

The Family and the New Evangelization

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I would like to give my presentation an educative slant, in harmony with the concern of the Pope and the Italian bishops who speak of a true and proper “educational emergency.” It is specifically for this reason that I would like to insert my reflections on the family in the context of the new evangelization, which is the formidable challenge of our time. In the audience given to the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family on May 11, 2006, Pope Benedict XVI recalled the fundamental idea that constitutes the inheritance of John Paul II and that accompanied him throughout his life and his pastoral ministry: the idea that it is necessary “to teach the young to love.” This expression can seem difficult to understand: what does it mean “to teach to love?” Is not love the most spontaneous and uncontrollable thing that we can imagine, something which just happens and over which we do not have any control? What is love if we must say that it is necessary to learn to love? The noun “love” indicates a surprising and welcome event. Love is not a great idea or an ethical decision, as the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* reminded us. Instead, it is a grace that occurs and opens the life of each one to a new horizon filled with promise. By contrast, “to love,” as a verb, is the act of our freedom, which corresponds to this grace and that allows it blossom into a story, inserting it into the work of a relationship, in the duration of time and in the midst of unforeseeable circumstances.

Today, the journey that allows one to encounter love, and that must lead from falling in love to the commitment of marriage, and thus to the formation of a family, is particularly difficult, above all for the young. There are new and unforeseen obstacles that must be clearly recognized. The enterprise of teaching / learning to love demands to be understood within the context of an epochal challenge with truly imposing dimensions. In my opinion, this consists of nothing less than reconstructing a culture, that is, a human environment facilitating the formation of the person, which would be able to oppose an anti-culture which impedes learning to love. For this, it is necessary to have a specific reference to a criterion of truth that orients the journey. Therefore, my discourse will consist in three parts: in the first place, I will try to highlight the obstacles that are opposed to the education to love. In the second place, I would like to present the essential elements that identify the truth about love and the identity of marriage and the family, that is, those that the Pope has called “non negotiable goods.” Finally, at this point, I will trace the relationship between nature and culture for the constitution of an adequate educative context.

1. The Challenge of Relativism: “Liquidating the Family”

Regarding the first point, I would like to briefly mention three factors that block the education to love: affective illiteracy, the project of liquidating the family, and ethical relativism. Some of you might remember the English butler, Stevens, who appeared in a film some years ago by the director James Ivory entitled, “The Remains of the Day” (USA, 1993). It is about a very formal character, impeccable and naïve, absolutely incapable of expressing his emotions, which he fears. The story, a dramatic caricature, portrays how the butler prefers the cold formality of empty and habitual relations, to which he is accustomed in his role, to the possibility of establishing a lively but destabilizing relationship with the governess, who after 20 years confesses her love for him. Stevens appears embarrassed, incapable of accepting and expressing that profound sentiment which he too feels in his heart. His character makes us laugh because it recalls the stereotype of the frigid Englishman of past times, and does not seem to have much to do with us. The world in which we live seems to be radically opposed to the formalism of that puritanical society which represses emotions. Instead, today there is the apparent absence of rules, which has provoked a complete freedom to manifest and realize our emotions, in whatever ways befit the sensations and opinions of each.

Affective Illiteracy

And still this uncontrolled exhibition of immediate feeling, this free venting of the emotions, can conceal a spectacular drama, similar to the preceding, which is widespread above all among the young. There has begun to be talk of “affective illiteracy”, common among the younger generations. To continue speaking of England, a recent study was conducted in 90 schools in the area of Southampton. Those involved were from among a population of students belonging to the lower middle class, in which 40% live in families composed of only one parent. The study demonstrated that these children know, at maximum, a dozen words related to emotions and to affectivity: they are words scarcely differentiated and generally vulgar, which do not allow for subtlety when one tries to define his own mood or to understand the moods of others.¹ The phenomenon is alarming: the incapacity to enter into contact with the world of one’s own emotions implies, in fact, a consequent incapacity to communicate and to establish adequate relations with others. The various dramatic events reported on the news demonstrate how, in the social fabric in which we live, the area of affectivity and of emotional communication has become very restricted. Such restriction provokes sudden destructive explosions, above all in environments of mass emotions.

We could say that this new type of illiteracy, observed by sociologists and psychologists, implies an incapacity to read and to write. *An incapacity to read* one's own emotions and feelings, which results in their being repressed or exploding

¹ A. Oliviero, “Le nostre emozioni alla ricerca di un alfabeto”, in *Avvenire*, 1 March 2001. By the same author: “Ragione e passione nelle emozioni”, in *Psicologia* 130 (July August)1995, 52.

uncontrollably; an incapacity to interpret one's interior world and to give it sense inside of a complex frame of meaning. *An incapacity to write* the narrative of one's own existence and the story of which one is most intimately aware, which thus remains unexpressed or expressed badly, incomprehensible and unrealizable. The solitude of this context—and the lack of authoritative points of reference, of teachers, of narrated stories, of lived communities—hinders the interpretation of emotions and feelings, and the recognition of a meaning that qualifies and orients them. Without vocabulary, without grammar, without teachers, one does not learn to read and write. This is the decisive problem for the formation of the person: the necessity of an interpretative reference frame for emotions and affections, which can constitute a context of meaning able to integrate experience, rendering it both comprehensible and constructive.

“Liquidating” the Family

At this point, however, we must face a specific difficulty originating in the cultural context in which we find ourselves: our culture does not simply present us with a crisis of the family and its traditional educative role. Instead, it shows us how there is an attack operating against the family, a well-organized strategy to “liquidate it.” According to the analysis of the noted Polish sociologist and one of the greatest interpreters of our time, Zygmunt Bauman, a professor at Leeds (England), the word “liquidate” is to be understood here in its literal sense before its metaphorical. He defines our epoch as “liquid modernity,” characterized by the deregulation and privatization of the specific tasks and obligations of modernization. This can be called individualism: from the focus on the just society, we have passed to one on human rights, reduced however to “the right of individuals to remain diverse and to pick and chose at will their own models of happiness and fitting life-styles.”² Liquid modernity can not tolerate solid bodies. Its values are velocity, change, flux, the temporary and the precarious. As such, modernity can not tolerate the family, the class, the neighborhood, or the parish community: it must “make them liquid” or “liquidate them.”

Thus, Bauman speaks of *liquid love*: even love becomes a commercial fact, mercantile, of the same nature as the supermarket. In liquid modernity, it becomes “normal” to conform the relationships of couples to commercial relationships, with love and the partner on the same level as a good that I have the right to dispose of when I am tired of it and see the possibility of another “product” that promises me more gratification. Liquid modernity is dominated by the urges that contrast with the cultivated desires that are the principle of stability. Bauman writes: “While the principle of ridding oneself of desires is deeply instilled into daily conduct by the powerful forces of a market of consumer goods, a loving commitment seems to be unnervingly, inopportunistly, and annoyingly inclined to the cultivation of a desire.”³ If it really is so, this explains the offensive against the family founded on matrimony, which does not adhere to the rules, or rather to this *deregulation*: it is therefore necessary to liquidate it. Thus television programs and, more generally,

² Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Blackwell Publishing, Cambridge 2004, 29.

³ Z. Bauman, *L'amore liquido*, Laterza, Bari 2004.

representations of love in the mass media embark upon this attack, discreet and subtle yet constant and hammering. In the stream of sitcoms or talk shows, the figure of the natural-traditional family is systematically denigrated and ridiculed as repressive and an enemy of acting upon one's impulses. Instead, every behavior or tendency, even the most absurd and foolish, is presented in a neutral manner, "cleared through customs," that is, consigned to normality.⁴ Either deviously or openly, what is suggested and promoted is that which Pope Benedict XVI has called "weak love," without commitment to fidelity in time and without demanding projects for the future.

The Anti-Culture of Absolute Autonomy

What underlies these phenomena of an economic, social, and moral character is a well-organized cultural strategy, a true and proper revolution. Beginning with language it tends to insert itself into the mentality and the juridical institutions first of the West, and then, slowly, at the global level, as a kind of neo-colonialism.⁵ The principle of the right to choose on the part of the individual is affirmed as an absolute in the area of sexuality, of reproduction, and of life. This principle functions as a deconstructing factor of natural and traditional forms of relationships in the family, in the local community, and in society.

In the name of this individualistic concept of liberty and autonomy, there is the affirmation of an equal right to practice any kind of concept of one's own sexuality. Furthermore, juridical equality is demanded for every practice, from civil unions to homosexuality to transsexualism. Access to contraception, to deregulated abortion, and to artificial insemination are vindicated as rights belonging to "reproductive health." The principle of autonomy is associated with that of equality, within the context of an absolute neutrality on the part of the State concerning judgments about the diverse forms of realizing human sexuality. Human sexuality would thus belong to the private sphere; it would be the obligation of the civil law merely to guarantee the equality of rights. But such a neutrality of the State implies the consideration of the family as a purely conventional superstructure, a temporary form among many, a form from which one can, and indeed, one must, be emancipated.

The actual discourse on the "plurality of models" of the family (cohabitation, heterosexual and homosexual civil unions, temporary unions, etc.), based upon the pluralism of ideas, is also part of this manipulation.⁶ This testifies to an apparent change of strategy: we no longer speak of the "end of the family" but a "pluralism of family models," which, without bringing into question the family, would enlarge the panorama of possibilities. This way of speaking is nonetheless located within a radically skeptical vision. We continue to speak of "family" so long as it is empty of content. Now if any type of living together can be considered a family, then the family

⁴ Cf. U. Folena, *I Pacs della discordia. Spunti per un dibattito*, Ancora, Milan 2006, 37-54.

⁵ For further reading on this topic, see: M.A. Peeters, *The specificity of Christian kerygma in the face of the new global ethic*, Kampala, 9 June 2005; E. Roccella- L. Scaraffia, *Contro il cristianesimo. L'Onu e l'Unione Europea come nuova ideologia*, Piemme, Casale Monferrato (AI) 2005.

⁶ Cf. L. Roussel, *Les nouveaux modèles familiaux*, Paris 1984; J.H. Hagan, "Nuovi modelli di famiglia", in Pontifical Counsel for the Family, *Lexicon. Termini ambigui e discussi su famiglia, vita e questioni etiche*, Dehoniane, Bologna 2003, 635-639.

has simply ceased to exist.⁷ The liquid family equals the liquidation of the family. In summary, the discourse on the pluralism of family models is a function of the ideological operation to culturally obscure the identity of the family.

More recently, this opposition has revealed its ultimate aim. It has openly assumed the form of a defense of cultural relativism against the Catholic insistence on a model of the family as “natural,” which would possess stable, permanent characteristics, defined once and for all. Thus Francesco Remotti has penned an essay that has the form of a letter written to the Pope, meant to recall the Pope, in the name of anthropological science, to a greater humility. Remotti asserts that the rather elevated and irreducible multiplicity of forms of the family challenges every absolute claim to assert a model of the family as natural.⁸

Therefore, a “natural” family does not exist, because the nature of man is to be continuously changing. The so-called “traditional” monogamous family would in reality be only a particular European configuration created by Christian culture, which had manipulated certain natural dynamics of human beings. It is here the idea emerges that the future will inevitably see a progressive dissolution of a single model of the family and will fully recognize a plurality of familial forms, thus negating the existence of a nature as a stable criterion of reference.

These three factors (affective illiteracy, a strategy to liquidate the family, and relativism) converge at different levels: psychological, social, and cultural. It thus becomes difficult to decode the fundamental meanings of the language of our body, to grasp the grammar of love, and to use the rules of syntax correctly, in such a way as to compose the narrative of a successful life.

2. The Experience of Love and the Hermeneutics of Meanings

In any case, as David Hume said, the facts are stubborn: although threatened and negated in many ways, the family continues to exist as a stubborn fact that resists the announcement of its end, remaining even in our society with its own identity. The famous anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strass, who has just turned a hundred years old and has defined the family as “a universal phenomenon, present in each and every kind of society,” asks, “If the universality of the family is not an effect of the natural law, how is it to be explained that it is found everywhere?”⁹ Even in the plurality of its concrete manifestations in many historical and cultural forms, the family is present as a kind of “natural society,” founded upon a double bond: a first which could be called “horizontal,” given in the sexual relationship between man and woman, and a “vertical” one given by the generational relationship between parents and children.

Pierpaolo Donati, a sociologist from Bologna, speaks of the family as a form of a primordial relationship, characterized by a kind of “genome.” In a manner analogous

⁷ Cf. J.-J. Pérez-Soba, *El corazón de la familia*, Presencia y Diálogo, Madrid, 2006, 106.

⁸ F. Remotti, *Contro natura. Una lettera al Papa*, Laterza, Bari 2008, 259.

⁹ C. Lévi-Strauss, *La famiglia* [1956], in *Razza e storia e altri studi di antropologia*, Einaudi, Turin 1967.

to the biology of living organisms, this genome is of a latent structure, being lived in different ways without ceasing to be the permanent nucleus of this reality.¹⁰ The family thus is not a form of individual life, constructed only upon the affective dimension, but is rather a primary social form, a completely social phenomenon, that involves all the dimensions of human existence. It is configured as “super functional”; in other words, it is not defined simply by the performance of certain particular functions. Rather, the family is a living social system that presides over the primary reproduction of society, not only in the obvious sense of generation and social education, but also in the care of persons’ primary daily needs. Donati indicates four constitutive elements of the DNA of the family: gift, reciprocity, sexuality, and generation. These elements are interwoven among themselves, giving origin to a specific symbolic code, which is that of love. The transformation of society entails a continuous reorganization of the configuration of the family, without diminishing the constitutive genome.

But now we ask ourselves: how are the essential elements of the “universal natural phenomenon” revealed? Moreover, how is it possible to recognize them, distinguishing that which is permanent from that which is contingent, that which is not negotiable from that which is dependent on a given historical-cultural circumstance?

The Original Experience and its Evidence

Where do we begin if not from experience, in its most spontaneous and original form? It is here that we rediscover the testimony of the “heart,” as an infallible criterion of discernment between the true and good realization of life and a false configuration of it. The criteria of truth and of goodness must, in fact, be within ourselves, otherwise we will be alienated. What is, therefore, the heart? It is the whole of those demands and original and fundamental proofs by means of which nature launches us towards reality, and beginning from which, every human being, willing or non-willing, aware or unaware, spontaneously judges all that occurs.¹¹ These are the proofs and demands of justice, of truth, of goodness, and of beauty. The tradition of Thomistic thought made reference to “natural inclinations:” native orientations towards particular goods that we recognize as suited to us: the instinct to preserve and promote our lives, to live in society with other persons, to search for the truth, to feel compassion and to help those who suffer. Among these spontaneous inclinations, there is the uniquely compelling sexual inclination.

What is, therefore, the fully human meaning of this spontaneous inclination? In order to contribute to a good life, it must be inserted into a complex frame of meaning, which makes its interpretation possible. This frame of reference is formed little by little in the existence of each one, in function of the experiences lived during the maturation of the person.¹² Human reason grasps that the entire meaning of sexual attraction is respected only when the other is treated as a person, and not as an

¹⁰See the most recent study by P. Donati, *Perché “la” famiglia? Le risposte della sociologia relazionale*, Cantagalli, Siena 2008.

¹¹Cf. L. Giussani, *Il rischio educativo*, Rizzoli, Milano 2005, 15-21.

¹²Cf. J. Noriega, *Il destino dell’eros. Prospettive di morale sessuale*, Dehoniane, Bologna 2006, 19-39.

occasion for pleasure. The “heart” is at the origin of this indefinable unease which one feels, when, for example, he is treated only as an object of interest and of pleasure.¹³ The heart suggests that the right attitude towards the other is love and that it is inside of this love that sexual attraction must be found, interpreted, and lived. In this way, we can begin to distinguish between good and suitable realizations of this attraction and inadequate and incorrect attitudes. A culture of love would consist in cultivating in men and women those virtuous dispositions that develop a fully human sense of sexuality and of affectivity.

Thus, in order to know what sexuality and the family are, we can turn towards our reason and its capacity to interpret our relative experiences in the light of the “heart.” With regard to the sexual inclination, reason, which interprets our experiences, reveals to us that the sexual difference written within the male and female body is that incomparable factor that allows for the mode of encounter and the gift of self.¹⁴ This factor orients us to the gift of ourselves, which has its own intimate logic, demanding totality and definitiveness, and which is to be respected in its fruitfulness. Dietrich von Hildebrand wrote, “The meaning of sexuality consists in being the specific sphere in which conjugal love finds its expression and fulfillment. Only love, therefore, is capable of organically uniting sexuality with the heart and the mind. And only conjugal love has the key, so to say, that allows one to unlock the meaning of sexuality, understanding it as an experience and revealing to the person its truly positive aspect.”¹⁵ The reasonable form of living out sexuality, fully conformed to the reality of the sexual inclination in all of its factors and dimensions, is thus marriage, understood as a public and legitimate union between a man and a woman.

Moreover, the capacity to generate new human persons, naturally embedded in the exercise of sexuality between man and woman, is not extrinsic to this context of meaning. Rather, it confirms and reinforces it. On the one hand, human sexuality is manifested in all of its truth only when it remains open to this “beyond” with respect to the original conjugal relation between the two. As Maurice Blondel said, illustrating the strange mathematics of love: “It is only when two become one, that they can become three.” Sexuality is faithful to the demands of authentic love only when it does not deliberately exclude an openness to the transmission of life. When it turns in on itself in the search for pleasure, it becomes sterile, even as a human experience.

On the other hand the child, the fruit of the gift, gift from gift, is not a thing but a person. The child is appropriately desired, called to life and welcomed when he is not treated like a “product” that must correspond to certain demands and characteristics established by those who desire and plan him, but when he is recognized as a person, unique and unrepeatable, who has intrinsic value and merits respect because he is someone and not something. We can understand why only the conjugal act, performed between spouses, is the suitable place to give rise to the life of

¹³Cf. L. Giussani, *Il senso religioso*, volume primo del *PerCorso*, Rizzoli, Milano 1997, 14.

¹⁴Cf. A. Scola, *Uomo-donna. Il “caso serio” dell’amore*, Marietti 1820, Genova-Milano 2002, 15-28.

¹⁵D. von Hildebrand, *Purity. The Mystery of Christian Sexuality*, Franciscan University Press, Steubenville 1989, 69.

a human person, as only the legitimately established family of a man and a woman is the environment in which he can be adequately educated.

We can now attempt to formalize all that we have discovered so far beginning with the consideration of experience, and to grasp the ontological foundation of the being of the person, which is essentially relational, open to the other and destined to communion with the other. To this end, Angelo Cardinal Scola has spoken of the “nuptial mystery,” indicating by this expression the phenomenon of love grasped in those essential elements that describe it in all of its possible forms—from the basest carnal love to those highest and most noble forms, up to and including the Trinitarian love of the divine life, preserving always the necessary analogical application of likeness within an always greater difference.¹⁶ The nuptial mystery allows us to grasp the true nature of conjugal love and of matrimony, considering it in its supreme source: God, who is love, and who is the Father “from whom all paternity in heaven and earth is named” (*Ephesians* 3:14-15). Conjugal love, however, has not only a theological foundation, but also a rational evidence: in its light, one can identify the goods for the person that are involved in sexual action. These goods regard: (a) the corporeality assumed in love, upon the basis of the sexual difference that connotes and qualifies it as the “nuptial body”; (b) the unity with the other, that in the affective encounter is anticipated as the promise of a fullness in the gift of self and the reception of the other; (c) the possible fecundity of the encounter, in an openness to the communication of life to another person.

3. The language of love: grammar and syntax

We have thus arrived at the final point of our reflection, during which I propose to highlight the conditions for an authentic culture of the family. These are the presuppositions for an education to love, which knows how to recognize and respect its linguistic rules, its grammar, and its syntax. A reflection upon these goods, in the perspective of love, is capable of illuminating how the sexual difference, far from constituting a limit to love, guarantees its possibility and [describes] its authenticity in the area of the exercise of genital sexuality. Without difference, the union in the body is the fiction of an intimacy, which in reality reflects only a narcissistic identity without a real openness to the other. The sexual difference thus demonstrates itself to be good, in as much as it makes possible a communion of persons in the sexual encounter.

The language of the body: its grammar and syntax

Thanks to love, the sexual difference assumes the meaning of a call to personal fulfillment, in the communion of persons and in openness to God. This difference is therefore relevant in the definition a good life. Where there is no difference, gift of self, and openness to life, there is no nuptial love properly speaking, there is not human love. The sexual difference is the living symbol that offers the key to the

¹⁶A. Scola, *Il mistero nuziale. 1: Uomo – donna*, PUL-Mursia, Roma 1998; *Il mistero nuziale. 2: Matrimonio – famiglia*, PUL-Mursia, Rome 2000.

meaning of corporeality, as a call to a communion of persons in love. This difference opens us to the other and ultimately to God, which is the keystone in the architectural order of meaning and of language. The sexual difference is part of the grammar of love, that system of rules that allows for communication among men. "I fear that as long as we believe in grammar, we will continue to believe in God," Friedrich Nietzsche affirmed.¹⁷

And thus also for the language of the body it is necessary to make reference to a grammar rooted in a truth. The truth of sexuality is, in fact, announced in affection and becomes accessible to reason by means of practice, in the perspective of love. Here we find two levels of meaning: one perennial and the other unique and unrepeatable. The first regards the "objective sense," of which the body itself is not the author, that which has been "pronounced by the word of the living God."¹⁸ The second, of a "subjective" character, is that of which man himself is the author, through the necessary and continuous "re-reading" of the original truth. Not all of the language of love can therefore be creative: in the experience of love, there are corporeal gestures that have an intrinsic meaning, which cannot be manipulated.¹⁹ As can be immediately understood, grammar and syntax are not sufficient to guarantee that one writes a beautiful story with one's own life; they are not everything in the narrative sphere. Grammar and syntax are limited to establishing the basic rules necessary to write that poem, which is always entrusted to the freedom of the persons and thus is unique in every story of human love.

Referring to the essential factors of the nuptial mystery, that is the truth inscribed in human love, we can therefore grasp the constitutive elements of the grammar of love: above all, the sexual difference; then the personal union between man and woman, with a form of publicly sanctioned commitment which corresponds to the social character of human life; and finally, openness to procreation and care for the education of children that can come from marriage.

Naturally, this language needs not only a grammar, but also a syntax, the rules relative to the dynamic order among basic meanings. The constitutive and immutable meanings of language are thus interwoven with cultural interpretation and with the story of men and women. At this level, however, the possibilities of error are less destructive to the truth of love. For this reason, the cultural acceptance of divorce or even polygamy in some societies, though not conformed to the full truth about love, has a relevance less grave than that presented by the full institutional recognition of homosexuality as equivalent to so-called "heterosexuality."²⁰

Nature, culture, and virtue

¹⁷ Cited in L. Irigaray, *Éthique de la différence*, cit., 109 ; the famous affirmation by Nietzsche is found in *Die "Vernunft" in der Philosophie*, 5.

¹⁸ Ibidem, CIV e CV, 400-405.

¹⁹ This is the fundamental critique of the work of A. Guindon, *The Sexual Creators*, cit.

²⁰ We are obviously not speaking here of negating the possibility of tolerance or the full respect of the rights of the persons, apart from sexual orientations and practices. The distinction between grammar and syntax can be referred back to the classical distinction between "first principles" and "second principles" of the natural law.

By means of its being rooted in the body, this language overcomes the self-reference of the conscience, maybe even the shared social conscience, and is directed towards reality. Such a language is not born in the empty space of the conscience, but is rooted in the ontological structure of the person and reflects it: it is in the context of personal relations, and particularly in the affective tension towards the person and in the perspective of a good life, that the gesture acquires its meaning and can be evaluated in its capacity to adequately express love. This interpretation of human praxis makes it possible to articulate the relationship between nature and culture. Culture is the inevitable context in which one inserts the acts and words also of the language of the body, which intend to express and realize love. Culture offers a first interpretation of nature, aiding in humanizing the act and interpreting its meaning.

John Paul II gave this definition of culture: «Culture is that which makes man become more man; he is more, he enters more into being»²¹. The truth of a certain historical configuration of the family is verified by its capacity to promote the authentically human life, corresponding to the natural needs written within the hearts of men and women: in the greater light, enjoyment, life, and love that the family makes possible. Here is the meaning of the double reference that has been proposed in this reflection: reference to both *culture* and *language*. There is not a culture without a language, and there is not a language without truth. The culture of the family is promoted where one learns the authentic language of love, according to the original truth of the “beginning”, written by God in the heart and in the body of man and woman. And this truth is not merely to contemplate, but to act upon in life, in personal relations, in social relationships, and in institutions.

Here the decisive value of the moral virtues emerges in terms of the education to love. These are stable dispositions of the affections and will that confer a practical capacity, that thus render the person likely to act in a certain way. The theme of virtue is quite appropriate when we speak of culture. Because if culture means that which makes man more human, that which causes him to grow in his humanity, then human culture is realized precisely in the virtues. The educative problem is not only that of informing, of communicating a truth, but it is above all that of the integral formation of the subject, even in his affective dispositions. The moral truth is of such a nature that in order to grasp it, speculative intelligence is not enough. It is also necessary to possess the connaturality created by the virtues.

Family and the common good

Why must the civil law of a secular and pluralist society, as are our Western societies, favor marriage between man and a woman as the privileged form of the realization of human sexuality and as the basis for the construction of the family? The line of reflection that we will follow is no longer based on the intrinsic rationality of the experience, but upon the nature of society and the common good that justifies it.

²¹John Paul II, *Address to UNESCO*, 2 June 1980.

We are seeking, above all, to understand the meaning of the idea of the “common good” that is the foundation of society.²² This notion indicates that the social relation among human beings has its own specific goodness, which therefore must be protected and promoted as essential to personal life. Against an individualism that thinks of man as an isolated monad, and that considers relations with other persons as extrinsic and un-original, it must be recognized that only in the relationship lived with the other, and with others, is an environment created in which each one can grow in his own humanity. The other person is not merely a limit to my rights, but the partner in dialogue that allows me to become fully conscious of myself and to develop my personality. The common good thus consists in “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow both the collectivity and individual members to reach their own perfection more fully and quickly.”²³ A society constructed only upon the individualistic idea of personal rights, without the “fresh air” of the common good, would in the end negate even the good of the person.

Now the family, founded upon the stable marriage of a man and a woman, constitutes an essential and decisive element of the common good of society. Many of our national constitutions have explicitly recognized the family as the first natural cell of society, the foundation of the civil life. This very ancient and ever valid conviction has found its confirmation in a current reflection at the sociological level, which has highlighted the concept of “social capital.”²⁴ This term indicates the patrimony and cultural resource that sustains the relationships of trust, cooperation and reciprocity among persons. As one can easily understand, a society, in order to avoid becoming un-human and fatally destroying itself, needs to draw upon the values of reciprocal trust, of loyalty, and of solidarity, precisely in the area of the primary relationships of the family. The family constitutes the primary social capital, the foundation of that secondary social capital constituted by networks and associations in the civic sphere. Social capital is thus a relational good produced and used simultaneously, without which society dies.

The reasoning here is extremely simple: society, in order to preserve its existence, has a vital interest in favoring the primary agency of the formation of social capital, which is the stable, monogamous family, founded upon the fruitful union between a man and a woman. It is precisely in the recognized sexual difference that we find the archetypal form of the welcome of the other in his identity and otherness that is the foundation of reciprocity. Only in the stability of the bond is it possible to realize its positive function for the persons involved and its educative capacity. Only in the generation and education of children is society assured its future. Only in the support of the weakest and of the elderly, a support guaranteed by the family, is society capable of responding adequately to emerging and always more pressing social needs.

²²Cf. Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2004, nn.164-170.

²³Vatican Council II, Past. Const. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 26.

²⁴See especially: P. Donati, “La famiglia come capitale sociale primario”, in P. Donati (ed.), *Famiglia e capitale sociale nella società italiana*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 2003, 31-101, with a wide bibliography.

In this way, we better understand the term “non-negotiables,” referring to the essential elements of marriage and the family, to those factors that belong to their permanent identity. We here refer with this term to the context of the democratic debate of modern pluralist societies, in which the consensus of the majority is reached by means of discussions and compromises. There are nonetheless principles that are removed from the possibility of a negotiated compromise, because they are prior to the discussion. In fact, they are the foundation of the discussion, because they constitute the essential common good of society, without which the same society where they are discussed cannot exist. Democracy can debate everything, but not these fundamental elements. We are thinking for example of the fundamental rights of the human person, which for this reason have been justly “declared,” that is, recognized but not established by a law.

It is also clear that not every form of cohabitation corresponds to the production of this primary social capital. When those who are involved in a relationship of cohabitation avoid assuming, according to the configuration of public law, the obligations of reciprocal assistance, of fidelity, and of stable cohabitation, society does not have any interest in favoring this type of relationship. Rather, equating marriage with forms of cohabitation which demand all of the rights which spring from the conjugal bond, while excluding the correlating obligations, would inevitably lead to the weakening of that family institution which sustains society.²⁵ The civil law, in fact, has an educative value: as the English criminologist Nigel Walker affirmed, the laws of one generation easily become the customs of the next.²⁶ The privatization of love and the exclusive consideration of individualistic rights lead to the rapid dissolution of that necessary capital indispensable to the life of a society.

Additional observations can be made if we consider the point of view of the weakest, which the law has the specific duty of protecting, and which in this case are the children. Granting the right to adopt children to unstable cohabitation situations, or to homosexual cohabitation situations in which the complementary figures of mother and father are deficient, comes to a negation of the right of minors to be born and to grow up in a suitable family environment, such as the natural one, without knowing what the consequences upon their psyche and their growth will be. From the moment that the principle of equality among human persons is violated in this concrete way, by exposing some to a life in contexts unsuitable to their psychic development and their formation, the laws that equate marriage with such forms of cohabitation must be described as unjust.

Conclusion

²⁵Cf. V. Marano, *Le unioni di fatto. Esperienza giuridica secolare e insegnamento della Chiesa*, Giuffrè, Milano 2005; M. Bovini Baraldi, *Le nuove convivenze. Tra discipline straniere e diritto interno*, Ipsa, Milano 2005.

²⁶A more modern penal doctrine has expressly and thematically recognized the value of the law as a model for the formation of moral orientation in the life of citizens: cf. Johannes Andenaes, *La prevenzione generale nella fase della minaccia, dell'irrogazione e dell'esecuzione della pena*, in M. Romano - F. Stella (ed.), *Teoria e prassi della prevenzione generale dei reati*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1980, 33 ss., where the citation of Nigel Walker can be found.

“Christianity is not the work of persuasion, but of greatness.²⁷ With this beautiful quote by Saint Ignatius of Antioch, Pope Benedict XVI indicated before the Swiss bishops the key point in which resides, for him, the formidable challenge of the new evangelization. The greatest difficulty is not so much making ourselves understood, but rather losing the initial greatness that Christianity proposes in amazement. This loss of greatness is that which leads many Christians either to cling to certain valid convictions only at the private level, which however are devalued at the public level; or even to be ashamed of these convictions, hiding in a vague spiritualism that is content to cultivate good intentions lacking any concreteness or to exhibit merely a formal altruism.

Instead, the full awareness of the greatness of this Love that alone can save us and that in the humanity of Christ has revealed to us the greatness of love as a total, faithful, and fruitful gift of self, thus definitively illuminating the mystery of the family, allows us to find once again the courage of proclamation and the necessary certainty for a convincing educational proposal. The Christian proposal is demanding for men and women; it calls them to continually go beyond themselves, challenging their liberty. However, it does not leave them alone in their weakness and their doubts. It meets all men and women with a company that sustains them in the journey and above all with mercy that always offers, with forgiveness, the possibility of getting up and beginning again. The time has come to show in what measure we Christians are “experts in love” and how our mission is that of “teaching to love.”

²⁷St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans*, III, 3, cited by Benedict XVI, Concluding discourse at meeting with the Swiss Bishops, 9 November 2006.