

THE HISTORICAL IMPACT OF SAINT JOHN PAUL II ON THE CHURCH'S DOCTRINE OF THE FAMILY¹

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“[T]he Christian family . . . is the place where anthropology and faith are mediated, the crucial space where the human fitness of the Gospel is verified, the terminal where, in capillary form, the mission of the Church is realized.”



From the very beginning of his pontificate, John Paul II's teaching on human love, marriage, and family was remarkable for its broadness of horizon, its originality of approach, and its freshness of emphasis, astounding the public and surprising even the Catholic community, its theologians included. The themes of family and the love between man and woman—which were once

1. Originally titled “The Historical Contribution of St. John Paul II to the Church's Doctrine on the Family,” Msgr. Livio Melina first presented this talk in Paris on October 2, 2011, as part of a public conference organized by the Family Commission of the French Episcopal Conference.

viewed from a chiefly moral perspective—took on a fundamentally anthropological connotation, characterized by strong symbolic significance, becoming at the same time the possible key to a theology coextensive with the whole mystery of Christian revelation.² It is fitting to look back at the Polish pope's Magisterium to demonstrate how fruitful it has been for the theology of the family, which today is more urgently needed than ever to support the Church's pastoral response to the radical challenges posed by the context in which we are called to live.

I think the real key to grasp John Paul II's historical impact on the Church's doctrine of marriage and family is to see the Christian family in the light of evangelization. Speaking off the cuff during a homily for the feast of the Holy Family on December 30, 1988, the pope used bold words to express the intimate connection between the family and the mission of the Church: "The thing that is most fundamental, most important, in the mission of the Church is the spiritual renewal of the family. . . . We must begin from this point, from this mission. Holy Church of God, you cannot carry out your mission in the world except through the family and its mission."

In this essay, I would like to offer a few points to help contemplate the theological foundations of this affirmation by John Paul II, showing that it is not just a matter of occasional emphasis or homiletical exaggeration, but rather a theological and pastoral truth that is decisive for evangelization. First, I will unpack his contribution to the theology of the family, particularly in the 1981 apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio*. In the second part, I will highlight his impact on the field of anthropology in developing a social doctrine, as can be seen especially in his Letter to Families (1994).

1. TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF THE FAMILY

Theological reflection on the family really began only recently, and it is still barely developed. It has often been more practical or occasional than systematic, written more by pastors than by

2. For a discussion of this topic, see Cardinal Angelo Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, trans. Michelle K. Borrás (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

theologians. Even as late as 1997, the theologian Giuseppe Colombo remarked that although some interesting work had come from the 1980 Synod on the Family, systematic treatments of the subject were still scarce, and what few treatments there were relied on rhetoric and clichés.³ In particular, the Second Vatican Council's two major indications on the subject⁴—namely, the analogy with the communion of the Trinity⁵ and the patristic metaphor of the “domestic Church”⁶—seem more often than not to be merely parroted rather than seriously contemplated or organically articulated. Moreover, the “pastoral” perspective inevitably leads us to see the family's impact on evangelization as confined to “doing” rather than “being,” thus furthering what some have regarded (and not without reason) as an excessive and equivocal ecclesialization of the family, with a frequent misuse of the language of ministry.⁷

1.1. *Mystery and analogy*

Given this background, we must point out the use of the word “mystery” when referring to marriage and family, as in the 1988 apostolic letter *Mulieris dignitatem* (6–8) and the Letter to Families

3. Cf. Giuseppe Colombo, *Teologia sacramentaria* (Milan: Glossa, 1997), 147–73. In fact, some impressive, pioneering attempts have been made (Grazioso Ceriani, E. Rolland, Paul Evdokimov, Lionel Gendron, Silvio Botero). More recently, there have been significant works published by theologians connected to the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family (Marc Ouellet, Angelo Scola, Carlo Caffarra, Juan José Pérez-Soba), as well as by others (Friedrich Bechina, Normand Provencher, Franco Giulio Brambilla, Dionigi Tettamanzi, Germano Pattaro, Giorgio Mazzanti, Francesco Pilloni, etc.). One recent important work is Carlo Rocchetta's in-depth study: *Teologia della famiglia. Fondamenti e prospettive* (Bologna: EDB, 2011).

4. Cf. Joseph C. Atkinson, “Family as Domestic Church: Developmental Trajectory, Legitimacy, and Problems of Appropriation,” *Theological Studies* 66, no. 3 (2005): 592–604.

5. An indirect mention of this can be found in the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 24.

6. Cf. *Lumen gentium*, 11; *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 11.

7. This is suggested in Giuseppe Angelini, “La Chiesa e la famiglia,” in *Chiesa e famiglia in Europa*, ed. Adriano Caprioli and Luciano Vaccaro (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1995), 77–138.

(19). This is inspired by St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians: "This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church" (Eph 5:32). If the term indicated something irrational or unknowable, it would only condemn the experience of the Christian family to a further marginalization in the private sphere. For the Fathers of the Church, however, *mysterion* (*sacramentum*) communicates to man that which goes beyond all purely rational capacities: the divine. Far from being a synonym for unknowability or unspeakability, mystery expresses a specific mode of knowing, one that requires transcending the horizon of rationalism and invites us to understand reason as an opening to reality according to all its dimensions.

The recent development of a theology of love has enabled us to speak of the "nuptial mystery": in the fruitful personal union of man and woman, a fundamental truth is manifested and communicated—a truth about that original love that is at the very source of being and that is reflected in every human love, indeed in every form of life and every created being. In biblical revelation, both Old and New, the inexpressible fact of God's love for mankind finds its expressive mode precisely in the language of marriage and the human family. Thus, we are talking about far more than a simple metaphor; it is truly a "profound inner analogy."⁸

If we take seriously this principle of analogy, the sacramentality of marriage is not merely added to the love between man and woman in some external way; rather, it is embedded into its inmost nature. In the sacrament, the gift of creation becomes the grace of redemption, restoring human love's capacity to communicate and express itself. For this reason, it is worthwhile to reflect on an astute observation made by then-Cardinal Ratzinger while commenting on the postsynodal exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, opening up all the historical and existential significance of theological analogy:

8. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Matrimonio e famiglia nel piano di Dio," in *La "Familiaris consortio." Commenti* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1982), 77–88. See also Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter to the Bishops on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World" (Rome, 31 May 2004), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html.

“The destruction of the capacity for human love is the vehicle of atheist indoctrination.”⁹ I will return below to this commentary, which is so valuable for grasping the mission of the family today.

1.2. *The trinitarian foundation and the anthropology of communion*

The teaching of John Paul II moved far ahead along this line of analogy. In *Familiaris consortio* and, even more pronouncedly, in the Letter to Families, he spoke of the family as an image of the Holy Trinity: “The primordial model of the family is to be sought in God himself, in the Trinitarian mystery of his life” (Letter to Families, 6). We should note that this idea can hardly be taken for granted. In fact, there are records of a long tradition opposed to it, one with its origins in no less an authority than St. Augustine. His *De Trinitate* explicitly criticizes it, describing it as unfounded, strange, and even false (“*non probabilis . . . , error, . . . absurda et falsa*”), since the three hypostases that constitute the human family—man, woman, and child—can never bring about that authentic substantial unity among themselves which necessarily exists in God.¹⁰

This objection is overcome through a rigorous theological-anthropological reflection that, using the discoveries of personalism, grasps the human being’s constitutively relational character as part of his being created in the *imago Dei*.¹¹ Already the meditations of Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar on this subject have led theologians to recognize how central the divine “image and likeness” is for dogmatics. The scriptural ground for this is found in contemporary exegesis, which sees the man-woman difference, narrated in the priestly account of Genesis 1:18–24 (the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib), as the key to interpreting Genesis 1:26–27 (man is created in the image of God).

9. Ratzinger, “Matrimonio e famiglia nel piano di Dio,” 82.

10. Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna, Fathers of the Church Patristic Series (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002), bk. 12, chap. 5, no. 5.

11. See Lionel Gendron, *Mystère de la Trinité et symbolique familiale* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1975); Cardinal Marc Ouellet, *Divine Likeness: Toward a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family*, trans. Philip Milligan and Linda M. Cicone (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 20–37.

Not only does this let us understand relationality as a constitutive dimension of the divine image in the human being, but it enables us to see included within this dimension the very difference between man and woman, which is the first and most basic form of man's relationality. This original thesis, laid out by John Paul II in *Mulieris dignitatem* (6), allows us to give a solid biblical and theological foundation to the trinitarian analogy of the family.¹²

The *communio personarum*, then, reveals itself as the common factor between the profound reality of the family and the mystery of the Holy Trinity.¹³ Here, the *analogia* is not arbitrary precisely because it is founded on a prior *catalogia*, that is, on the revelation of the intimate life of God as a communion of persons, which casts a new light on the meaning of the family, and thus allows us to grasp its ultimate destination. Just as the divine persons of the Trinity, following the laws of circumincession, live out the logic of gift, so in the same way the human family is called, analogically, to reflect and incarnate these relationships.

This opens up space for a trinitarian anthropology. In the infinite difference between the divine persons—perfect, subsistent relations—and human persons—who subsist only through the Creator's gift of existence and, on the basis of this fundamental relationship, open themselves to relationships with others—the analogy is grounded in the very *being* of those human persons, who are called to communion. Just as the three divine persons are distinct from one another, living ever *with* one another and *for* one another, so human persons, created in the image of God, are diverse, yet can only live and fulfill themselves in communion and in continual reciprocal relation.¹⁴

12. Cf. Scola, *Nuptial Mystery*, chap. 3.

13. Cf. Ouellet, *Divine Likeness*, 33, citing *Mulieris dignitatem*, 8.

14. For a basic outline of trinitarian anthropology, see Klaus Hemmerle, *Theses Towards a Trinitarian Ontology*, trans. Stephen Churchyard (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2020); Klaus Hemmerle, "Matrimonio e famiglia in una antropologia trinitaria," *Nuova umanità* 6 (1984): 3–31. This idea was repropounded more recently by Pope Benedict XVI in his General Audience on Hugh and Richard of Saint-Victor (Vatican City, 25 November 2009), indicating the Trinity as the foundation and model of communion in human relationships, beginning with the family.

1.3. *The body and the Church*

From this trinitarian foundation, one can also comprehend to some extent the ecclesiological dimension of the Christian family. Here we run into an original trait of the teaching of John Paul II, significant both for its content and for its method. What is specific about the mission of the Christian family, particularly in relation to the larger mission of the Church, consists in the fact that the communion of persons is inherently linked to the dimension of the body. The anthropology of communion is necessarily rooted in the body. The concept of communion is in crisis in today's world, which has rendered marriage and family all but unthinkable. This situation is tied to the idea of a "pure relationship"—purified, that is, of any element that does not depend on individual choice, and established on the understanding that both partners must receive as much as they give, in a balance of credits and debits.¹⁵ This implies a conception of freedom rooted in total autonomy and individualism, as well as a complete plasticity of the body, since it is considered a subpersonal element—there to manipulate at will.¹⁶

At this point, it is crucial to develop a "theology of the body," shaped by John Paul II's catecheses on human love in the divine plan (1979–1984).¹⁷ The methodological and intellectual innovation of these catecheses lies in the way they employ a hermeneutical circularity, drawing out a connection between the original human experiences (original solitude, original unity, original nakedness) and biblical revelation.¹⁸ Indeed, the design of the "beginning," in which God desired to make them "male

15. Cf. Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

16. For an illuminating discussion, see José Granados, DCJM, "The Family, the Body and *Communio* Ecclesiology: the Mission of the Family in the Midst of the Church as *Communio*," *Anthropotes* 23, no. 2 (2007): 57–70.

17. John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books, 2006); Carl Anderson and José Granados, *Called to Love: Approaching John Paul II's Theology of the Body* (New York: Image, 2012); Livio Melina, *Learning to Love: At the School of John Paul II and Benedict XVI*, trans. Joel Wallace (Leominster, UK: Gracewing, 2011).

18. See John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, audience 4.

and female,” is not only revealed in Scripture but imprinted in the body and in the heart of every man and woman as a vocation to love. Christ the Redeemer, at the same time, is the true beginning; in his light, the human truth of experience and the theological truth of creation are made definitively clear.¹⁹

In the pope’s search for the original experience of love, what emerges first of all is an attention to the reality of the body, which he defines as the “primordial sacrament” or the “sacrament of the person,” a visible sign of the invisible reality of the person.²⁰ This approach is not made through empirical science or through metaphysics, but rather with a phenomenological slant, understanding the body through the lens of the subject’s lived experience.²¹

The human body is first and foremost the site of openness to reality, or, better, the site of hospitality toward reality, a reality that provokes and calls out the human being through the *other*, who poses a singular suggestion by virtue of sexual difference. The experience of the body is determined at its very root by the relations between flesh and spirit. The flesh is poised to become the space of communion, and the spirit communicates by means of the flesh. The sexual difference, which defines the body as male or female, is oriented toward a total and definitive gift of self, open to the fruitful transmission of life. The theology of John Paul II thus opens the relationship between man and woman to the symbolic dimension and accounts for its intrinsic fulfillment at the level of a sacrament, without separation or confusion.

The coming of Christ in a human body manifests and fulfills the body’s vocation to communion, redeeming it of the closure and self-infolding caused by sin, and this vocation is realized in the Church, his mystical body. Indeed, the Church is the communion of persons made possible precisely through the gift of Christ in his own body. The Eucharist is the place of articulation between the body of Christ, given on the Cross, and the body of the Church, living in history. This Eucharist is also the

19. See *Veritatis splendor*, 53.

20. See John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, audiences 9, 87.

21. See *ibid.*, audience 18.

source of the communion of persons within the family, by way of the sacrament of matrimony. The sacrament of Christ's unique and unrepeatable gift of self in his real, historical body renders possible the *communio* of the ecclesial body and of the family, the domestic Church.

The great nineteenth-century German theologian Matthias J. Scheeben once said that “marriage is a ‘church in the flesh’”²²—a bold affirmation, but one that sheds light on the design and work of God. If the Church is the body of Christ and is *communio personarum*, manifesting man's likeness to the divine communion of the Holy Trinity, then marriage is the sacrament where the union of the spouses' bodies expresses and realizes this communion of persons, which is the temple where we give spiritual worship to God.

Christian marriage sacramentally embodies at once the pact of love between two baptized people, the bond that flows from it, and the life of love with its manifestation and unfolding in the generation of children, all within the horizon of the spousal mystery of Christ and his Church.²³ For this reason, Scheeben also called marriage a “branch” of the great spousal mystery, wherein Christ's supernatural grace takes effect and bears fruit in one permanent factor of the life of the Church: the family.²⁴

If the whole of conjugal life—not just the moment of the celebration—is a sacramental sign of Christ's love for his bride the Church, then this life carries with it an incredible positivity and beauty. After Pius XI's encyclical *Casti connubii*, theology has looked more and more favorably on Robert Bellarmine's judgment that Christian marriage, in a kind of analogy with the Eucharist, is a “permanent sacrament.”²⁵ By the sacrament's power, the spousal relationship is the vehicle of Christ's salvific action for the spouses and thus, through them, for the whole family built upon this marriage.

22. Quoted in Albert Kriekemans, *Preparazione al matrimonio e alla famiglia* (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 1959), 93.

23. See Scola, *Nuptial Mystery*.

24. Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, trans. Cyril Vollert (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2015), chap. 21.

25. Robert Bellarmine, *De matrimonio*, bk. 1, chap. 6. See Louis Ligier, *Il matrimonio, questioni teologiche e pastorali* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1988), 209–15.

1.4. *Christian community and family community*

We can thus understand the vital relationship between Christian community, generated by baptism and nourished by the Eucharist, and family community, grounded in the sacrament of matrimony. If, as we have seen, the marriage sacrament, in conferring conjugal charity, allows the Church to be built in the flesh, then the family that it engenders is the “domestic Church,” where the relationships between the spouses, between the parents and children, and between their relatives are illuminated by the sacramental gift of grace and oriented toward constructing a community of love, life, and worship of God. Pastoral care for conjugal love also brings forth an attention to every other aspect of family life that, sacramentally, depends on this love.

The analogy between trinitarian *communio* and the human family can only truly be realized through a sacramental encounter with Christ in the Church and through a continual conversion to him. The family is not a salvific reality in itself: it is a human reality, complex and dramatic, marked by fragility, tensions, and contradictions; it too needs to be saved. The family receives its life force from “outside,” that is, from the grace sacramentally conferred by mother Church. The possibility of being effectively a communion of persons wherein divine charity circulates comes to the human family only when it turns in repentance to the Lord, who washes it of every sin and feeds it with his body and blood (cf. Eph 5:25–33).

The missionary dynamism of the Gospel takes up the family, transforming it into a communion of persons and a cell of Christian life, precisely by guiding it beyond itself toward the kingdom, into that new community which is the Church. The Church is born from above through the grace of faith and through the active hearing of the word of God; she herself is a new family that can in no way be reduced to a mere sum of human families, since the principle from which she originates is found above, not in flesh and blood. Some have rightly warned that we must avoid a “domestication of the faith and a familiarization of the Church.”²⁶

26. Franco Giulio Brambilla, *Cinque dialoghi su matrimonio e famiglia* (Milan: Glossa, 2006), 101–38.

2. TOWARD A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF THE SOCIAL SUBJECTIVITY OF THE FAMILY

Using this theology of the family, John Paul II's teaching worked out a new understanding of the family's social subjectivity, as can be most readily seen in his Letter to Families. Here one discerns an intention to "open" the family, to help people understand that the life of the family extends to all of society and, in this way, embraces the full extent of human existence, even becoming a space to encounter the mystery of God. This corrects the idea of a love that is too closed in itself, isolated from all other social relations, a personal "thou–thou" forgetful of the social fabric of which life is made.

2.1. A relational vision of the human person

To illuminate this social dimension, the letter first brings to light a relational vision of the human person. Man cannot be defined as an individual or an isolated subject, capable of knowing the world and of acting in it out of his own power. John Paul II introduces instead the notion of a "genealogy of the person": a person's birth and coming into the world, generated by a father and a mother (Letter to Families, 9). This datum may seem trivial, but in fact it has great anthropological relevance for our society that, as Mounier says, has absolutized the adult age, eliminating all the other stages of life.²⁷ Childhood—the fact of proceeding from another, of having someone else in one's own origin—enters into the definition of the person presented by John Paul II. For this reason, man is not defined through his autonomy, but rather, more basically, through his relationality, which begins with filiation, with dependence. From this point of view, man's being does not start with a decision or with a reflection on himself but with a grateful recognition of an original gift, mediated by his own parents.

Through this "genealogy of the person," the Letter to Families outlines the vocation to love that gives the family its origin. The sincere gift of self exchanged by man and woman in marriage thus proves to be rooted in the gift that they themselves

27. Emmanuel Mounier, *Traité du caractère* (Paris: Seuil, 1947), 164.

are by virtue of their being children, of having been in their turn received into a family. Because of this shared filiation, man and woman are able to discover the good of their reciprocal love, a good that will be the ground of all goods that follow. The communion of the spouses serves as a foundation for the family. In it, the two are, in a sense, recreated; they receive a new life in the common “we.”

This communion between man and woman, then, subsists only in fruitfulness; it is maintained only when it is given over in a new life. Love remains open to fruitfulness or it is not love at all, hence the letter’s emphasis on motherhood and fatherhood. With the birth of a child, John Paul II says, communion becomes community. This is the basis of human civilization, because it lays the foundation for the building of a city—the civilization of love.

2.2. *The common good and the good of communion*

After this discussion, one of the central features of the Letter to Families emerges: a rich and original reflection on the common good. For John Paul II, this is not a good divided among many, where whoever governs is delegated the responsibility. No, what is novel about his vision is that he sees the common good in light of the communion that unites these people with one another. There exists a common good because this communion unites the family members, and the family turns out to be a school for understanding and living out this common good. If the spouses have a common good, it is not merely because they share their own individual goods but rather because the two have been transformed into a new subject, into a communion of persons; everything they possess now belongs to them in a new way, as a common good. They no longer have two separate life projects but one only; they no longer have two separate memories, but they are building one only; the goods that they share and that unite them are founded on the relational good that makes their lives one.²⁸

28. See Pierpaolo Donati and Riccardo Solci, *I beni relazionali. Che cosa sono e quali effetti producono* (Turin: Bollati-Boringhieri, 2011).

The birth of the child is essential to this vision of the common good. Here one sees, once again, the importance that John Paul II attributes to fatherhood and motherhood as the first form in which the family opens beyond itself. Indeed, the good that the child represents for the father and mother is the clearest example of a common good: the good that is born from the union of the two and that now unites them even more closely. Thus they can understand—and this is a task particularly entrusted to the mother—that the true common good of society is the person. The perception of the unique dignity of the person, of the fact that man is irreplaceable and is worth more than whatever practical benefit he gives, is cultivated precisely in the experience of the family.

From this reality we can draw some fundamental principles for social life. Freedom is no longer seen as an exercise of autonomy, which finds itself limited by the presence of others. To the contrary: freedom is *made possible* by the presence of the other, once freedom is understood as being for the sake of gift. Man is free not because he has no ties but rather because he belongs to a family, to a community that welcomes him and to which he can give himself. This freedom does not remain paralyzed in indecision but makes man capable of giving himself away and thereby generating new life. It is a freedom that builds the common city not out of fear of conflict but out of a desire to consolidate the relationships between people.

The letter can therefore insist on speaking of the subjectivity of the family. This means that the family is more than the sum of its parts. The communion that unifies them brings about something new, a synergy that enriches everyone within the common “we.” For this reason, the family cannot be treated as just any group of individuals who live together. Each member is who he is because of the relationships that bind him to the others. This question takes on decisive importance when developing state policies for the family, as is evident in the current sociology of the family.²⁹ The family receives no real aid, in fact, when only the separate members benefit on their own (for example, through subsidies for children or for the elderly), but only when the bonds

29. See, e.g., the extensive work of Pierpaolo Donati, particularly *Perché “la” famiglia? Le risposte della sociologia relazionale* (Siena: Cantagalli, 2008).

that form the family are strengthened, when the members are helped in giving *one another* reciprocal support. A policy that favors the individual at the cost of the relationship tends to nullify this relationship and thus dissolve the subjectivity of the family.

Benedict XVI confirmed the fruitfulness of this approach in his encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, positing that charity is the principle not only of microrelations (those that link friends or family) but of macrorelations (those of the political world and of the economy).³⁰ The Letter to Families anticipated this idea when it identified the family as the root of the experience of the common good, which is the good of the communion of persons. We find an example of this in the field of economics. The present financial system is based on the opposition between gift and interest. The former is free, gratuitous, while the latter seeks some benefit. The market is concerned with the creation of this benefit; the state is concerned with its fair redistribution. The family, however, shows that this contrast is mistaken. In the family, a gift is not at all disinterested. Although it does not go looking for payment or for some kind of material compensation, it nevertheless has an interest: an interest in creating and maintaining a bond, an interest in a response to the gift given. In this way, the experience of the family could even suggest the development of a new economic model.³¹

2.3. *Teaching the truth of love*

In light of this, it is easy to recognize the family's importance for education. The letter rejects every privatization of the family, for the family is part of the structure of the civilization of love. In fact, it is the irreplaceable locus of the person's experience of the common good, as we have described above. Hence the role of family in education: the parents are educators precisely insofar as they are parents. From this point of view, education takes on the unmistakable features of an education into love, which punctuates the stages of a person's life: in childhood, learning to be

30. See *Caritas in veritate*, 1–2.

31. See Livio Melina and Giulio Gallazzi, *La famiglia è ancora un affare?* (Milan: SRI Group, 2010).

loved and thus discovering the world's goodness through the love transmitted by one's parents; in adolescence and youth, learning to understand one's own life in terms of a vocation to love. Education in the family thus lays the groundwork for a preparation toward marriage, where the person forms his own family.

Then another central element appears in the Letter to Families, which resurfaces in various forms: the theme of the truth of love. It is not enough to speak of love. Like all words—and perhaps more than any other word—the term *love* lends itself to misunderstanding. Linguistic counterfeits can be used to manipulate the person, and the letter plainly denounces this abuse of *love*. Today, the word is applied to mere “liquid love,” without any stable form, or to weak love, which cannot sustain a life.³² It is precisely the family that comes to serve the truth of love. Within the family, in the different relationships that it houses, one encounters the reality of this love: its capacity to give unity to life, to support a bond stable enough to endure as long as one lives, to enable a fruitfulness that lets us grow beyond ourselves. Put at the service of the truth of love, the family also proves to have another potential use for society: serving the common good by building up the truth, by overcoming a relativism that leaves human life without any sure, ultimate reference to take as a compass.

In an interview with Vittorio Messori, John Paul II confessed, “It is this vocation to love that naturally allows us to draw close to the young. As a priest I realized this very early. I felt almost an inner call in this direction. It is necessary to prepare young people for marriage, it is necessary *to teach them love*. Love is not something that is learned, and yet there is nothing else as important to learn!”³³ The Christian family is the school where one can hear the vocation to love and learn to love, according to a pattern that describes the whole educational program: *recognizing oneself as a son*, remembering the original gift received, by way of one's parents, from God himself; *being a spouse*, growing the capacity to make a gift of oneself and to receive the other as a

32. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2003).

33. John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, ed. Vittorio Messori (New York: Random House, 1996), 118 (emphasis original).

gift; and finally, *becoming a father or mother*, generously conferring the gift of life and teaching the children to love it.³⁴ If the family is the place where man has the fundamental experiences of birth, growth, opening up to the world and to others, suffering, and death, then the Christian family helps to experience all this as pointing toward the horizon of the vocation to love. In this way, it is the place where anthropology and faith are mediated, the crucial space where the human fitness of the Gospel is verified, the terminal where, in capillary form, the mission of the Church is realized.

CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude with a word on the urgency, particularly now, of drawing on the legacy that John Paul II left for the mission of the family. In the encyclical *Deus caritas est*, Benedict XVI points out that there is a close connection between the question of love and the question of theology. In this, the pope follows an idea of St. Augustine that today is more relevant than ever. Commenting on Psalm 42's question, "They ask me every day, 'Where is your God?,'" this great father of the Church offers a response, almost as if continuing the psalm: you "see the Trinity if you see love."³⁵

The visibility of the intimate mystery of God, one in three, is made possible by a life of charity, actuated in the Church and in the life of the Christian family. Thus authentic love, animated by the charity infused through the Holy Spirit, acquires the meaning of a testimony to God, a testimony that is absolutely urgent, especially in a world like ours, where spiritual blindness to creation as a gateway to the Creator is being spread at a dramatic rate, along with an intellectual blindness to the other proofs of the existence of God—a blindness that corrodes social bonds, abandoning people to the desert of an individualism without brotherhood.

34. For a further discussion, see Livio Melina, *Per una cultura della famiglia: il linguaggio dell'amore* (Venice: Marcianum, 2006), 23–28.

35. Augustine, *The Trinity*, bk. 8, chap. 8, no. 12. See also José Granados, DCJM, "'Vides Trinitatem, si caritatem vides': vía del amor y Espíritu Santo en el 'De Trinitate' de San Agustín," *Revista Augustiniana* 43, no. 130 (2002): 23–62.

The Holy Trinity is eternally going out toward man to communicate to him the divine life that is charity. When one contemplates the mystery of the family in light of the mysteries of the Trinity and the Church, as John Paul II did—when he views it within its specific mission to realize the Church in the flesh of fundamental human relations—he can understand that the Christian family, in its very being, is also forever going out toward every human being, in order to reveal to him, transmit to him, and allow him to experience the essential element of his life: love.—*Translated by Thomas Jacobi.* □

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