

His Excellency Archbishop Raphael Minassian

PASTORAL LETTER



"... Therefore what God has joined together,
let not man separate..." (Mt. 19.6)

FAMILY

Armenian Catholic Ordinariate
Gyumri
2014



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The painting of the cover page, "The Holy Family", viewed by the famous Armenian painter Yuroz. It was presented as a gift to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, in Brescia, 2009, during the Pastoral visit of the Pope to Potticino Sera.

Introduction

2013 was a special year in that it gave all of us the chance to deepen and enrich our Christian lives with love, dedication, and an honest faith. I would like to take this opportunity to extend my deepest thanks to the clergy of our Church: senior and junior archimandrites, archpriests and priests, deacons, nuns, devotees, and all believers whose love and dedication has helped to empower and spread our Christian faith through good work and exemplary lifestyles that profess a deep faith.

In the past year, we have focused on the grace of absolute “Faith,” yearned for the light of the Holy Spirit, prayed, preached, and testified our faith together through our daily lives.

However, upon completion of the year, I wonder whether we have closed the page of our faith or simply begun a new chapter in order that we may become worthy of the bliss that was conveyed to St. Thomas by Jesus after His glorious resurrection, “Because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20.29). Indeed, we will become worthy of this bliss should we continue to embrace our Christian faith.

That said, beloved clergy and faithful, I would like to once again invite you, through this pastoral letter, to live the new year of 2014 with FAMILY in mind. We, together with the Catholic Church, dedicate the year 2014 to the family, which needs to be restructured, revised, and evangelized.

The “Letter to the Families” by Pope John Paul II written in 1994 is worthy of mentioning; that year was also declared as the year of the family by the initiative of the United Nations Organization. In that letter, the Pope welcomes the initiative of the United Nations Organization pointing out that the family is a great focus for the world nations and states and evaluating it is one of the essential issues of modern society. “Church wishes to take part in this initiative, because she herself has been called by Christ with a special mission and sent to “all nations” (Mt 28:19),” states Pope John Paul II and continues, “I wish to speak not to families “in the abstract” but to every particular family in every part of the world, wherever it is located and whatever the diversity and complexity of its culture and history. I wish to address this message to each family, as a living “cell” of the great and universal “family” of mankind.”¹

As in the past, some works dedicated to the family were implemented internationally; this year as well, with God’s will and through this pastoral letter, I wish to share with you the anxieties of the Church, for which an extraordinary Synod of Bishops will convene and study these everyday difficulties and struggles of social life that threaten the family. I wish to share with you the condition of our Diocesan family; personally, as a shepherd, I would like to share with you my thoughts, concerns, and honest wishes for healthy progress and ultimate success of the Armenian family. I would like, together with you, to live a family life abundant in breadth and full of human

¹ Pope’s message in the UN hall on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of “Human Rights”. “Human Rights” were established in 1948 by the United Nations Organization. Unfortunately, later many countries did not remain loyal to their declaration and tried to destroy the Family - its cell by citing the insecurity of the institution of the family.

grace. I would like, together with you, to pray for the restoration of the Armenian family, and together with you, to decipher the mottoes of the Armenian family, to restore and develop moral values that will allow us to reach divine heights together.

Meanwhile, the world works for destroying and terminating the family by creating illusions of freedom, false personal and political explanations, and through the interpretation of immorality as a natural, human phenomenon for defining an individual's freedom. Co-habitation has substituted marriage, abortion is widely encouraged over the preservation of life, homosexuality is deemed as a supreme expression of one's freedom. We of all people, the children of the Armenian nation, survivors of the pious Christian nation, and the eventual faithful of Christ's Holy Church, should try to seriously consider the purest of Christ's concepts, namely the building and preserving of the family. First, let's consider in the biblical sense the miracle of the 6th day of creation, at which time mankind was created: "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen. 1.27). Now, let's deliberate on the story of creation, on the sentence, in which God emphasizes the unique importance of man's creation and his special vocation, afterwards, on the family in our daily life with its social, moral and legal issues, rights and responsibilities.

With this letter, I wish to represent the "Holy Family" of Bethlehem as a model of humble, obedient, tranquil, conjoint and unanimous family that is happy in its simplicity of living the family-centered life that's marked by fulfilling together the familial and social responsibilities required of each person.

We read in the Gospel how Joseph confided in God's will and took Mary to himself after an angel of the Lord had appeared to him in a dream; how Mary confided in and obeyed God's will on the Annunciation Day (Mt. 1.20-25) and both of them went to Bethlehem to fulfill God's plan.

We should interpret the special rights of today's Christian family, the responsibilities and God-given moral values set down by the "Holy Family," and the importance of our willingness to remain loyal to these values. We should try to restore our family if it is shattered and to develop it if it is conscious of its special vocation. We should praise the Armenian family for exemplifying life through Christian faith.

In short, I would like this pastoral letter to contribute first to the formation of individuality, and secondly to the acknowledgement of our own special vocations as Christians living under God's protection in our tightly-knit communities and families.

Exhortation to the clergy

“These things I command you, that you love one another” (John 15.17).

All these theories will be in vain, if we, the clergy, knowing the truth, do not try and confirm it with our preaching and leadership.

Episcopal consecration being the accomplishment of the priesthood, has endowed bishops with certain responsibilities of teaching, and thus sanctifying and leading the Church entrusted unto them (Christian Doctrine of the Catholic Church). However, bishops can assume and accomplish such responsibilities only through the immediate collaboration with the clergy, which through their special vocation have the similar but opposite responsibility of being in communion with the bishops.

Driven by this fervor, I would like to request from you, beloved clergy, sisters and brothers, together with me, to dedicate this year to the service of the Armenian family for the sake of its better and brighter future. Let us try to consolidate our Armenian family with God’s grace, keep it united under the indivisible tie of matrimony, strengthen it with our abundant love, and take all the necessary steps so that the Almighty God may bless, sanctify, and protect the family from harm.

We, the clergy, are considered to be the “salt” of the earth, as with a special clerical vocation, we are called to testify to the Armenian family through our good example and kind exhortations, always having the Holy Gospel as our leader and the Holy Family as our model. In the Catechism of the Holy Catholic Church, the priesthood is deemed as one of the seven sacraments of the

Church, and we are the main members of the Church with our humble service for God's sake. For this reason, I remembered the example of salt given by Jesus. However, we should also take into consideration the continuation of the same sentence, "Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its flavor, how shall it be seasoned?" (Lk. 14.34-35). Let's also recall Christ's words addressed to His disciples, responsibilities given to them and capacities they were granted to preach God's name all over the world.

Today the same responsibilities and abundant graces are entrusted unto us, the clergy, to go on implementing Christ's commandments. This year, you and I are especially requested to pay special attention to the families entrusted unto us. We are demanded to be solicitous to disclose the true vocation of the family that is expressed in marriage through the sacrament of matrimony.

However, for implementing the above-mentioned points we should first remember Christ's commandment of love given to His disciples, which was delivered to us, "This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15.12).

Indeed, having the priestly vocation, we cannot live beyond this commandment and become worthy of the great honor of being called Christ's apostles. We cannot testify to Christ, unless we keep His commandment and live up to it truthfully. We cannot preach love, which is the unique and essential basis of the family life, if we are deprived of it. The commandment of love was so close to Christ's heart that He again and again commanded His apostles saying, "These things I command you, that you love one another" (John 15.17). So, how can we become worthy of the sacred honor of serving Christ if we do not ripen seeds of love in our hearts?

How can we act and devote ourselves to the sanctity and success of the Armenian family if, as clergy, we do not have necessary raw materials for love in our hearts?

Therefore, beloved brothers and sister in Christ, I turn to you with humbleness and kindness, asking to totally dedicate the year 2014 to looking over your own conscience and to honestly decide to be renovated, asking for the blessing and grace of God the Father and our Savior Jesus Christ and the grace-grantor Holy Spirit, enriched with and radiating divine love for the sake of the service to the children of the Armenian nation.

Therefore, we should bear Jesus' model as a shepherd. We should remember that He gave us not only titles, abundant graces and rewards, but also responsibilities. We should remember the fragment, in which He says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep... I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own" (John 10.11-14).

Hence, our sacred mission is to go after our sheep, to gather, protect and lead them to blissful spiritual meadows. We, as Christ's followers, should testify to the living and life-giving Light — Christ, who says, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life" (John 8.12).

Special vocation of the family

“So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Gen. 1.27)

We have mentioned in the Introduction that for understanding the word “Family” and its essence we should necessarily turn to the Bible.

Therefore, let me mention in the first point what the Holy Bible states in the Old Testament, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness...” (Gen. 1.26)

Naturally, these words of God are the expression of infinite divine love, wishing to create man and place him above all the creatures of creation. Undoubtedly, the above-mentioned biblical phrase is full of special description and capacity, especially, when man became the inhabitant of the heavenly paradise, being close to God, being His friend and lord of all the divine creation, armed with unique authority to have domain over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creature that creeps the earth. What an unspeakable and unimaginable honor and exceptional vocation!

In the second point we notice the focus of the same book of Genesis on the character and vocation of the human creation. We see how God the Father bestows the man with the great honor to be “according to His likeness”, which is expressed in the following words, “So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him...” (Gen. 1.27). This is the only place, where the nature and special vocation of a creature is confirmed

by a double mentioning. As to the other creatures, we read the following in the book of Genesis, “And God created and saw that it was good, blessed it and went on creating” (cf. Gen. 1, “The History of Creation”). God showed a special attitude only in the case of creating the man by bestowing him with a special grace, as he was created according to His likeness, “Let Us make man in Our image...” (Gen. 1.26). Indeed, these words confirm the divine character and consequently, the vocation of the man, making him differ from the other creatures.

The second point wonderfully rejects whispers existing in today’s human society in the course of centuries that aim at destroying human nature and social structure. In the book of Genesis, at the end of the sentence describing man’s creation, human nature is revealed, “... male and female He created them” (Gen. 1.27). Yes, male and female, and not individuals alike in sex. Today, invisible forces try to change the perception of the image of human nature accepting homosexuality as a natural phenomenon and part of human nature by distorting laws of nature.

After these three explanations, we can add more, however, let us content ourselves with God’s words pronouncement at the end of creation and take them as a head stone in the structure of the family. It is shown in the following words, “...Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it...” (Gen. 1.28). The man, crowned with God’s blessings, received a responsibility to have a family, to multiply and subdue the earth entrusted to him. This phrase of God suffices to originate and establish the institution of the family. Therefore, the first family was established through Adam and Eve, who were supposed to multiply in their union, fill

the earth and subdue it. Truly, they became one flesh: as it is stated in the New Testament by Evangelist Matthew, when the Pharisees went up to Christ and asked wishing to test Him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?”, Jesus replied them with three affirmations, “Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ ... So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mt. 19.3-6). Therefore, Jesus not only confirmed what was defined by the creation, but also added one more grace: to live the matrimonial life with new dignity in the holy sacrament of matrimony, which is portrayed by the love existing between Christ - the Groom, and Church - the Bride. As St. Paul describes in his letter addressed to the Ephesians, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her” (Eph. 5.25). O, what a miracle! Christ, with one sentence, reaffirms the aims of the creation, the sanctity of the family, and the indissolubility of divine law.

Thus, Christ’s words became a double affirmation and warning for all the individuals, groups, organizations and countries: the creation is the inaccessible reality of two sexes, which aims at continuing the plan of God the Father, “...what God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mk. 10.9). Therefore, family is unshakably established as a magnificent divine sacrament, the responsibility of which is to keep the family away from social and moral vices.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church in its turn requests to preserve the holy sacrament of matrimony that is established between two spouses, male and female, because it is based on divine laws for the sake of the couple’s benefit and welfare, procreation

and upbringing of the offspring by implementing God's will, i.e. the indissoluble sacrament of matrimony.¹

God created male and female and called them to live in the sacrament of matrimony by loving one another. As you have noticed in this letter, God's plan is destined for both spouses, because God, being a source of love, created humans in love and invited them to love, therefore, "they are no longer two but one flesh" (Mt. 19.6) and "God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1.28).

Undoubtedly, the family and its important role in human life are inevitable and undeniable.

The above-mentioned explanation by the Church doctrine aims at none other than reminding to secure tranquility and happiness for the married couple in a healthy atmosphere, reminding of the plan of educating children and preparing a new generation that in the course of centuries shall perpetuate the creation of the human race according to His likeness.

Thus, the family becomes a natural environment, the cradle for the formation of virtues, abstinence, chastity and fraternal love of children and youth. "Family is a local church, moral school of spiritual maturity², where parents and children try to live up to the above-mentioned values. Humans are born in the family and are indebted to it for their existence, therefore, it is impossible to separate or alienate them from their roots. However, when humans are born outside the family, dissatisfaction and pains emerge in their hearts, which are predominant during their entire life", states

1 (COMPENDIUMDU CATÉCHISMEDE L'ÉGLISE CATHOLIQUE CHAPITRE III LES SACRAMENTS AU SERVICE DE LA COMMUNION ET DE LA MISSION 1659-1660)

2 (Enchiridion della Famiglia, p. 709, 1974)

Blessed Pope John Paul II. In that case, the Church draws near them and spreads love in their lives³.

Responsibilities and rights are jointly distributed among the family members. Parents, in compliance with their parental status and special vocation, have responsibility to control their children's healthy psychological environment, natural growth and maturity. The offspring, who grow and mature in exemplary Christian families, live more easily and practice moral values and divine love imitating the kind example of their parents⁴.

Love is the only fire that unites the family in one hearth, making them mature, steady and simple, conveys strength to them to face difficulties of life, to overcome temptations and testify truly to the Christian identity and affiliation.

After a brief biblical study, let us pass to the second sphere to consider extensively the concept and notion of the family in its legal and social definitions.

Indeed, God created the family, loved, sanctified and chose it as the cradle for His Only Begotten Son's birth. In the New Testament, it is a historical reality that Christ reaffirmed the family as a miracle of divine creation. It is also a fact that on the cross, Jesus declared His Mother as the Mother of all mankind in the person of Apostle St. John, "Woman, behold your son!" (John 19.26) and through the same Apostle John, the divine family was adopted by all of humanity, "Behold your mother!" (John 19.27), said Christ.

However, besides these valuable phenomena, it is necessary

3 (Gratissimam sane, Lettera alle famiglie Enchiridion della famiglia, p. 284, n.898)

4 (Familiaris Consortio, 18, 63-64: n. 532ss; EV 7/1582s. 1716s.)

to appreciate the precious works done by the human society in the course of centuries: formulations and ideas on the “Family”, which developed and reached us in their various interpretations. We can find numerous examples in thoughts and writings of great people of all times. “A family is a miniature version of the society, and the security of the entire human society depends on its integrity,” states American pedagogue Felix Adler (1851-1933). Consequently, it is important for us to understand who we are in society and the rights and responsibilities that role entails.

In European culture, the concept of family is explained in the following way, “group of individuals united with legal rules as marriage, and blood relationships - as genealogy. However, many anthropologists have different opinions. They state that “besides blood relationships, there are societies with different cultures and understanding, who live the whole family reality beyond the blood relationships.” Let’s put all these declarations to one side and focus on the 16th article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

1. Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.

2. Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.

3. The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

I do not want to reflect on constitutions of various countries and states, as the 16th article of Human Rights is adopted by the majority of world authorities.

I would rather focus on the image of the family in today's society and particularly, on the Armenian family.

From the social viewpoint, the characteristic of the family and its primary role is to procreate and proliferate so that societies may form. For this reason, society and family are in close and permanent relations, and by enduring changes in the course of centuries, they meet the demands of the societies that make up a culture.

The family is a predominant element in the society and culture with an absolute authority to make decisions in having legal and household demands. These advantages work for the benefit of children's safe future.

According to recent scientific studies by experts of social sciences, the family represents the couples or spouses that have special social relations with children. They have an important role in society and are of great value for the public good as future generations of people. Based on the above-mentioned and much more data, the family managed to face malevolent powers in the course of centuries and remained loyal to vital slogans by overcoming them.

In this regard, some researchers have been greatly influenced by the psychology and social status of the family, for example, German philosopher Friedrich Hegel (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831)), who wrote in his studies on the family, "The first human classification fight takes place in matrimonial life", and this idea was included in discussions of the classicists. Undoubtedly, we can accept this idea and agree with philosopher Friedrich Hegel, if we set conditional disparity between two spouses. The author's study will also do justice, if we bereave

human beings of their spiritual and moral values and alienate them from their Creator that created equally the male and female. Indeed, when humans forget their identity, vocation of life, affiliation, then fights, misunderstandings, and divisions will become a natural phenomenon in such a society. Thus, the above-mentioned author would be right to consider the family as the first field for the classification fight. There are other authors and among them Peter Laslett, who has a study on the family, in which he divides the family into five classifications.

The most common family.

Nuclear family, i.e. the family consisting of one conjugal unit.

Extended family, i.e. the family that through the marriage of that one unit has family relations with another, which is called patriarchal family.

Co-residential family, i.e. the family consisting of more than one conjugal relations.

Concubinage that we call “unwed mother”.

Besides these studies, three more divisions with their subdivisions are introduced by social scientists. First, it is homosexuality and the response to it is found in the book of Genesis, in which God, with a clear formulation, established the family through two opposite sexes. And we have already reflected on it. As we do not share this concept, there is no necessity to focus on its study.

In today’s society, the concept and definition of the family are totally distorted. In European and American societies, the patriarchal purity is lost and destroyed. There are evil powers that try to generalize human life with the globalism psychology, in order to disjoint and weaken the healthy mentality of the

family. This reminds me of acquisitions in Africa, where the white people exchanged glittering glass for the diamond. The natives were ignorant, did not realize the real value of diamonds and willingly exchanged them for glittering glass. It took centuries to condemn this injustice. Today this happens not between the whites and blacks, but in everyday human life. For this reason, our attitude to the family remains traditional, loyal to the family life adopted and cherished by our nation in the course of centuries. We find the formulation of the family in national, church and state constitutions, which correspond to the formulation and character given by the Bible, corresponds to Christ's teachings, on which we have already reflected. Our Armenian family, in spite of various inner problems, believes in the sacred and divine institution of family. I would remiss if I did not mention the second assembly of Ashtishat held in 356, which was convened in the reign of King Arshak II (350-368), upon the initiative of Catholicos St. Nerses I the Parthian (353-373). According to the assembly decisions, orphanages, hospitals, almshouses and poor houses were opened, which shows that from the very beginning, our clergy and kings were greatly caring towards the Armenian family. Therefore, it is natural that today we are devoted to our families and concerned with their anxieties for living it up to the fullest.

Family crises

“... Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mt. 19.3-6)

Recently, a survey has been published, which points out the great degradation of values (from 40% to 5%) of the family or the institution of family from 1970 to 2000. Precisely, the family faces numerous issues in internal and external relations, in parent-children relations, in relations between the spouses, in relations among the members of the extended family and relatives, including even personal, individual and psychological issues, which negatively affect or otherwise influence the instability of the family. Irresponsibility, selfishness, arrogance, which are oftentimes the result of parental unawareness or negligence, serve as a heavy burden for the peaceful life of the family. Besides mutual relations existing among human beings, there are also financial conditions, ups and downs of wealth and poverty, which in their turn overload the family with negativity and lead to hatred and divisions. It would surprise us if there were no problems and clashes in the family. On the contrary, these issues are signs of life if they are faced and overcome by a good and spiritual disposition. Indeed, we are all concerned with these tough issues on a daily basis, all around the world, such that striving to secure a balanced and natural growth through times of hardship are central to living with grace. As such, it is surely indispensable to awaken a moral and spiritual value within the family that will greatly improve the disposition of all members throughout the difficult time.

Love

“This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15.12)

Indisputably, the prerequisite for the formation of a healthy family is Love. We are born out of love; couples get married in love, live and give birth to children in love. Unfortunately, the current reality shows that love is abandoned; love is exploited, underestimated and tattered for personal benefits. Love has been converted into an instrument of aberration for committing immoral deeds.

The family is based on love and not on the above-mentioned negative ideology that’s perpetuated in popular culture and media. The family is an institution of true love. And if love reduces in or totally is absent from this institution, how can the family be nourished? The main reason of the family problems is the absence of love. Unfortunately, the formulation of love is imperfect in our Christian society and often receives different interpretations even within the framework of the family. The essence of love is perverted; its sublimity is lost and commercialized. For this reason, our duty is to purify, rectify, and restore it in its true sense. What is love that is so essential for the unity and success of the family?

For most couples, love is the passing of the path of life together in unanimity; is the mutual respect towards one another. For others, love is the voluntary subordination of one person toward the other, and it is not a secret that in the Armenian society, more frequently the wife is subordinate to her husband. Some people consider love as an inexplicable condition and relate it to a feeling or emotional expression, thus they consider themselves unable to describe it.

All of this shows that love is a victim of poor comprehension. It needs some help to recognize its true sense and understand the exact vocation of the family under its light. Therefore, true love is found in neither of the above-mentioned descriptions and not even in relations of love. The essence and accomplishment of love is in sacrifice: unconditional, perfect, total, immeasurable sacrifice that is achieved in a permanent disposition. This description of



love is reflected in Christ's image: what a love Christ gave to us for our salvation! Apostle St. Paul states in his letter addressed to the Philippians, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God... made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and ... He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2.5-9). This is the true love required from the spouses. This is the secret and the key that ensures happiness for the family, its healthy and successful progression. Sacrifice and total devotion to one another – this is the true love that we aspire to restore in our Armenian families. To understanding love thoroughly, I invite you to read chapter 13 of the first letter of St. Paul addressed to the Corinthians entitled, "The Gift of Love."

Infidelity

“There is neither ... male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3.28)

The second pain of conjugal and family life is considered to be infidelity. Indeed, infidelity is one of the main problems of the Armenian family, as well as the most painful one. All of us speak about infidelity as a usual phenomenon that has become part of many family lives. In our society, infidelity is mainly ascribed to women's and men's infidelity, and generally accepted or considered as a natural phenomenon, even a basic human right. Therefore, the Armenian society has two measurements. “So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Gen. 1.27) and blessed and gave them responsibilities without any distinction between the two creatures, “So then, they are no longer two but one flesh” (Mt. 19.3-6), states Christ. And Apostle St. Paul says, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek... there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3.27-29). Therefore, the transgression of infidelity is equally condemned both in the case of the husband and in the case of the wife.

However, I do not aim at condemning or judging, but rather drawing attention to errors that have become natural in our society. Unfortunately, the only victims of these errors are our children. Speaking of infidelity, we, driven by love, seek for means to restore the sublimity and purity of our Armenian families. How can we find the sources of infidelity and cure them? Long years of work

in the Church court and the great experience of priestly mission have made me a witness of the family life of numerous couples and a partaker in reconciliation processes of families and restoration of conjugal life. Therefore, I can include the enemies of marriage in five points, which lead the family to separation, divorce and infidelity.

Forced marriage, arranged between one or two sides, sometimes leads to tragedies. Marriages based on family wealth or made in anticipation of some positions can also kill the couples' dreams and future.

Undue interferences of the spouses' parents, which are consequences of uncontrolled parental love, create disturbances in the newly established family and agitate the couple's mutual love and harmony.

The spouses' greediness and selfishness, which is a very troublesome situation. Greediness is a disease, which creates troubles in couples and their families, as a greedy person disregards conjugal and parental responsibilities. And selfishness is a sub-conscious complex, which makes people unable to love truly and fully devote themselves to family responsibilities.

Spouses' inconsiderate bonds, friendly, business or social relations, which create aloofness, distance, indifference towards each other, that may cause betrayal and ultimate divorce.

Ungrounded and imaginable ideals, for example, spouses' undue quarrels concerning their children's education, especially if it is a mixed marriage.

These five points stamp on and put into oblivion the most sacred moment of the conjugal couple – the vow of fidelity towards

one another and towards God that the couple has made in front of the altar. These five points and their outcomes agitate the family atmosphere and disturb the natural course of life. However, the worst part is that it deteriorates children's psychology and lays the foundation for future problems to be faced by the youngsters. Oftentimes, we are negligent in the way we raise our children, because we are incapable of determining their future, one must always be wary of creating vengeful characters within their vulnerable souls from a very young age. This is especially true of children whose parents' marriage fails and gives way to divorce or separation at a time when they are old enough to comprehend the occurrence, but too young to reason through it.

Divorce¹

“...Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mt. 19.6)

On previous pages I have commented on divorce as a result of matrimonial infidelity. However, in reality, divorce happens not only on account of the above-mentioned vices, but even more frequently, due to individual egoism. Besides being victims of poor communication, they are also victims of indifference of states and governments toward families. This indifference heavily influences the stability of the family and destroys matrimonial relations of even those pious couples, who were willingly united through the indivisible sacrament of matrimony.

Divorce also happens, when spouses consider their whims, wills and wishes to be superior to the detriment of the family. Devotion, sacrifice and true love towards the family go missing. These types of men and women are not concerned with the disasters that may ultimately befall the children of the family after a divorce, of the unfortunate psychological problems that may threaten them throughout their lives. They are purely egotistical in that they are only concerned for their own personal mental and emotional well-being, and not of their children's. However, the Church, in spite of all this, considers the increased number of divorces in some countries and especially in our Armenian society as a social “hurting wound,”² and for this reason, continues her Motherly

1 In my pastoral letter I have used the word “divorce” and not “annulment of marriage” to explain the significance of separation. Annulment of marriage is only studied and carried out in Church courts, while divorce is not accepted by the Church. In case of divorce, second marriage is not allowed, while in some cases of the annulment of marriage the Church permits it.

2 Cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n.47

care towards the family in a special manner. Divorce is the pain of mankind, especially of those who see the fall of their noble matrimonial dreams. The Church is careful towards her children and follows St. Paul's words, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12.15).



Poverty

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt.5.3).”

Certainly, poverty, to say the least, is an unpleasant condition in human life, especially when the family experiences financial poverty. Let it not be a self-deception, if we take into consideration the consoling words on poverty mentioned numerous times in the Gospel, especially in the “Beatitudes”, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt.5.3). Indeed, poverty is not pleasant, however, those who endure it with patience and love, will deserve the blessedness promised by Christ. It creates discord in the family, especially when the children’s future is not secured. In society, a poor person is converted to a representative of an inferior and insignificant class, regardless of his/her spiritual and educational competence. Moral values become senseless and unimportant for changing the lives of the poor. In one word, a poor person and a poor family remain abandoned and ignored. It is terrific that the poor are ignored by even some clergymen. Poverty is a cruel phenomenon, but the attitude of the society towards the poor is crueler.

In consideration of the above-mentioned, if there is a true love with a powerful spirit between spouses and children, financial shortage destroys neither marriage nor the family. On the contrary, it becomes a source of aspiration to the unity and collaboration of the family, which leads to achievements of success in their lives.

Abortion

“You shall not murder” (Ex. 20.13)

Abortion is a tragic infanticide, which makes us face the horrible murder of innocent and unprotected human beings. It sins against human rights; not mentioning how great a sin it is against God. I do not want to mention that the main victim is the mother that has committed abortion and how much she will suffer in her life. I do not want to remind that the main and principal aim of marriage is procreation. Girls get married wanting to become mothers. How is it possible to explain or justify such a crime? How is it possible to understand the mother’s psychology and incentives that push her to kill voluntarily her unprotected child? Even unreasonable animals do not commit such crimes. What a betrayal towards the child, the family, the self, and what a betrayal towards the right of human life and towards life-giving God!

When we were children, we used to read a story dedicated to a mother’s heart, in which the child, deceived by the enemy and dazzled by lavish promises, killed his mother and took her heart to the enemy. Hurrying, the child fell down, and the mother’s heart screamed anxiously, “My son, be careful not to get hurt”.

Today, most mothers’ hearts would behave similarly. Unlike pure mothers, who raised and educated generations of children in silence, bearing their crosses, there are mothers, and unfortunately they are numerous of them, who commit voluntary and pre-planned murder, in the form of abortion, against unprotected infants, who found safety in their wombs. What a cruel deed! They shed some tears and then return to the normal course of their life, apathetic and

indifferent, as if nothing has happened. Today, women do not limit themselves to one abortion; they do it again and again, converting their bodies to a slaughter-house. It is a terrible disaster. While making this analysis, I think about mothers of our nation, whom I would like to hug and tell, “Love and do not murder”. I would like to meet young Armenian mothers and tell them with love that there are world powers, supreme powers, and even mighty atomic powers, which are, however, nothing against the power of a believing family, faithful to God. And Armenian girls, your power is in motherhood and family. For this reason, I do not want to go any further and single out those countries and states that actively work to declare abortion as a human right. I do not want to speak of them, who try to destroy the family, the supreme and central power of the mankind. The Church is aware of the existence of these demonic powers, however, remains intact and firm in her divine sources, and based on them, continues to struggle for the respect and preservation of human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed on December 10, 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization is worth mentioning. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of its proclamation, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights evaluated “the family as the natural and fundamental group unit of society”.

Exhortation to parents

“Whoever loves instruction loves knowledge” (Prov.12.1)

If the Universal Declaration of Human Rights regards the family as the fundamental group unit of society, if scientists also regard the family as the first school of life knowledge, if the Church calls it a domestic church, if experts of social sciences deem the family as the best cradle for the natural growth of children, if even psychologists consider the family to be an ideal place for overcoming complexes and psychological anxieties, why should we, Christian Armenians, abandon our sacred traditions and forget God’s commandments and requests? Why should we not keep holy God’s day and live up to His holy commandments, and instead, imitate negative and immoral habits of foreigners?

In foreign countries, our children, mixed with foreign cultures, are often infected with alien habits, and upon return to their motherland, they are alienated from their environment and live in foreign habits and mentality, which does not correspond to their true identity and national culture. For this reason, I heartily supplicate you, fathers, who have responsibility to protect your families from every danger. Man, being the head of the family and his wife, has a responsibility to love, correct, educate, and lead his family to the life-giving source of light. Fathers, you have a responsibility in front of God and society, to educate righteous and stable individuals with healthy soul and body, with a powerful will and firm Christian morality.

And you, mothers, have a heavier and more crucial obligation. Beginning with pregnancy and delivery, childhood, throughout

youth and adult age, you are the ones, who shape and form your children. The children nourished by you take from you love and caress, education and science, the spiritual and the moral. And they, in their turn, will convey the same unto subsequent generations.

“People, if you want to have educated children, you should prepare educated mothers... A person is first educated in the family and then at school. Educated mothers prepare their children from the cradle.” This idea belongs to a famous Armenian writer, Raffi. Beloved mothers, your role is not limited to being barricades to difficulties, you should rather convert your life to a sacred mission for the sake of your children. As the Holy Virgin Mary took care of God’s Son, likewise you, beloved Armenian mothers, with your sacrifice and devotion, give life, joy and safety to your families and children.

Everyone, be them kings or peasants, young or old, bows down in front of mothers. All the Armenian poets have praised and venerated mothers in their verses. Our work will not suffice to quote the works of all of them. Therefore, let me quote one of the most heartwarming poems dedicated to mothers.¹

My Mother

My mother is our aspirations indeed, She is our home chapel
indeed. My mother is our cradle
Our family backbone is my mother. My mother is like a father as
well as a mother, She is our sole mistress.
My mother is the homeless of our home, Our eagle nest is our
mother. Our family maid is my mother,

¹ Hovhannes Shiraz “My Mother”.

As well as the queen of our family. My mother is insoluble,
Yet she is our remedy and the solution.
My mother is our family spring, And also our thirsty sister.
My mother is our home sleepless person,
And yet she is our sweet sleep indeed. My mother is our bread
Our family Goddess is my mother indeed.²

I do not want to judge or condemn anyone for errors and sins committed in the course of life: we all are sinful and we all need God's blessings and atonement for our sins. However, I want to see in you a desire of renewal, courage, and firm will to rush into the infinity of heaven. I have seen how jays train their wings on the ground before flying to the immeasurable spaces of heaven with their parents. And we should imitate the jays by training our spiritual wings to rush through heavenly paths of sanctity together with our family members, who gave us life and morality and thanks to whom we have gathered spiritual resources during our life.

The day, you have chosen the family life, you have responded positively to God, received your special parental vocation, which is the reward of God and a great responsibility. For this reason, the book of Proverbs exhorts children,

“My son, keep your father's command, and do not forsake the law of your mother. Bind them continually upon your heart; Tie them around your neck” (Prov. 6.20-21). This is the great vocation and honor of parental responsibility.

As St. Paul exhorts fathers in his letter addressed to the Ephesians, “And you, fathers, provoke not your children to anger,

² Translated from Armenian by Daniel Janoyan, Glendale, April 2, 2008.

but bring them up in the discipline and correction of the Lord” (Eph. 6.4), I also want to remind you the same exhortation: fatherhood is not in authority, rage and strictness and in giving unbalanced orders. Fatherhood is a sacrifice, indulgence and devotion, as St. Paul states to husbands, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her” (Eph. 5.25). Indeed, Christ gave Himself for the Church sacrificing His life on the cross. He remained loyal to the Church, saved her through His blood and takes care and nourishes with His body, “You have bought us with Your blood and keep nourishing us with Your body”, we pray in this way during the veneration of the Holy Communion.³ You, too, fathers of the 21st century, continue with faithfulness what was entrusted unto us through the Bible, through national and cultural traditions and by our holy Fathers.

Fathers, your vocation is sacred and honest, rich and honorable, sanctified by the sacrament of matrimony. It is a vow made between each other and God to live, lead faithfully, and protect the family entrusted to you in spite of all the difficulties, having as a model St. Joseph, father of God, who fulfilled his great paternal vocation on this earth with humility, sanctity, and love.

³ “Mashtots” ritual book, Vienna, 1880, p. 503, “Blessing Canon of the Life-Giving Sacrament of Holy Communion”.

Ode to the Holy Family and wish for the Armenian family

Analyzing family conditions of a stormy life and acknowledging its vocation we have seen its sublimity, its power, its invincible and truthful character in spite of all the difficulties and weaknesses of a family life.

With these spiritual sentiments, voluntarily and confidently, I walk to you, O Holy Virgin Mary. Near the cross of your Only Begotten Son you have become the mother of all mankind. I come to you to humbly confide in you all the mothers and pure girls of our nation, who are going to become mothers. Let them be dressed in virtues, enriched with abundant divine graces and decorated with eminent moral values under your protection.

And St. Joseph, protector of the needy and leader of the lost, I entrust you the fathers of Armenian families. Let our Armenian fathers be impressed by your modesty, humility and faithfulness to struggle for keeping, preserving and leading their families through right paths. Confirm the fathers of our Armenian nation with your vocation of God's father. For the sake of their families, strengthen them with spiritual life and loyalty making them models for their children.

Eventually, I confide to You all the children of our nation, O Jesus. Please, shape and develop love towards God, honesty, righteousness and courage in their hearts to testify to their affiliation with a life fit for Christians.

Let this be my prayer for our families to remain under the protection of the Holy Family.

06/02/2014