

**Address Given by His Excellency
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President of the Holy See's Pontifical Council for the Family
On the Occasion of the 2014 International Day of Families
United Nations Headquarters, New York City
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The Family at the Heart of Human Development

The 20th anniversary of the United Nations International Year of the Family

It is a great honor and a pleasure to address you in this Event being conducted in conjunction with the celebration of 2014 International Day of Families organized by the Division for Social Policy and Development of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to mark the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family, which was established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1994 to raise awareness of the importance of families, promote knowledge of socio-economic and demographic trends affecting families and stimulate efforts to respond to challenges faced by families.

I offer my sincere thanks to His Excellency, the Most Reverend Francis A. Chullikatt, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, for all he has done to make our meeting today possible.

As we read in the *Declaration of the Civil Society on the Occasion of the 20th*

Anniversary of the International Year of the Family, “...as basic and essential building blocks of societies, families have a crucial role in social development, bear the primary responsibility for the nurturing, protection, education and socialization of children, as well as instilling values of citizenship and belonging in the society, and provide material and non-material care and support to its members....”

In that context, I am in agreement with Resolution 2012/10 adopted by ECOSOC that stresses the need “*for undertaking concerted actions to strengthen family-centered policies and programs as part of an integrated, comprehensive approach to development*”; and that invites States, civil society organizations and academic institutions “*to continue providing information on their activities in support of the objectives of and preparations for the twentieth anniversary.*”

While, however, I am in full agreement with the Theme of the International Day of Families, that is, “*Families Matter for the Achievement of Development Goals*,” my message today is that the family not only “matters,” it is rather at the very heart of human development, indispensable and irreplaceable, and at the same time beautiful and welcoming. Truly, it is a precious resource, an incomparable font of life for the affective, spiritual, other-serving and generative aspects of our human existence.

The Catholic Church is an enthusiastic participant in the initiatives that the United Nations undertakes to enable each people, within itself, and all peoples, as a world community, to develop as a family where the members, while maintaining their own individuality, live together in harmony and peace.

The fact that with me today on the dais are representatives of the three great Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, each harking back to one great Patriarch, Father in Faith and Prophet, shows that diversity does not make us foreigners to each other, or worse yet enemies, but rather offers us a chance to develop all the richness and harmony of which the human family is capable.

Moreover, the decision of the United Nations to ask all governments and all Civil Society Organizations to rediscover the central place of the family in society and human development is not only timely, it is inspired. The family – if I may say so from the very beginning of my presentation – is the right road to travel on the journey to human development, so allow me to offer some reflections that have led me to that conclusion.

1) There is nothing quite like the family

First, the family is a *unique social phenomenon* in that it combines in a lasting fashion two kinds of relations characterized by radical differences, one being male and female, and the other being parent and child. Unlike the individualism, with its ideals of autonomy and independence, that rules society today, and unlike procedural and abstract concepts based on a “quantitative” notion of equality and rights, in the family we find both “elemental and formational interdependence” as well as “asymmetrical reciprocity.” That is, we find a difference between members that is qualitative and irreducible but that is protected and accompanied by ties that bind and by reciprocity.

Next, in today’s world, where choices are always and only temporary, the family is the locus of strong relationships that deeply affect, for good or ill, the lives of its members. In the family “otherness” loses its connotation of that instability that it now has in most social milieus, and not just digital ones. Change channel, friends, political party? No problem! When we look only for someone who is like us, we avoid any confrontation with “otherness,” and life becomes one big hall of mirrors, one big echo chamber. In the family, however, the “other” cannot be ignored. The family – male/female and parent/child – is a unique social structure, a very special school of education in “otherness.” In that sense, it is not only a resource, it is as well a flowing spring that empowers social interaction between us and those who are different from us, but without swallowing up our differences. Parenthood itself, understood as openness to the transcendence of the child, in fact implies “otherness” and non-preferential love. The individual child, happily and at least to date, is

not selected. And the child does not select its mother and father.

2) The Family at the Heart of Development

History shows it is the family that has made possible what we commonly call *development*. In cultures where the two formational aspects of the family – “male/female” and “parent/child” – have not been integrated with each other, development has been more difficult. For example, in countries where a man’s responsibility for his children is not a structural element of society, the process of social development is adversely affected, particularly with respect to women and children. On the other hand, think of the role that the family plays in the education of children, in the creation of family economic resources, in the starting of family businesses, and in mutual assistance (particularly intergenerational) among family members. The family, by making possible a delicate but stable community of life among different persons, has been able to foster and protect the sensitive relations between individuals and diverse social realities, thus allowing for the harmonious development of society as a whole.

It was not by chance that families, open to joining with other families, were responsible for the formation of cities as alliances between families, and subsequently for the notion of citizenship, which is based on the recognition of the value of every single individual. In this regard, Cicero, a great thinker in ancient Rome said that “The family is at the beginning of the city and is, as it were, the seed-bed of the republic.” We can summarize this point by saying that without the capacity for self-organization found in the family, the development of society as we know it would scarcely have been possible.

3) Changes in the Configuration of the Family over Time

Over time, the family has organized itself in very diverse ways, but always within its two formational dimensions, “male/female” and “parent/child,” each of which has had its limits and problems. We can see that only over the course of centuries has the family learned to respect individual freedom and create the conditions necessary for a more

effective mutual respect. In a certain way the family has “purified” itself little by little. In particular, family relations have over time been freed from the idea of “possession” and from a facile acceptance of the models of inequality accepted without thinking in certain cultural milieus. It is enough to mention how the relationships between men and women and parents and children have profoundly changed over time, and have allowed families to become more able to progress in their own development.

Nevertheless, these changes, which evidence real human development, are in no way an abrogation of certain characteristics that have always been identified with the family and with respect for the dignity of every individual. The first, as Pope Francis pointed out in his address to the leadership of the United Nations in Rome last May 9, is that human life is sacred and inviolable from conception to its natural ending, and the second is that protection of the family is an essential element of any sustainable economic or social development, particularly as regards societal opposition to an “economy of exclusion,” a “throw-away culture” and a “culture of death.”

On the other hand, we cannot overlook the risk of “familyism,” that is, the inability to think of a larger group and the tendency to favor, even in matters not affecting the family, the members of the family nucleus. This tendency has been the cause of numerous “amoral” abuses, where the good of the smaller family group prevails over that of the larger community. Maintaining intra familial warmth and affection without compromising the public good and the “universalism” necessary in an advanced society has been and still today is, at least in certain areas, a difficult challenge. Proof of this is found in the oscillation between persistent forms of regressive “familyism” on the one hand and the affirmation of a radical individualism on the other that, by destroying the family reverses the progress of humanization, heedless of the long-term consequences of so doing.

4) The family regenerates society

It is true that in recent decades the family is in crisis, and the increase in divorce

rates, the increase in out-of-wedlock births, the multiplication of one-parent families, and the decrease in the number of marriages are only the most evident results of that crisis. Some are even asking whether the moment has come to abolish the family altogether. This crisis is the result of two factors: hyper-individualism and “hyper-technological” culture, both of which are putting great pressure on this (and others) fragile institution, and risk destroying it. The negative consequences of this crisis for society are evident: from demographic anomalies to failed socialization and education, from the abandonment of the elderly to the spread of affective disturbances that lead to violence.

But the crisis that the family is going through now could also be an opportunity for growth. It all depends on us, and we should be decidedly more attentive to the deepest desires of today’s men and women. In fact, in spite of today’s hostile cultural environment, a clear majority of persons want a family at the center of their life, and it would be mistake to think the family can be done away with. If anything, we should foster a renewal of family models, a family more understanding of itself, more respectful of the ties that bind it to its surroundings, more attentive to the quality of its internal relationships, more concerned for, and more able to live in harmony with, other families. We could even say that if on the one hand there are fewer families, on the other hand there is more “family” in a qualitative sense, and for that matter there is no better place than the family for the complete humanization of those born into this world. We have to be much more cautious than we have been about weakening this fundamental unity that is not only the bearing wall of social life but that can also help us avoid the inhuman consequences of a society that has become hyper-individualistic and hyper-technological. The family remains – thanks paradoxically to its defects and limits – the locus the mystery of life and of history. Its vocation is to be the special place where the individual is protected in his individuality and society is protected against fragmentation. It is this unique character that renders it truly a patrimony for all humanity.

5) The Catholic Church and the Synod on the Family

The Catholic Church, for its part, never ceases to support and assist the family. Pope Francis –aware of the indispensability and dynamism of the family – has called a Synod which in two sessions will examine the role of the family today and the challenges it faces. The Pope’s clear intention is to put the family at the center of the Church and of all human reflection. There will be no question of ideological debates but rather of a consideration of the reality of the family today and of its mission in contemporary society. The Synod intends to discuss family questions and take decisions that will empower Catholic families to become active participants in a society-wide ferment that will move all peoples to a culture of solidarity. In this context we might even say that there is a necessary link between “the family” and the “family of peoples”: that is, the prospect of peaceful life together among different peoples - something that is learned in the family and extends to the city, the nation, and the whole family of nations.