

“A HERMENEUTIC OF CONTINUITY IN DEFENSE OF THE FAMILY”
KEYNOTE ADDRESS OF ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE, APOSTOLIC NUNCIO
2ND BINATIONAL PRO-FAMILY, PRO-LIFE CONGRESS
EL PASO, TEXAS
APRIL 29, 2017

Introduction

I am very pleased to join you today as you gather for this Binational Pro-Family, Pro-Life Congress. I thank Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso for his kind welcome and Bishop Oscar Cantu of Las Cruces for his assistance in promoting this event. To each of you who have been so committed to the pro-life, pro-family movement, I thank you for your presence among us.

As the Holy Father’s personal representative to the United States, I wish to express his spiritual closeness to you as you continue to defend the gifts of human life, the family, marriage and religious liberty. I also greet all those in Mexico, with whom I have a special bond, having served for nine years as apostolic nuncio there. From the depths of my heart, I greet you with joy and pray that under the mantle of the Virgin of Guadalupe, you too may continue your promotion of the dignity of the human person and family life, so important to your (our) way of life!

As Catholics, we belong to a living Tradition of faith – a faith that is handed down from one generation to the next. The handing on of the faith is becoming increasingly difficult, particularly when the culture and its views on marriage and family life are changing so drastically. Ten years ago, the Bishops of Latin America recognized this, and what they wrote then is just as pertinent for the Church in the United States now:

Our cultural traditions are no longer handed on from one generation to the next with the same ease as in the past. This even affects that deepest core of each culture, constituted by religious experience, which is now likewise difficult to hand on through education and the beauty of cultural expressions. It even reaches into the family itself, which, as a place of dialogue and intergenerational solidarity, had been one of the most important vehicles for handing on the faith. (V Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano y del Caribe, *Documento conclusivo*, CELAM, Aparecida 2007, n. 39.)

The three most recent Popes have all recognized the threats to both the family and, therefore, to the handing on of the faith. Each has contributed something to the Church’s tradition on marriage and family life. The writings of Pope John Paul II are too vast to explore in depth, but his “Theology of the Body” is a unique attempt to help contemporary men and women appreciate the gift of human sexuality, the body, and the personalist dimensions of marriage. Pope Benedict XVI, in continuity with his predecessor, explored the theme of love in *Deus Caritas Est* and developed the theme of “human ecology” and the defense of human life as a sign of authentic development in *Caritas in Veritate*. Pope Francis highlights the importance of the family for the transmission of the faith; the need to be more welcoming – of life, of migrants, of those in difficult situations; and finally, he asks the Church to accompany families, conveying the closeness of the Merciful God to them. Each of these Popes exhort us to be grateful for the gift of human sexuality and family life and to be tireless in our defense of the gifts of God.

Pope John Paul II: The Theology of the Body

We begin with the so-called “Theology of the Body” of Saint John Paul II. The Theology of the Body refers to his catechesis on the body, the human person, and marriage, given during Wednesday audiences between 1979 and 1984.

In his catechesis, John Paul II has given rise not only to a renewed vision of human sexuality and marriage but also to a renewed vision of man and woman, made in the image of God, and, by implication, a renewed vision of the complete Catholic doctrine. Through the prism of marriage and conjugal love, the Pope helps us to rediscover who God is, who Christ is, who the Church is, and who we are ourselves are. The richness contained in the theology of the body has the potential to renew marriage, the family, and the entire life of the Church and the world.

The beginning of this important effort, we could say, began with the publication of Karol Wojtyła's *Love and Responsibility* and with his theatrical work *The Jeweler's Shop* (1960). The fundamental preoccupation in both was to show that love cannot be reduced to emotions; rather, it should find its foundation in the human ability to grasp the religious, moral and ontological truth of the encounter and of the self-surrender of man in Christian marriage, expressed in a dynamism in which God is a participant, author, creator and redeemer. Sexuality, beyond nature and culture, is a participation in Divine Love.

The historical-cultural context of the "Theology of the Body" (or "Love in the Divine Plan") is the crisis of modernity in which the sexual revolution sharpened the questions that created great controversies around the definition of "freedom" in the developed world. Pope Paul VI attempted to respond to the *signs of the times* with his Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*; however, not too many listened. Right from the beginning of his Pontificate, John Paul II took up the task of showing the truth of human situations and institutions in light of the Gospel through the catechesis, which began in September 1979 and lasted through November 1984; these were given at the traditional Wednesday Audiences in Saint Peter's Square.

He began with the great framework of the experience of the human being as being in relationship – a being ontologically-connected with the Other (God), with others (human beings), and with the other (creation). John Paul II developed his teachings, expounding widely on the mystery of human love, including the participation of man and women in procreation with all its causes and effects. He spoke of being male and female, of the dignity and complementarity of the sexes, of their sharing in their gift of self with the plan of the Creator, of the natural and personal dimensions of marriage, of the personal identity of the sexual being, of the family, etc.

The "Theology of the Body" as a systematic reflection rises from the preoccupation of John Paul II to point out to man that his body, which is part of his person, is an instrument that actualizes the person for love; it is the space or place in which the divine value of the human person shines forth and also represents a framework for a truly Christian anthropology.

For John Paul II, the dualist vision that separates the body from the soul and that condemns the first and exalts the second is totally false and harmful. It is certain that the spiritual holds priority over the material; however, it is also certain that "Man, being at the same time spiritual and corporal, expresses and perceives spiritual realities through material signs and symbols" (CCC, 1146). Through them, Christ instituted the sacraments that are "efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church through which the divine life is given to us" (ibid, 1131). Specifically, the Eternal Son of God became incarnate, and assumed a human nature; that is, He is a unity of body and soul to give us knowledge of the Father and, at the same time, to save us from sin and death (cfr. Jn 1,14; Filip 2,5-8; Hebr 10,5-7; Catecismo de la Iglesia Católica, 461-462).

The positive vision of the material world of John Paul II is that which we encounter on the first page of the Bible, in which we see that God revealed to his People Israel, by means of beautiful symbols, laden with profound religious and moral truths, the goodness of Creation, both material and spiritual, of which God is the author: "*And God saw that it was good ... very good.*" (Gén 1,4, 10, 12, 14, 18, 21 y 31)

Contemporary culture has fallen into an erroneous vision of human sexuality and the body. However, this obsession with sexuality and the body does not come from an excessive valuing of these dimensions of the human person. On the contrary, the hyper-sexualization of our modern society comes from an undervaluing of human sexuality. The current obsession with sex comes from the vacuum of love that suffers from having abandoned God. People have replaced the search for true love (human and divine) with the ephemeral pleasure that sexual relations provide. This gives rise to a greater emptiness, that at times, leads to falling into the same frustration time and again, or, includes falling into excesses, evermore abominable and absurd. All of this shows that the error of contemporary culture is not the exaggerated valuing of the body and sexuality; rather, on the contrary, as John Paul II says, it is in, “not sufficiently appreciating the value” (Catechesis del 22.X.1980) of them; of not sufficiently appreciating the value that God himself has given to human sexuality, to marriage and to conjugal love. People go about seeking pleasure for itself, disconnected from true love, true joy, of life and of family.

The task that we as Christians have before us is not to regress into a useless rigorism that doesn't lead us anywhere, nor is it to descend into the current hedonism as pretext for a presumed and false updating. No, the Church and the Gospel cannot simply conform to the world of today. It is the world of today that must be conformed to Christ. But, to achieve this, there has to be a rediscovering of the Gospel (the Good and Joyful News, as Pope Francis says) of God with respect to conjugal love, human sexuality, the life that arises from marriage, that is to say, the family, and all of this in total fidelity to the faith of the Church.

In the development of this reflection on the theology of the body, we discover some key ideas that help us to glimpse the importance and beauty of the teaching – ideas about man and woman, understanding their splendor and value, and how they might live the gift of sexuality. These include:

- That the body is not simply a “container”; rather, it is the means by which the invisible is made visible, that the human participates in the divine. The body reveals the essential core of being a person: the call to give oneself in love to another and to receive in turn the gift of self of the other.
- That the fulfillment of the human being depends on the surrendering and giving of oneself, not in affirming oneself, not in being self-referential and self-sufficient. Thus, the “original sin” can only be understood as an infringement of the law of the gift of self that we carry within us, turning the other into a simple object. The personalist norm of the theology of the body states that a person is to be treated as a person, not an object – as an end in himself or herself, not as a means to an end.
- That marriage is the human experience that begins to make God understandable for the human being, introducing us to the experience of total, personal, and gratuitous communion.
- That in the sacrament of marriage, the spouses are the ministers of the grace of God and the “language of the body” in marital love is the manner by which the partners carry out the “conjugal dialogue” proper to marriage as a vocation.
- That God created man: male and female; corporeal beings, endowed with sexuality and destined to live in complementarity, sharing in the greatest love.
- That far from banning eros, the ethic of the Church frees it for a full and mature spontaneity, where the perennial attraction between the sexes finds its fulfillment in the mutual surrender and affirmation of the dignity of each member of the partnership.

- Celibacy must be fruitful and takes on a spiritual paternity or maternity, just as marriage does through procreation and education of children.

As you can appreciate, the depth and relevance of these fundamental ideas about the body, its expression and meaning, are a precious mosaic that, with the Grace of God, can undoubtedly help a lot today and in the future in presenting the truth and beauty of the human person in relationship, in giving, in sharing in the capacity of love that God himself pours out on us so that we may live in Him.

It is so important for us then as missionary disciples of Jesus, that we take up in our hands once more the texts of this catechesis of John Paul II, that we meditate upon it, that we study it, integrate it, and that we live it and make it known.

Benedict XVI: Love, Social Responsibility and Human Ecology

The Theology of the Body strongly influenced the expression of the Church's teaching on marriage and sexuality in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Code of Canon Law, the *Letter to Families*, the *Letter to Women*, and the Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*.

Through much of the Pontificate of Pope John Paul II, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger served as the Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith. As an outstanding theologian and man of the Church, he was aware of the cultural and anthropological changes occurring in society. After the death of Pope John Paul II, he warned of the "dictatorship of relativism." When he was elected Pope in April 2005, taking the name of Benedict XVI, there was a great continuity with the thought of John Paul II with respect to the understanding of the person, marriage and family life.

However, many were surprised when Pope Benedict chose the theme of love for his first encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*. The encyclical begins with the words of the *First Letter of Saint John*: "God is love and he who abides in love abides in God and God in him." (1 John 4:16)

The theology of the body explains love as involving self-giving and surrendering to bring about a communion of persons. The first part of the encyclical letter offers a theological and philosophical reflection on love in its different manifestations, concretely as *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*. The word love is one of the most used and abused in the world today. Amid the multiplicity of meanings of 'love', one in particular emerges: "love between man and woman, where body and soul are inseparable joined and human beings glimpse an apparently irresistible promise of happiness." (Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, 25 December 2005, 2) This was called *eros* by the ancient Greeks. In the Bible and especially in the New Testament, the concept of love was deepened – seemingly to push the word *eros* to the margins in favor of the term *agape* to express oblation love.

As I was just saying, far from banning *eros*, the ethic of the Church frees it and purifies it. *The* contemporary way of exalting the body is deceptive. *Eros*, often reduced to pure "sex", has become a commodity, a mere thing to be bought and sold, or rather, man has himself become a commodity. (cf. *DCE*, 5). The body-soul dualism causes man to consider his body as an instrument – to be used and exploited. Pope Benedict, consistent with the theology of the body, affirms that the "Christian faith has always considered man a unity in duality, a reality in which spirit and matter compenetrates, and in which each is brought to a new nobility. True *eros* tends to rise "in ecstasy" toward the Divine, to lead us beyond ourselves; yet for this very reason, it calls for a path of ascent, renunciation, purification and healing." (*DCE*, 5)

If at first love is still "insecure, indeterminate, and searching", the biblical idea of love expresses the experience of a love which involves a "real discovery of the other." Love is best described as a "journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self toward its

liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed discovery of God.” (cf. DCE, 6)

Thus, *eros and agape* – ascending and descending love – can never be completely separated. Benedict states, “The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized.” (DCE, 7) The two manifestations of the one reality of love show a pattern of giving and receiving.

While the theology of the body expressed this, at times, the emphasis was often on self-giving. Benedict XVI notes that “man cannot live by oblation, descending love alone, he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift. Certainly, as the Lord tells us, one can become a source from which rivers of living water flow. Yet to become such a source, one must constantly drink anew from the original source, which is Jesus Christ.” (DCE, 7)

In *Amoris Laetitia* (70), Pope Francis summarizes: “Pope Benedict XVI, in his Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, returned to the topic of the truth of the love of man and woman, which is fully illuminated only in the love of the crucified Christ (cf. DCE, 2). He stressed that ‘marriage based on an exclusive and definitive love becomes an icon of the relationship between God and his people and vice versa. God’s way of loving becomes the human measure of love’ (cf. DCE, 11).”

The exclusive and definitive love is experienced in the new and Eternal Covenant – in the celebration of the Eucharist. The Eucharist draws us into Jesus’ act of self-oblation. The implications of this are social: “Union with Christ is also union with all those to whom he gives himself. I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or will become his own. ... Love of God and love of neighbor are now truly united: God incarnate draws us all to himself. ... Worship itself, Eucharistic communion, includes the reality both of being loved and of loving others in turn.” (DCE, 14)

This idea of social dimension to love (and the commandment to love our neighbor) is important for the defense of the family and of human life. In his third encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict XVI highlighted the importance of love as a principle of life in society (Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, 29 June 2009, 44), a place where we can experience the common good. He laments the reduction of sex to pleasure or entertainment, materialistic ideas and policies to limit family size, and the rapid decline in births which threaten economic development. Authentic love is open to life. He contends that *morally responsible openness to life represents a rich social and economic resource*.

As such, he reminds States that they are “called to *enact policies promoting the centrality and the integrity of the family*, founded on marriage between a man and a woman, the primary vital cell of society, and to assume responsibility for its economic and fiscal needs.” (CiV, 44)

The Church has a responsibility toward the family and toward creation. He states that “the deterioration of nature is in fact closely connected to the culture that shapes human coexistence: *when human ecology is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits*.” (CiV, 51) Pope Francis reinforces and explores this in *Laudato Si*, but Benedict XVI makes a significant contribution in reminding the world that the “*decisive issue is the overall moral tenor of society*.”

Authentic development of society involves the protection of human life and all of creation. Here I wish to quote him at length, because this is significant for you who are engaged in the pro-life, pro-family movement:

“If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology. ... The book of nature is

one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other. Herein lies a grave contradiction in our mentality and practice today: one which demeans the person, disrupts the environment and damages society.” (CIV, 52)

Pope John Paul II’s theology of the body provides us with a proper theological and philosophical anthropology for understanding man and woman, human sexuality and marriage. Benedict XVI builds upon this, clarifying the meanings of the word love and pointing us to our social responsibility toward the entire human family and creation.

Pope Francis: The Family: Reality and Dreams

Pope Francis’ pastoral focus on the family is rooted in practical realities rather than abstract ideas. He writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

“There also exists a constant tension between ideas and realities. Realities simply are, whereas ideas are worked out. There has to be continuous dialogue between the two, lest ideas become detached from realities. It is dangerous to dwell in the realm of words alone, of images and rhetoric ...Realities are greater than ideas.” (Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 231)

In this Exhortation, he looks at the actual situation of families, noting that “the family is experiencing a profound cultural crisis, as are all communities and social bonds. In the case of the family, the weakening of these bonds is particularly serious because the family is the fundamental cell of society.” (cf. *EG*, 66)

Francis recognizes the cultural challenges to the family and sees this as a direct threat to the transmission of the faith. The first setting in which faith “enlightens the human city is the family.” Faith helps us grasp “in all its depth and richness the begetting of children, as a sign of the love of the Creator, who entrusts us with the mystery of a new person.” (cf. Francis, Encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, 29 June 2013, 52)

In perfect continuity with Benedict, Francis believes that “absorbed and deepened in the family, faith becomes a light capable of illuminating all relationships in society”, helping us to recognize that “every man and woman represents a blessing for me, that the light of God’s face shines on me through the faces of my brothers and sisters.” (*LF*, 54)

It is faith that helps us understand the unique dignity of each person, including the unborn. In his exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, Pope John Paul II eloquently said that from the standpoint of faith, “every violation of the personal dignity of the human being cries out in vengeance to God and is an offense against the creator of the individual.” (John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, 30 December 1980, 37)

Francis, echoing the anthropology of the theology of the body, writes in *Evangelii Gaudium* that the “defense of unborn life is closely linked to the defense of each and every other human right. It involves the conviction that a human being is always sacred and inviolable in any situation and at every stage of development. Human beings are ends in themselves and never a means of resolving problems.” (*EG*, 213) It is not “progressive” to try to resolve problems by eliminating human life!

Francis has a broad concern for the welfare of the weak and vulnerable “at every stage of human development.” In his exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, following two synods on the family, he

noted that the welfare of the family is decisive for the future of the world and that of the Church (cf. *Francis*, Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, 19 March 2016, 31). As I was saying earlier, Francis is a Pope rooted in reality. He knows the “reality of the family with all its complexity, with its lights and shadows” and recognizes the threats posed by anthropological and cultural changes, extreme individualism, the cultural of the ephemeral, and the problem of migration.

On this last threat to the family, he comments:

“Forced migration of families, resulting from situations of war, persecution, poverty, and injustice, and marked by the vicissitudes that often put life at risk, traumatizes people and destabilizes families. In accompanying families, the Church needs a specific pastoral program addressed not only to families that migrate but also to those families who remain behind.” (*AL*, 46)

Without being political, I wish to say that the issue of migration is a pro-life, pro-family issue! Pope Francis is a Pope who challenges us. He challenges the whole Church to present a positive vision of the family. The Holy Father does not descend into a fatalism; rather, he sees crises as opportunities. He notes that “the life of every family is marked by all kinds of crises, yet these are also part of its dramatic beauty. Couples should be helped to realize that surmounting a crisis need not weaken their relationship; instead it can improve, settle, and mature the wine of their union.” (*AL*, 232)

Still, it is the task of the Church to help these couples – these families! He says that experienced and trained couples should be open to offering guidance, so that couples will not be unnerved by these crises or tempted to hasty decisions. For family life to be successful, real effort is necessary.

In his meeting with families in Victor Manuel Reyna Stadium in Tuxtla Gutiérrez during his Apostolic Journey to Mexico, the Holy Father offered some reasons why so much effort is necessary:

“Today we see how on different fronts the family is weakened and questioned. It is regarded as a model which has done its time, but which has no place in our societies; these, claiming to be modern, increasingly favor a model based on isolation. Societies become increasingly inoculated – they refer to themselves as societies which are free, democratic, sovereign – but they are inoculated by ideological colonizations which destroy; and we end up being ideological colonies that then have a destructive effect on families, the family cell, which is the basis of every healthy society.” (Meeting with Families, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, 15 February 2016)

As an antidote to these inoculations, the Holy Father suggests repeated efforts, acknowledging that “living in a family is not always easy... but I prefer a wounded family that makes daily efforts to put love into play, to a family and a society that is sick from isolationism or a habitual fear of love. I prefer a family that makes repeated efforts to begin again ...” (*Ibid.*).

Rooted in reality, Pope Francis recognizes that there are no quick solutions to the threats posed to the family, but rather than simply surrender, he believes in hard work and repeated effort. The Holy Father also has dreams about what family life can be like.

In preparation for the upcoming World Meeting of Families to be held in Dublin, Ireland, writing to Cardinal Kevin Farrell, he articulated these dreams:

“How much better family life would be if every day we lived according to the words, “please”, “thank you” and “I’m sorry”. Every day we have the experience of fragility and weakness, and therefore we all, families, and pastors are in need of renewed humility ... I dream of an outbound Church, not a self-referential one, a Church

that does not pass by far from man's wounds, a merciful Church that proclaims the heart of revelation of God as Love, which is Mercy. It is this very mercy that makes us new in love; and we know how much Christian families are a place of mercy and witnesses of mercy." (Letter to His Eminence Kevin Card. Farrell, 25 March 2017)

Yes, my friends, you are part of the Pope's dreams for the Church and our world – by being close to families, by welcoming families into your *casita sagrada* – as the Holy Father said in the Cathedral of Mexico City. A *casita* is familiar and at the same time holy, *sagrada*, for it is filled with the presence of God. He wonders whether "we have lost the sense of the humble ways of the divine and are tired of offering our own men and women the *casita* in which they feel close to God" (cf. Address of the Holy Father to the Bishops of Mexico, 13 February 2016). The Holy Father dreams that you will open your *casita sagrada* to other families, just as Saint John Paul encouraged you to "open wide the doors to Christ!"

We are living in the age of great Popes who have been tireless -as have many of you – in their defense of the family. Acknowledging that we are gathered at the border for this Bi-National Pro-Life, Pro Family Congress, I conclude with the words the Holy Father addressed to the Mexican Bishops but he says to all of us: "I ask you to witness together that the Church is the custodian of a unifying vision of humanity."

May the Holy Virgin of Guadalupe protect and strengthen you as accompany families along the journey of life that leads to the Father's House!