INTERVENTO DEL CARDINALE, SEGRETARIO DI STATO, CARDINALE PIETRO PAROLIN, AL "12° CONGRESSO MONDIALE SULLA FAMIGLIA", A CHISINAU (MOLDAVIA)

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"The most beautiful thing God made – so the Bible tells us – was the family. He created man and woman. And he gave them everything. He entrusted the world to them: 'Grow, multiply, cultivate the earth, make it bear fruit, let it grow'." These words, Pope Francis pronounced during a Prayer Vigil of Families in Philadelphia in 2015 (*"Address", 26 September 2015*) invite us to reflect and to meditate on the beauty of the family, and to marvel at the great plan of Creation.

During the Catholic World Meeting of Families, recently celebrated in Dublin, families from all over the world deepened their knowledge of God's plan of Creation and reflected on the challenges facing families in contemporary society. They listened to concrete testimonies about the lives, problems, and joys of families in widely differing situations. The Meeting brought concepts and theory into contact with life and experience. The many viewpoints and testimonies that were presented were particularly helpful, since they pointed, in a very tangible way, to the unique beauty of conjugal love and the family in God's saving plan. In marriage, we see a reflection of that joyful love that is the life of the Blessed Trinity. It is the joy of loving and being loved, the joy of giving and receiving, the joy of mutual self-giving, which is the source of our fulfilment as individuals and as a human family.

The testimonies we heard in Dublin converged on an indisputable point, namely, that relationships within the family need to be firmly grounded in the Gospel of the family if they are to speak effectively to the culture of our day. Families, whose nature is God-given and whose vocation is love, are today – perhaps more than ever before – called to be a beacon of hope, a ray of light in our world. The truth of marriage and the family is enduring. It is also vitally important that it continue to be proclaimed in its integrity, especially in times like our own, when we are conscious of how deeply fragile so many human relationships appear to be.

The family is the first school where we learn the meaning of our common humanity. Despite often overwhelming challenges, which I will consider shortly, many families continue to offer a convincing witness to the beauty of conjugal love and the redemptive power of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Their faithful witness also points beyond themselves to the marriage covenant between God and humanity foreshadowed in the "great mystery" of the union between the Lord and his Church. By dwelling in that love, Christian families become a prophetic sign of hope in today's world. In both traditional and "progressive" cultures, in countries both rich and poor, this witness of families remains vital. Even where they are a small minority, numerous families are generous and responsible in upholding the human and Christian values that serve as a source of wisdom and strength to society as a whole. In several countries we see a growing number of initiatives which are aimed at assisting the family. I think, for example, of associations, both religious and civil, devoted to supporting family life and values. Your own Congress, in which I am honoured to take part, is a privileged and important expression of such support for marriage and the family.

The need to encourage and sustain families is a reality particularly close to the heart of Pope Francis. In his Apostolic Exhortation "*Amoris Laetitia*", the Holy Father meditates on the joy of love experienced by families and the beauty of marriage. Reflecting on the wide range of challenges, often grave, faced by families, he invites all of us to offer them support, guidance and accompaniment (cf. *Nos. 217-258*).

In order for this to happen, it is important, and indeed essential, to understand the concrete realities that "*threaten*" the institution of marriage today.

Speaking in broad terms, the grave challenges facing families today derive from a culture that is individualistic, utilitarian and consumerist. In his Apostolic Exhortation "*Amoris Laetitia*" Pope Francis warns against the "growing danger represented by an extreme individualism which weakens family bonds and ends up considering each member of the family as an isolated unit, leading in some cases to the idea that one's personality is shaped by his or her desires, which are considered absolute" (*No. 33*).

The individualistic culture enjoys enormous prestige in the world of media, finance and politics, but it ultimately relegates intermediate institutions like the family to a non-essential option. We can see this disregard reflected in the notion that Church bodies and organized religion should be limited to, and remain within, the "private sphere". The reasoning goes that if relationships such as the family or those within the Church are not essential to the process of generating profits, what real value can they have for wider society? This tendency to put every kind of relationship on the same level, and to privilege economic gain over other social bonds, directly results in a view of

morality centred exclusively in self-interest. In such a culture, families often require heroic virtue to grow and flourish, especially where social policies increasingly tend to undermine the value of the family and to overlook its real needs.

Faced with this situation, we, as a Church, must reaffirm our confidence in God's plan for the family. It can be said that the Triune God is in some sense a "family" of three persons, from whom, as Saint Paul says, every family in heaven and earth takes its name (*Eph 3:14*). Each human family is called to reflect that life of communion and fruitfulness that is the heart of the Trinity. In every authentic marriage, even outside of the Church, man and woman express the image of God to the extent that they live their love as a mutual gift, even if they are not aware of it (cf. *JOHN PAUL II, "Mulieris Dignitatem", 7; "Gratissimam Sane", 6*). For, from the beginning of creation, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created him" (*Gen 1:27*). The natural institution of marriage, present from the very beginning of creation, was perfected and raised by Christ to the dignity of a sacrament of the New Covenant.

As itself an image of God, the family has unique features that make it the building block of every society. It is a community of love and life where fundamental human differences, between the sexes and across generations, promote mutual growth and development. This is why we must clearly hold and affirm that the family contributes, and will always contribute, to the harmony and development of every society: the structure of a society is dependent on the structure of the family and on the relationships nurtured therein.

Love reveals its true nature and nobility when it is considered in its supreme origin, God, who is love (cf. *1 John 4: 8*). Therefore, the Church sees this primordial human reality in the context of a love that is meant to be reciprocal gift, communion, and a sharing in the very life of God. And this life is "*fruitful*": by its very nature it seeks to be shared for the benefit of all. Pope Francis forcefully reiterated this: "Christian marriage and family life are only seen in all their beauty and attractiveness if they are anchored in the love of God, who created us in his own image, so that we might give him glory as icons of his love and holiness in the world" (*"Address at the Celebration of Familes", 25 August 2018*).

With this in mind, I encourage all the participants at this Congress to see this meeting as an occasion to renew our confidence in God's plan for the family: the love and fruitfulness of family life witness and cooperate in his loving design for the entire human family. This is our hope, this is the strong foundation on which we must move forward.

Finally, I would like to add a further consideration. The family is a bridge to the world around us. While respecting all those who do not share the Christian vision of marriage and family, Christians ought to be courageous and joyful in proclaiming "the Gospel of the Family" as a source of hope for our world. Here I can only repeat the stirring words that Pope Francis addressed to families in Ireland: "As families, you are the hope of the Church and of the world! ... By your witness to the Gospel, you can help God's dream to come true. You can help to draw all God's children closer together, so that they can grow in unity and learn what it is for the entire world to live in peace as one great family" (ibid.). The lived experience of the beauty of the family is the strongest argument we have, because it tends to welcome rather than exclude, show compassion rather than condemn, attract rather than impose. By its very nature, the family inspires us to step out of ourselves, to feel compassion with those who are wounded in spirit and soul because they never had the chance to experience love in a family. This way of witnessing to God's love is a precious and vital contribution to transform an individualistic, utilitarian and consumerist culture into a "culture of encounter", that Pope Francis is calling for. It means, "in a simple way" following the example of Jesus Christ: "not just seeing, but looking; not just hearing, but listening; not just passing people by, but stopping with them; not just saying 'what a shame, poor people!', but allowing yourself to be moved with compassion; and then to draw near, to touch and to say: 'Do not weep' and to give at least a drop of life" (cf. *Morning Meditation in the Chapel of the "Domus Sanctae Marthae", 13. September 2016*).

In conclusion, allow me to assure you of the spiritual closeness of Pope Francis, and to reiterate his hope that families will take up with renewed vigour their vocation to share in the building up of the Church and of society as a whole. Certainly, there are many challenges to be faced. Surely, the task can appear daunting. Yet Christ is our hope and our strength. His victory on the Cross is the definitive victory of love over sin and selfishness. His is the victory of life over death, the victory of goodness over evil. He told us this at the Last Supper: "Do not fear, I have overcome the world" (*Jn 16:33*). May all of us do our part to realize God's plan for marriage and the family. I join you in praying daily for families and I ask Our Lady to strengthen our faith in her Son. May she entrust our families to his love, which overcomes all obstacles and makes all things work together for the good (cf. *Rom 8:28*).

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