



**BISDOM
ROTTERDAM**

**Lecture Msgr. Van den Hende
On the Christian family and Catholic social teaching
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1. The family has a Biblical foundation

The family has a Biblical foundation. Sacred Scripture teaches us that marriage and the family are connected to God's purposes, rooted in creation. When in the Gospel the scribes ask Jesus trick questions about marriage, Christ immediately refers to the book of Genesis (Genesis 1:27; 2:24) to God's intentions regarding marriage.

Jesus asks the scribes in response: "Have you not read that in the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?" (Matthew 19:4-5; see also Mark 10:6-9). Jesus makes clear that marriage and matrimony have to do with the order of creation, with God's purposes from the beginning of creation.

In the preparation for marriage, this Biblical foundation of marriage is certainly discussed. In this context, attention has to be paid to the words of the Constitution 'Gaudium et Spes' of the Second Vatican Council, which refer to God's intentions when it comes to marriage in relation to society. I quote: "The intimate partnership of married life and love has been established by the Creator and qualified by His laws, and is rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent. Hence by that human act whereby spouses mutually bestow and accept each other a relationship arises which by divine will and in the eyes of society too is a lasting one. For the good of the spouses and their off-springs as well as of society, the existence of the sacred bond no longer depends on human decisions alone. For, God Himself is the author of matrimony, endowed as it is with various benefits and purposes. All of these have a very decisive bearing on the continuation of the human race, on the personal development and eternal destiny of the individual members of a family, and on the dignity, stability, peace and prosperity of the family itself and of human society as a whole"¹.

Today I will not discuss in detail the Biblical origins of marriage and the family and the Creator's purposes for marriage. In the Church, the family has an undeniable place as a concrete form of community, a community of faith, hope and love. In the Constitution on the Church of the Second Vatican Council - Lumen Gentium - the Christian family is regarded as a domestic church, as *ecclesia domestica* (n. 11)².

2. The family in the Catechism of the Catholic Church

The family is described in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (n. 2205) as a community of persons, as an image of the communion of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

¹ Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern world 'Gaudium et Spes'* (1965) n. 48

² Cf. John Paul II, *Exhortation 'Familiaris Consortio'* (1981) n. 21; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) n. 1655-1657; 2204-2206; Francis, *Exhortation 'Amoris Laetitia'* (2016) n. 86-88. See also K. Koch, *Hauskirche und Grosskirche*, in: K. Koch, *Das Geheimnis des Senfkorns. Grundzüge des theologischen Denkens von Papst Benedikt XVI* (2010) 98-126

Such a Christian family is a community that lives and proclaims the Good News and is missionary.

When it comes to the vocation of the family to live and proclaim the Good News, it is not surprising that the family also has the primary responsibility to practice and propagate Catholic social teaching, recognizing that love is the common thread that runs through the social teaching of the Church³.

Today I have been asked to reflect on the meaning of the general principles of Catholic social teaching in the family, in the belief that the family is the first and vital cell of social life. When we talk about the social teaching of the Church in the context of the family, we can already read it in the leading encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII in 1891. I quote: "the family, the society of man's house – a society very small, one must admit, but none the less a true society, and older than any State"⁴.

3. Principles in Catholic Social Teaching

a. Dignity of the human person

The social teaching of the Catholic Church focuses on the dignity of the human person. The book of Genesis says that God chose to make man in his image and likeness: 'God created man in the image of Himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female created them'⁵. In Psalm 8, man expresses admiration that God values man so highly, i.e. man as the work of his hands and as his image: 'what then is man that you regard him, the son of man that you regard him?'⁶ And in Psalm 139 it is said: 'It is You who formed my core, who wove me together in my mother's womb, and I praise You, knowing that I am of marvelous workmanship, a wonder that You have created. You know my being completely'⁷.

Being created in God's image and likeness expresses that every person has a personal relationship with God. That man is created in God's image is the core of the Christian view of humanity⁸. The fundamental dignity inherent in every human being requires respect and respect for the life of every human being, from the very beginning.

b. Freedom and responsibility

Freedom of the human person is fundamentally part of the dignity of being human. It is not about freedom without borders. 'Man's freedom is shared freedom, freedom in the interplay of freedoms that limit each other and thus support each other'⁹. Right freedom goes hand in hand with responsibility and reciprocity¹⁰. Freedom should not be reduced to merely the right of one individual to freedom. In this sense, freedom is often abused to do one's own way, with the emphasis solely on one's own freedom. Nor does human freedom benefit from the adage: 'live and let live'. Proper freedom is therefore different from indifference, in the sense of: 'what they do is up to them!'.

c. Common good

³ Benedictus XVI, *Encyclical 'Caritas in veritate'* (2009) n. 2

⁴ Leo XIII, *Encyclical 'Rerum Novarum'* (1891) n. 12

⁵ Genesis 1, 27

⁶ Psalm 8, 5

⁷ Psalm 139, 13-14

⁸ Vaticanum II, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) n. 12; J. Hulshof, *De waardigheid van de mens*, in: K. Merks e.a., *Uit op geluk* (1995) 18-29; C. Alting von Geusau, *Catholic doctrine and social teaching*, in: *Human Dignity and the Law in Post-War Europe* (2013) 37-70; J. van den Hende, *Menselijke waardigheid*, in: J. van den Hende, *Bouwen aan een netwerk van liefde* (2019) 49-71

⁹ J. Ratzinger/Benedictus XVI, *Geloof, waarheid en tolerantie. Het Christendom en de wereldreligies* (2008) 199-202; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004) n. 199-200

¹⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 17

The society in which people live together must be organized in such a way that people achieve their full potential and can also contribute and build up their own. The individual person is not essentially opposed to the whole of the community. The common interest (bonum commune) must not conflict with the interest of a family or an individual person¹¹.

d. Solidarity

Man is a relational being, connected to the Creator and to fellow man. It is essential for a person that he or she opens up to others. A person can only become and be himself through other people and only develop his talents with and through other people. There is self-development on both sides. Solidarity requires that people continuously build community, by dedicating themselves as human beings to the common good. Solidarity should therefore not be limited within one group, class or period. Solidarity concerns humanity as such. Solidarity between people builds community between people and makes true living together possible¹².

e. Subsidiarity

An important principle in Catholic social teaching is the principle of subsidiarity. Subsidiarity underlines the vital importance of small and medium-sized communities in society (family, kinship, association, voluntary organization, church). These smaller connections give people the opportunity to serve society as such, i.e. to help build society as a whole together with other people in a small context. Subsidiarity is about the appropriate contribution of all connections and institutions in society (from the family circle to the state and even the international world) in the service of people. It means that tasks and authorities are placed where they can best be fulfilled. For example, creating social conditions such as work, housing, health care, education, etc. is a task of the government, while education lies primarily in the family context¹³.

4. Family and social teaching of the Church

I have briefly described the main principles of the Church's social teaching: human dignity and freedom, common good, solidarity and subsidiarity. It is clear that these principles of Catholic social teaching have their origin in the Gospel or are related to it. The social teaching of the Church is strongly linked to the proclamation of love and hope, of the freedom and redemption of Jesus Christ, especially in the complex reality of human society.

Pope John Paul II emphasized that the Church, with her social teaching, aims at helping humanity on the path of salvation¹⁴. This mission of the Church is also called the evangelization of the social sector, it means building a city of man that is more human because it is in greater conformity with the kingdom of God¹⁵.

In this mission to enrich society and infuse it with the Gospel, the family has a prominent role. The family is a community of persons, the community of life of man and woman and their children is the first and most important school of life, with marriage as its foundation. This life as a family is important for the person and for society. The family is called to be the place where the first formation of the authentic community of persons takes place,

¹¹ *Compendium* (2004) n. 61

¹² *Compendium* n. 192-196

¹³ *Compendium* n. 189, 214

¹⁴ *Centesimus Annus* n. 54 (see also: *Compendium* n. 69)

¹⁵ *Compendium* n. 63

thanks the dynamism of love and the fundamental dimension of human experience for making itself known¹⁶.

How are the principles of Catholic social teaching to be used in the family? I would like to quote Pope John Paul II who described this clearly and prophetically on the occasion of 100 years of the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus* in 1991. I quote:

“The first and fundamental structure for “human ecology” is the family, in which man receives his first formative ideas about truth and goodness, and learns what it means to love and to be loved, and thus what it actually means to be a person. Here we mean the *family founded on marriage*, in which the mutual gift of self by husband and wife creates an environment in which children can be born and develop their potentialities, become aware of their dignity and prepare to face their unique and individual destiny”¹⁷. In other words: “By constructing daily a network of interpersonal relationships, both internal and external, the family is the first and irreplaceable school of social life, and example and stimulus for the broader community relationships marked by respect, justice, dialogue and love”¹⁸.

The special book entitled ‘Docat’, especially for young people concerning the social teaching of the Church, promoted by pope Francis in 2015, states: “In the family, one can learn that prior to the marketplace logic of exchange there is an entirely different kind of give-and-take, a logic of self-giving and acceptance. The fact that individuals also learn in the family the meaning of social responsibility and solidarity likewise benefits society as a whole: someone who proves to be responsible and to practice solidarity ‘in little things’ will be more likely to do so ‘in big things’, too. Where does one learn devotion to the poor, the sick, or the elderly better than in the family? [...] how does a person become sensitive to structural social ills if his own family does not set an example? The family thereby makes an irreplaceable contribution to the humanization of society”¹⁹.

5. Two final remarks

a. In Western European countries we see that society is increasingly divided into groups or bubbles. In today’s society families could be even more the foundation of society if families would reach out to other families. And not just families in the same circumstances, but rich families with poorer families, immigrant families and native families, religious families and families of unbelievers.

b. The life of a family requires the necessary financial efforts. To be a family there is the need of sufficient income. Men and women often do not dare to start a family before they have sufficient means to do so. The State or the government could support citizens in their family life by providing good and affordable housing and other necessary means. Saying this, we are back to the social plea of pope Leo XIII in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, regarding the workers and their families.

¹⁶ *Compendium* n. 221; Franciscus, *Amoris Laetitia* (2016) n. 276

¹⁷ *Centesimus Annus* (1991) n. 39

¹⁸ *Familiaris Consortio* (1981) n. 43 (see also *Compendium* n. 221)

¹⁹ Austrian Bishops’ Conference, *Docat. What to do?* (2016) n. 118-119; Cf. Franciscus, *Amoris Laetitia* (2016) n. 88, 201