

FIFTH CATECHESIS

THE CULTURE OF LIFE

“AND JESUS ADVANCED IN WISDOM AND AGE AND GRACE BEFORE GOD AND MEN” (LK 2:52)

Lord Jesus,
 You who faithfully visit and fulfill with your Presence the Church and the history of men;
 You who in the miraculous Sacrament of your Body and Blood
 render us participants in divine Life and allow us a foretaste of the joy of eternal Life;
 We adore and bless you.
 Prostrated before You, source and lover of Life,
 truly present and alive among us, we beg you.
 Reawaken in us respect for every unborn life,
 make us capable of seeing in the fruit of the maternal womb
 the miraculous work of the Creator,
 open our hearts to generously welcoming every child that comes into life.
 Bless all families, sanctify the union of spouses, render fruitful their love.
 Accompany the choices of legislative assemblies with the light of your Spirit,
 so that peoples and nations may recognize and respect
 the sacred nature of life, of every human life.
 Guide the work of scientists and teachers,
 so that all progress contributes to the integral well-being of the person,
 and no one endures suppression or injustice.
 Give creative charity to administrators and economists,
 so they may realize and promote sufficient conditions
 so that young families can serenely embrace the birth of new children.
 Console the married couples who suffer because they are unable to have children
 and in Your goodness provide for them.
 Teach us all to care for orphaned or abandoned children,
 so they may experience the warmth of your Charity,
 the consolation of your divine Heart.
 Together with Mary, Your Mother,
 the great believer, in whose womb you took on our human nature,
 we wait to receive from You, our Only True Good and Savior,
 the strength to love and serve life,
 in anticipation of living forever in You,
 in communion with the Blessed Trinity. Amen

(Benedict XVI, St. Peter's Basilica, 27 November 2010)

It is very interesting to note the unexpected conclusion of this Gospel story. Given the family dynamics developed in this scene and especially Jesus' answer to the anguished words of his parents filled with fear at the thought of having lost Him, it almost seems that a kind of rupture has

occurred between the members of the Holy Family. This coincides with the moment in which the Son, having come of age, starts to put up defenses and limits parental authority while asserting his autonomy and responsibility for himself. The scene is a very common one in the home of every family. It is the sudden arrival of that famous hour that bursts in when parents are not properly prepared for it. Then, the children suddenly present themselves as grown up and begin to manifest the ability to choose their own way of life. It is so surprising to see that the Family of Nazareth experiences the same dynamics as every other family. Now, if we continue reading the text, we can see that there has been no rupture in the family. Indeed, the opposite effect begins to occur. Luke writes that Jesus, in fact, *“went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them”* (Lk 2:51). It seems to be the typical reaction of those who, unable to pursue their claims for fear of punishment, finally, do what their parents tell them. In reality, Jesus defends himself quite well, and what he says leaves his parents speechless. Remaining under their authority is, therefore, not an inevitable choice; he is not constrained and forced but rather manifests a free and responsible decision, affirming once again his original preference for the Family. The Word of God comes into the world in absolute poverty and destitution, renouncing virtually everything except one thing: His incarnation in a family with a mother and a father. After this incident, Jesus, in fact, remains obedient to His own because *“together they teach the value of reciprocity, of respect for differences and of being able to give and take. If for some inevitable reason one parent should be lacking, it is important to compensate for this loss, for the sake of the child’s healthy growth to maturity”* (AL 172). Luke concludes the story this way: *“Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and grace before God and men”* (Lk 2:52). With a few words, the Gospel succeeds in affirming the best and most fundamental things that can guarantee the growth of a child in his total integrity. It is beautiful to note that the first aspect of growth highlighted is “wisdom.” We should not imagine that this means the progressive enrichment of a wealth of knowledge or skills. The word “wisdom” in Latin, *sapientia*, is etymologically related to the verb *sapere* which means both “to know” and “to taste;” true wisdom, indeed, means tasting the savor or the profound meaning of one’s life. Wisdom is put before “age.” Why? Here, we are looking a true Copernican revolution in the idea about how the human person develops. In general, we consider that the years first pass and, then gradually, over time, one learns to discover the taste and the meaning of life. The Gospel, on the other hand, states a truth that is in contrast with this widespread view: it says that the taste of life’s savor comes first, and the passing of the years then follows. All this means that we must experience every holy day of our existence, starting with the first, enjoying its beauty and depth. This is the only style of life that also makes the fruitfulness of the work of divine grace possible. We often spontaneously ask God to intervene in our human reality, forgetting a famous saying of scholastic philosophy: *“gratia*

supponit naturam.” God’s grace, of course, always precedes any human action, but the effectiveness of this grace is conditioned by man’s docility to God’s action. Finally, the Gospel underlines that Jesus’ growth is not a private matter that affects only His Family; it takes place “before men,” that is to say under the gaze of all those who are part of the community in the country in which He lives. Here again, the Gospel’s message contrasts the often narrow, individualistic way of thinking about what goes on within the family setting. In other words, the gradual growth of a small human being is not something that interests and concerns only his parents. The person’s evolution and maturation touch everyone because every person is always a human asset for the good of all. Moreover, everyone has been asked to give every little growing human being what he or she needs to develop in the best way. We are in the presence of a real hymn of the culture of life, and the family is its original womb. Pope Francis consequently points out that *“the family is the setting in which a new life is not only born but also welcomed as a gift of God. Each new life ‘allows us to appreciate the utterly gratuitous dimension of love, which never ceases to amaze us. It is the beauty of being loved first: children are loved even before they arrive’. Here we see a reflection of the primacy of the love of God, who always takes the initiative, for children ‘are loved before having done anything to deserve it’”* (AL 166). Especially *“expectant mothers need to ask God for the wisdom fully to know their children and to accept them as they are”* (AL 170). Today more than ever we are witnessing the diffusion of a mentality that manipulates, in all and for all, the generative act of the human creature to such an extent that it breaks the original bond with the family. In contemporary mentality, people no longer perceive even the slightest difference between generating a human being through the natural conjugal act and generating a child through artificial insemination or other continuously evolving practices. This common thinking that envelopes us is spreading more and more for just one reason: man has lost the perception that a child is a great gift that comes from Above. Paradigmatic, in this regard, is the affirmation that Sacred Scripture transmits to us in the narrative of the birth of the very first man: *“Adam knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, ‘I have produced a man with the help of the Lord’”* (Gn 4:1). The cause of today’s situation, then, is not simply cultural, moral, social, economic, or anthropological. The main underlying cause of the new global scenario is the loss of the sense of God, and consequently the fact that man himself now feels that he is the ruler, even in the conception of new human life. However, the view of life totally changes only in a faith perspective. Even *“if a child comes into this world in unwanted circumstances, the parents and other members of the family must do everything possible to accept that child as a gift from God and assume the responsibility of accepting him or her with openness and affection. For ‘when speaking of children who come into the world, no sacrifice made by adults will be considered too costly or too great, if it means the*

child never has to feel that he or she is a mistake, or worthless or abandoned to the four winds and the arrogance of man.’ The gift of a new child, entrusted by the Lord to a father and a mother, begins with acceptance, continues with lifelong protection and has as its final goal the joy of eternal life. By serenely contemplating the ultimate fulfillment of each human person, parents will be even more aware of the precious gift entrusted to them” (AL 166). In this regard, “with special gratitude the Church ‘supports families who accept, raise and surround with affection children with various disabilities’” (AL 82): who, more than any other, shows the sacred and absolute value of human life to the whole world. Indeed, “so great is the value of a human life, and so inalienable the right to life of an innocent child growing in the mother’s womb, that no alleged right to one’s own body can justify a decision to terminate that life, which is an end in itself and which can never be considered the ‘property’ of another human being. The family protects human life in all its stages, including its last” (AL 83). Generation is certainly a divine act, and Pope Francis highlights how “each woman shares in ‘the mystery of creation, which is renewed with each birth’” (AL 168). At the same time, however, the act of welcoming a new life is no less sacred. After all, Mary and Joseph attest that their greatness lies in having received, with each one’s singularity, the Word of God, allowing Him to be incarnated in the world. Therefore, while it is true that not everyone generates in the biological sense, it is no less true that everyone is called to welcome life always, everywhere and whatever the circumstances may be. “Motherhood is not a solely biological reality, but is expressed in diverse ways” (AL 178), and especially “those who accept the challenge of adopting and accepting someone unconditionally and gratuitously become channels of God’s love. For he says, ‘Even if your mother forgets you, I will not forget you’ (cf. Is 49:15)” (AL 179). Precisely this welcoming love of the family gives life to those who unfortunately often are denied it. “A married couple who experience the power of love know that this love is called to bind the wounds of the outcast, to foster a culture of encounter and to fight for justice. God has given the family the job of ‘domesticating’ the world and helping each person to see fellow human beings as brothers and sisters” (AL 183). Who more than the family has the power to concretely widen the horizons of the culture of life in the world?, “Christian marriages thus enliven society by their witness of fraternity, their social concern, their outspokenness on behalf of the underprivileged, their luminous faith and their active hope” (AL 184). Today, on the contrary, “narcissism makes people incapable of looking beyond themselves, beyond their own desires and needs. Yet sooner or later, those who use others end up being used themselves, manipulated and discarded by that same mindset. It is also worth noting that breakups often occur among older adults who seek a kind of ‘independence’ and reject the ideal of growing old together, looking after and supporting one another” (AL 39). In contrast, the family alone has in its DNA a relentless force of communion that

should press it to “*provide love and support to teenage mothers, children without parents, single mothers left to raise children, persons with disabilities needing particular affection and closeness, young people struggling with addiction, the unmarried, separated or widowed who are alone, and the elderly and infirm who lack the support of their children. It should also embrace “even those who have made shipwreck of their lives”*” (AL 197). The family is *par excellence* the setting of the culture of life because it is *par excellence* the place of God’s presence. Only when the primordial link between God and life is recognized in every home will the world become more humane and shall every person always be protected in his/her dignity.

In the family

Let us reflect

1. Every human life is a sacred and inviolable gift of God. Today, however, in an increasingly widespread mentality, people want to have a child just to satisfy their desire, at any cost and even easily resorting to ever new techniques developed that allow conception regardless of the natural conjugal act. Every human creature, regardless of how he or she has been conceived, is a gift from God. Given this fact, what is, consequently, the relation between God’s gift of life and the natural conjugal act?
2. In what sense can the family become a promoter of the culture of life only if it recognizes itself as the place *par excellence* of God’s presence?

Let us live

1. Every family has the inherent dynamism for accepting life, whatever its situation may be; but this fact is not always brought to light. What impediments are there and how could its recognition be promoted?
2. When both spouses are able to welcome each other totally, they open their hearts to everyone. What does that mean? Explain it concretely, perhaps by telling about a specific experience.

In church

Let us reflect

1. People often think that the promotion of life is something that concerns the Church, with its doctrinal system, and is not an inalienable right regardless of any religious or moral adherence. What could or should the Church do to affirm the sacred and inviolable right to life, regardless of everything and anyone else?

2. Today, the original and inseparable link between love and life is becoming weaker, to the point of being questioned. What are the errors? What are the difficulties? What suggestions could be made?

Let us live

1. We cannot promote a culture of life without the family and its original welcoming character. What could be done in ministry to set in motion this virtuous circle?
2. How could the Church help families to live the true culture of life?