church in Canada desires from the development of a true *family culture* inspired by God's plan.

As you may now understand, our pastoral work is carried out in a society in which there is an ongoing distancing from our Judeo-Christian roots – a rupture that has thrown us into moral relativism. In certain areas of the country, we can run into the same challenges that the first Christians faced. We need to bring about a radical transformation of the current mentality; to open up a philosophical and anthropological

reflection on human beings, marriage and family.

A positive approach

This morning, Archbishop O'Brien demonstrated how the family, the basic unit of all society, is feeling repercussions from the events and phenomena that are shaping the life of our country. In Canada, as we have seen, there is no shortage of attacks against the family and marriage.

Despite everything, it seems vital that we, as pastors of the Catholic Church in Canada, take an optimistic approach to all questions concerning the family. The Christian message about the family is definitely "good news" for society! It remains for us to convince a population that is generally overstressed and without time to stop and reflect upon what is essential.

We believe that a positive and constructive attitude will have more success in attracting public and government attention to the beauty of the Christian message about families than a negative or judgmental attitude. Our experience confirms this intuition.

Choosing optimism has nothing to do with naivety or unawareness about the demanding realities that today's families face. On the contrary, we are fully aware of current events and on the lookout for all potentially favourable or unfavourable events concerning families.

Unfortunately, for many families, either because of their busy schedules or preoccupations with their own concerns, there appears to be little or no interest in the evolution of the socio-political milieu in which they are living.

This lack of awareness and indifference of many of the baptized faithful is very worrisome and we must hope for the necessary awakening of these life forces in Canadian society. Passiveness and silence should not be options.

The essential role of the laity

We are therefore directing pastoral action on two fronts: that of the pastoral leaders of the Church, and that of the laity. Faced with social challenges, it seems important to not only make gestures and speeches as bishops, but also to encourage members of the Church who are present in all sections of society to accept their responsibility in this whole picture by their concrete actions and timely words, as inspired by their Gospel values.

We are touching upon an urgent pastoral situation, clearly identified by Vatican II nearly four decades ago: the integral formation of the laity. This call is being heard even more loudly in Canada in light of the new evangelization. It is time for us to recall the powerful teachings of Vatican II concerning the role of lay people in the world.

While devoting themselves to the raising of their children, it is urgent that parents develop a greater awareness of their social responsibility and become *salt of the earth* and *light of the world*. It is critical that they become far more aware of the impact that laws adopted by governments and ideologies promoted by lobby groups will have on their own family and on their children's families.

We hope that such awareness – linked to the discovery of their baptismal call to transform the world from their own milieu – will awaken a new desire among married lay people: the desire to act by becoming directly involved in social debates about questions touching on life, marriage and family; the will to reclaim social policies and promote initiatives that benefit families, and oppose ones that threaten their fundamental rights.

This is not an easy task. Members of the Church who choose to resist the secularizing forces that are at work in our very secular society are sooner or later confronted with the hostility of those who have decided that religion should be confined to the private lives of believers. There is even discrimination towards the faithful who try to promote projects and policies inspired by their Gospel values, or who simply want to live their professional lives in coherence with the Christian message.

Promoting parenthood

Reaffirming marriage and parenthood – I would even say the “profession” of being a parent – is an urgent necessity in Canada. It seems necessary to us to link these two realities in our pastoral message, in order to remind future generations that, “according to the plan of God, marriage is the foundation of the wider community of the family, since the very institution of marriage and conjugal love are ordained to the procreation and education of children, in whom they find their crowning”¹.

In our society with its individualistic values, we must help young people to discover the joy of giving life and watching it grow; the joy of forgetting oneself in order to serve the other with love. A very real joy, despite the unavoidable challenges of daily life. We must introduce them to a wholesome version of sexuality, and we must help them understand how important it is for a parent to be present with growing children.

Women and men are both fully equal and very different. Their natural complementarity and mutuality bring specific, yet different gifts to their relationship. We must be clear that the father and the mother are co-responsible for the children's upbringing. In Canada, what we call the “paternity crisis” affects a great number of families. A book by a psychologist entitled *Absent Fathers, Lost Sons* goes into great detail on this subject.

In fact, studies have shown that the ideal family environment for a child to mature emotionally is one in which both the mother and father are present. One cannot replace the other, and it is by the example of both parents and through witnessing the dynamics of their relationship that children learn, bit by bit, about their sexual identity and who

¹ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, no. 14.

they are as individuals.

It doesn't matter whether or not both parents choose to work outside the home, or if one parent decides to devote him or herself to raising the children. What does matter is that we must reassert the value of being present in a child's daily life and upbringing. It is a child's right.

The unpaid work of parenting is of great value. It is fundamental to forming responsible, autonomous, hard-working citizens who are respectful of the sacred nature of life and the dignity of others, compassionate and generous with themselves and their time.

Reasserting the value of parenting is not only the Church's job, but the job of the family, the schools and the State. Everyone has a role to play. For its part, the Catholic Church in Canada certainly intends to continue to play a pastoral role in inviting each of the faithful to become more and more aware of their individual responsibilities.

The awareness campaign must spread into different levels of government. Parents are the first ones responsible for raising their children, on a human as well as a religious level, and it is essential that their rights be respected by government officials who define school programs. The school must play a subsidiary role by supporting parents who wish to transmit their Christian values. However, this is not always the case, and certain schools promote values that are contrary to those in the gospel.

Promoting Marriage

As we reaffirm the value of parenting, we must at the same time reaffirm the value of marriage. Marriage must now be urgently promoted on a human level as well as a religious one.

It also seems essential that the Church continue to offer, with some improvements, marriage preparation that will allow the future spouses to deepen their conjugal, social and religious understanding of marriage. If they choose to ask for the sacrament of marriage, we owe it to them to help them discover its greatness and also its requirements.

Couples shouldn't come to church simply to celebrate their union in a beautiful setting or for tradition's sake. They should come because they want to build their marriage in Christ's presence, certain that, thanks to Him, they can always count on an abundance of love, especially in the more difficult moments of their life together.

There is no doubt that it is also necessary to create more opportunities for married couples to get support; places where solid friendships will be born and where couples can find a listening ear and a material or spiritual boost if they feel the need.

A Preferential Option for the Family

Canadian families must therefore be evangelized in order for them to evangelize in turn. In order to make Christ available to as many of our contemporaries as possible we must find a new language, one that includes witnessing and the use of multimedia.

Because the well-being of a society depends on the well-being of its most basic unit, it is vital that we foster a “preferential option for the family”, particularly in light of the numerous threats to Canadian families.

Already, across the country, individuals, Christian communities, dioceses and Episcopal conferences are devoting important amounts of energy to promoting and defending families. Let me give you the following examples:

The Ontario Bishops have just organized “*Marriage on the Rock*”, a whole week of ecumenical activities and celebrations aimed at helping the faithful understand the greatness of marriage.

Numerous bishops have invited the baptized to contact their Member of Parliament in order to share their opinion about the possible redefinition of marriage to include same-sex partners.

In the National Capital Region, another example shows how much Catholics care about families. In early February, a parish offered an entire day of reflection and sharing about the art of parenting teens.

Finally, I will mention a pastoral project developed by a Montreal mother and directed at families with children under the age of five. *La P'tite Pasto* aims to provide a clear context to awaken the little ones' faith, and it is having astonishing results on the evangelization of whole families – families that are often far from the Church.

The Catholic Organization for Life and Family (COLF)

(This section outlined COLF's mission and action. See <http://www.colf.ca/>).

Family: keystone of the new evangelization

Thirty-nine years after the final meeting of the Second Vatican Council, we feel that the family is the keystone of the new evangelization that is needed in our society, a society which is too often allergic to religious discussion. It is in Christian families that will be born the collaborators Christ is looking for in order to entrust them with the continuation of His mission. It is in families that they will discover the personal vocation to which the Lord is calling them.

If the Catholic family in Canada becomes the school of prayer that it is supposed to be, young people will learn to talk to God and be open to His daily calls. They will become

aware of their own role in the Church and in society. They will also discover coherence; that their faith informs their life and that there is no separation between their faith and their life. Did Vatican II not say that the “split between the faith... and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age”?²

Confronted with a growing lack of priests, the Church in Canada is calling on the very necessary collaboration of numerous lay people to ensure catechism and pastoral services in Christian communities – a role that lay people must play even when there are enough priests available. In this context, however, it seems essential to remind the faithful – and particularly parents raising young children – of the specific role of lay people in the Church.

The Council Fathers clearly affirmed the apostolic mission of laypeople, “in the social milieu, that is, the effort to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws, and structures of the community in which one lives, is so much the duty and responsibility of the laity that it can never be performed properly by others. In this area the laity can exercise the apostolate of like toward like. It is here that they complement the testimony of life with the testimony of the word. It is here where they work or practice their profession or study or reside or spend their leisure time or have their companionship that they are more capable of helping their brethren.”³

It goes without saying that if the young baptized members of the Church grow up aware of their responsibility in the world, they will each act in their chosen field, like yeast in the bread, and we will see a progressive re-christianization of Canadian society – a society that is thirsty for meaning and hope.

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² Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et spes*, no. 43

³ Second Vatican Council, Decree *Apostolicam actuositatem*, no. 13.