

THE LOVE OF LIFE

**Pastoral Letter of the Bishops
of the Nordic Countries**

on

Marriage and the Family

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1 Introduction

1.1 The Purpose of the Pastoral Letter and Its Foundation

As in the previous years we, the Catholic bishops of the Nordic Countries of Europe, would once again like to present a pastoral letter about the basic values of human life, this time about marriage and family.

Even though our countries are considered to be secularized we detect a growing religious interest and often a lively debate about the basic values of our present and future society. The interest in spiritual values does not always appear in sharp contrast to an environment largely permeated with materialism. As uniform as our mostly globalized society may seem, all the more individual is the access of many people to the big questions of life. No one authority – including the Church – seems to have the interest and the power of persuasion regarding large groups of people. However the spiritual thirst and the interest in ethical questions – no matter how unstructured and contradictory they are with many people – presents a great new opportunity to offer the Gospel to them. The present situation of marriage and family also has to be judged in this light. The traditional family pattern, with all that it contains, is no longer the foundation of modern human lifestyle. On one side people live together within a spectrum of marriage-like cohabitation or shape their lives critically as singles, and on the other side they suffer under the defeats and disappointments that broken marriages and families have brought them. Although he tries to hold on to the possibility of choice and variety, modern man finally also seeks love, loyalty and security.

On this basis the Church would like to proclaim the Christian message of marriage and family, in order to give people hope and consolation and lead them to their true dignity. As Christians we believe that these basic values were given by God Himself. It is our task to discover them according to their contents, range and realization. These values have been revealed to us, step by step. First in the Holy Scriptures of the people of Israel and then finally and in full clarity in Jesus Christ, the prophesized Messiah, in whom we believe, as the Son of God, who became Man. He teaches us the true values, since He *is* the Truth (cf. Jh 14, 6). He has realized them in his life. His disciples documented and explained his words and deeds and gave those a concrete form. They often, like Jesus, took up events, stories, commandments and prophesies from the Old Testament, commented on them and gave them a new meaning. In this way the revelation of God was advanced and finished. The New Testament hands down the most important and decisive contents and is therefore the main source of our thought about values.

1.2 The Teaching of the New Testament

The New Testament gives a clear picture of the relationship between man and woman, as well as between parents and children. It is obvious that God has meant this as a basis and a framework for a joint human life. He even dignified it, in that He let his Son become a man within a family.

In his discussion with the Pharisees Jesus put forward the basic characteristics of marriage: it is a union between *one* man and *one* woman. The two shall become one flesh. What God has joined together has become so closely united that no human can separate them (cf. Mt 19, 4–6).

The Apostle Paul took up this opinion of marriage and developed it further. He talks of love as the power that unites man and woman, a selfless giving such as the one that Christ shows regarding his Church (cf. Eph 5, 21–33). Paul shows a picture of a family that is based on marriage. The family should also be characterized by the love of the parents to their children and of the children to their parents (cf. Eph 6, 1–4; Col 3, 18–21).

This teaching about marriage and family shows how God conceives the “new man” according to the image of Christ, and how man, thanks to redemption from sin, can renew himself. Especially in marriage and the family, the new man should have the possibility and strength to realize God’s plan for his life.

The Holy Family is a model for every Christian family. The love and loyalty of Joseph and Mary to each other, their selfless devotion to the child that God had entrusted to them, and the deep bond between Jesus, Mary and Joseph, is a model for every marriage and every family, that want to realize God’s plan.

2 The Christian Image of Man

2.1 Made in God’s Image

In the aforementioned discussion with the Pharisees Jesus said: “Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator made them male and female?” (Mt 19, 4). There he uses the sentence from the story of the creation: “God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them“ (Gen 1, 27).

This means that man not only is connected more closely to God than other creatures, but he is even similar to him. This also means that man always stays in a relationship with his Creator and with other human beings. In the search for the other he must step out of himself. Therefore God created them “male and female”. Especially in the relationship of male and female, this interdependence of man is seen most clearly.

Man and woman seek each other mentally as well as physically, in order to be united. God blesses this oneness and makes it fruitful in the begetting of children (cf. Gen 1, 28). God therefore had himself as the starting point when he created man. He stood, as it were, as a model for man. Therefore we see God when we see man, since man cannot be understood without referring to God. And without referring to God man can not develop himself in a meaningful way.

We believe in the triune God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Even though this mystery is inconceivable to us, and to many even seems unimportant in their daily lives, it is fundamental for our understanding of God and of ourselves as human beings. Man can not survive without relationships. Just as God in himself always has relationships as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, so man shall in a similar way enter into relationships with other humans and make a community. The relationships in God are always relationships of love. The Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father. This love is expressed through the Holy Spirit. Men should also love each other. Precisely the love in the spirit of God, is the foundation and support of human contact between people. There we are not talking about love that only speaks to one’s own emotions and gives them a short-lived satisfaction, rather: it is about a long-lasting love to others, about respect, high estimation and valuation, that only wishes the other good and is pleased that he exists. In this way

this love gives joy and perfection. It gives the other his freedom, embraces without smothering, seeks union without force. However it hopes for love in return, but leaves it to the other to return it or reject it. This love ties us to God and makes it possible for us to build a real and unrestricted union with others. It first seeks to repay God love, since He loved us first, and then also other human beings. It lets us step out of ourselves and creates real relationships.

The love-relationship between man and woman leads to the most intimate union in marriage. They both become “one body”. That was the will of God (cf. Gen 2, 24). For this purpose he created man a sexual being. Sexuality is a holy gift, since God himself, the fountain of all holiness, planted it in man. It is a source of blessing for people, for the lovers, as well as for the fruit of their sexual union – the new human being. In this way God lets his command “Be fruitful!”, come true. Sexuality is therefore not a capacity of which man can dispose of, at will. It must be a part and expression of his love-relationship. This only happens in the correct way in an indissoluble marriage, in which the love-relationship is durable in every respect, and embraces body and soul in mutual harmony. Only in this way, can it bring wholesome fruit: the deepening of the mutual love of man and woman and the responsible begetting of children and their genuine welfare.

2.2 The Freedom of Man

God made man because of love. Man can accept this love or ignore it. He can even reject it. So man has the possibility either to live in union with God, without him or even against him. Already in the garden of Eden man chose the second possibility. This is the first sin, that from this moment clings to all men as the “original sin”. It has in such a way destroyed man’s direction towards true love, that he is often far away from the happiness that this love should bring him. All humans are affected by this. Also man repeats his faulty relationship with God, time and time again. God offers his love at every time. Man however man does not recognize this, passes it by and sometimes puts himself directly against it. He is seduced to this, like his original parents, by Satan, the opponent of God. The negative position of man, opposed to God, and the disturbance of the right relationship with Him influence how he sees himself, other human beings and the world in which he lives. Man withdraws into himself, closes himself off and does not enter into a truly selfless love-relationship.

Man tends to look at his fellow man and also himself only from the outside. This becomes especially clear in the way in which he deals with sexuality. Often it is not viewed in the context of its whole biological and spiritual content and as a possibility for realizing true love, but rather dominated by desire. As a consequence the sexual union does not lead any more to a really harmonious union. Sexuality is made independent: it serves its own satisfaction. Often man forgets or rejects that sexuality is made to confirm the union of man and woman, the fruit of which is to generate children, and tries to prevent the generation of children.

If individualism or even egotism is the basis of man’s life-style, rather than true love, then often he will not perform his daily duties positively and with confidence. This is seen in connection with his family as well as with his life in society.

The original sin and its consequences also lay a heavy burden on man and make his life very difficult when it comes to his vocation to love. This severely damages marriage and

the family, but also society as a whole. But deep in the heart of man, there often remains, unconsciously alive, the longing that God gave for the restoration of the original unity with him and with others. God refers to this longing, first in the warnings and appeals of the prophets and finally in the Incarnation of his Son.

2.3 A New Beginning in Christ

In the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the new man appeared. Jesus was born into a family and it was precisely in this family that his human love developed to its fullest degree.

The love of Jesus was always a “double” one: love of God, his Father, and love of men. Jesus was obedient to his parents (cf. Lk 2, 51), although he showed that he first had to be obedient to his heavenly Father and that he “must be in [his] Father’s house” (Lk 2, 49). He “advanced in wisdom and age and favour before God and man” (Lk 2, 52).

Already the youth of Jesus shows that the love that characterizes him as well as Mary and Joseph, calls for sacrifices, in the first place towards God. A life of love not only demands the acceptance of suffering and an unrestricted devotion to the loved one, but also trust and confidence in God.

From the beginning of his public life, Jesus as the Christ, the Redeemer of humankind, preached and lived this selfless love. He only sought the salvation of all men, which was the will of God. His words and deeds were permeated with this.

Jesus collected the disciples who believed in him around himself in a new community of brothers and sisters (cf. Mt 12, 46–50). It should be characterized by trust in the heavenly Father, by devotion to him and by mutual love. Especially the disciples who were closest to him, he encouraged to live a life of love. The day before he suffered he convincingly showed them this love. In the washing of the feet he gave them an example so that they would follow him in his readiness for humble service and selfless love (cf. Jh 13, 15).

“Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end” (Jh 13, 1). This love urged him on and gave Him the power to atone for every man, a necessary atonement, in order to reconstruct the original love relationship, between God and man. Therefore he offered himself to the Father in his suffering and death on the cross. “Because of this, God greatly exalted him” (Phil 2, 9). Jesus erased the original sin and opened again the possibility for mankind to return to God, and he gave them the strength to live again fully in love.

The risen Lord gave his disciples the Holy Spirit, the love-bond between Father and Son in the Trinity as a help and a force. The Spirit leads the believers to the full truth, in that he glorifies Jesus, confirms his words and announces the coming salvation (cf. Jh 15, 7–14).

Jesus opened the door to a new world, a world in which neither power, property nor pleasure reign, but a world that God had planned from the beginning, a world in which men recognize God as Lord and Father and are devoted to him as well as to each other. In marriage, man and woman testify in each other to an inseparable union of love and loyalty. From this they obtain the power to build a true family, with their children, and devoted to them. God himself blesses and confirms this in the sacrament of matrimony.

3. Marriage as Sacrament

3.1 They Shall Become One Flesh

The salvation from original sin, through Jesus Christ, and the restoration of the sonship of God are realized and celebrated in the sacraments. The sacraments are holy bonds between God and people. In them, Jesus Christ is working through the Holy Spirit. He brings about the salvation, that God wants to give to every human being. Therefore it also builds up communities.

Jesus entrusted the Church, which he built on the apostles, with the sacraments. In the sacraments, that the Church gives, the power of the Holy Spirit is active. Therefore the Church could be called the “original sacrament”. In her and through her, the salvation that the sacraments give, becomes fruitful for the individual as well as for the society. The first and basic sacrament is baptism. It cleans the recipient of original sin and all personal sin, making him a child of God and a member of the Church. It gives him access to all the other graces of God, particularly by the Eucharist. The sacrament of confirmation confirms baptism and gives the Holy Spirit in a special way as strength to realize the sonship of God. Through that the recipient becomes a witness of Jesus Christ and receives a calling to assist in the building up and the expansion of the Church and to help bring salvation to others.

On this basis, marriage according to God’s plan, can be shaped and become a place of salvation. Originally it was meant to be a framework for a life of love towards him and towards each other. Jesus Christ reminded us of that (cf. Mt 19, 3–9). The apostle Paul compared love in marriage with the love of Christ for his Church, his body. Just as Christ gave himself for the Church, so should man and woman give themselves to each other in marriage. They should love each other “as their own bodies” (Eph 5, 28). This existence for each other creates an indivisible bond, a union through which both “become one flesh” (Eph 5, 31). Directly through this, the saving power of Christ becomes possible. He elevated marriage to a sacrament and he makes it an instrument of salvation for married people as well as for the family and society.

3.2 Requirements

As with every sacrament, the sacrament of marriage is also an offer of love from God. Therefore it must be received in freedom and conscientiously. A valid marriage requires the freedom of the married couple as well as their being conscious of the contents and the aims of marriage.

Man and woman should exclusively belong to each other and be unconditionally loyal to each other. They should live their marriage in such a way that their love for each other steadily grows and could lead to the generation of children.

This requires an objective and intensive preparation of marriage. First of all, the lovers must get to know each other thoroughly, to test the strength of their love and to grow in their mutual devotion. But at the same time they should deepen their knowledge of the teaching of the Church and take part in the Church’s life. Finally they must always be more and more conscious that “in all the days of our life, in sickness and in health, until death do us part” they only belong to each other. In this light they should be led by the Church, her conviction, her truth and her power. This preparation aims at a Church-celebration of the marriage, which should also concern the parish. In this way the

sacrament of marriage, which couples give each other, with the blessing of the Church, can become fruitful.

This applies not only to the marriage of two Catholics. Every baptized person who lives a lifelong marriage, in a conscious and a sincere way, partakes in God's mercy. For a Catholic marriage, where one partner is of different denomination, permission of the bishop is needed. A marriage between two people of different religions, i.e. when one of them has not been baptized, can only be concluded in a valid way with an explicit dispensation of the bishop.

According to the conviction of the Church a marriage is only valid if both partners are "free", i.e. not (any more) bound by a former marriage. A civil "divorce" or one given by a non-Catholic denomination does not dissolve such a bond. If it is not clear whether a marriage really has been concluded validly, especially in the case of non-Catholics, this has to be investigated by a matrimonial court of the Catholic Church.

During the preparation time the lovers should not live together as man and wife and consummate the marriage. People can not start a marriage on trial, since marriage is a bond for life. Besides life in a family community can not be realized or give the necessary security without the stability and indissolubility of a marriage.

The sexual union may therefore not be sought as something purely biological, something that primarily gives pleasure, but it must always be an expression and confirmation of mutual love. Further, it can not be taken out of context with its purpose, the possible generation of children. Therefore artificial contraception against fertility is contradictory to the dignity of the married people and their loving union.

This way of looking at marriage explains also why same-sex partnerships and homosexual relationships are not reconcilable with the sexual life of man as God intended it.

Marriage is therefore a bond between man and woman, based on the total devotion to each other. God Himself enters this bond in order to give it stability and to strengthen their mutual and selfless love.

3.3 Gift of God and Charge

In its depth and right execution, marriage can only be considered as a gift, the gift of God to man and a mutual gift of man and woman. To open oneself to the love of Christ and to let it affect oneself, so that the other knows that he is loved, is a gift that includes a charge. After all, it is the love of God that wants to have an effect in marriage. The sacrament gives the power for this to happen. It lets the love remain active, i.e. continually, steady in truth, open for offspring, steadily striving for renewal and deepening, adjusting to changing conditions and advancing age and especially concerned with the building up of the family.

Marriage needs "nourishment", nourishment from God, that is primarily given in the participation in Church life: in communal praying and in the celebration of the sacraments, especially Penance and the Eucharist. Furthermore, marriage time and time again, needs signs of love in daily dealings with each other as well as in the joint management of life's duties, especially the bringing up of children.

In this light, the life of married people also points to true love in society and helps build it up according to God's plan. It mediates the salvation of man through Jesus Christ, since

he makes the divine love real in the life of people with each other. Rightly so, a good and stable marriage awakens attention and wonder. It contributes considerably towards the spreading and acceptance of the Gospel of Christ.

4. Marriage and the family

4.1 The Origin of the Family

In the marriage ceremony, man and woman promise each other loyalty “till death do us part”. This loyalty shall be maintained “all the days of our life, in sickness and in health”. On the basis of this, the married couple can declare that they are ready to become father and mother and to raise their children in a Christian way, since marriage is a bond for life and it therefore constitutes the main basis for the harmonious growing up of children, who can rely on their father and mother.

This is only possible if man and woman love each other with a selfless and unrestricted love. The blessing of God, that is called upon married people, guarantees exactly this. God unites those married people so intimately that their love-bond becomes inseparable. When two lovers, after careful consideration and conscious of the responsibility that they take on, publicly enter such a marriage, the Church reckons, that they really mean it and that they are determined to keep their promise.

But it often turns out that it is not easy to keep the mutual love alive for the long term. Love in marriage sometimes requires almost heroic self-sacrifice, not only by lengthy illness or in the case of unfaithfulness, alcoholism or the neglect of the duty of care within the family, but probably all the more in everyday trials. The lovers then find that they gradually drift apart. To avoid this, they must give and forgive time and time again. They must reach out of themselves and try to be completely open for the other, as always with the exclusion of any third party.

The one who becomes guilty of unfaithfulness, neglect of care of the family or lack of attention for the other, should change his behaviour. The partner should lovingly point out the faulty behaviour and encourage a change. The most important thing is, to show the guilty party that love is still alive and that forgiveness is possible.

Love is a process of growing towards each other. This lasts one’s whole life. Only the one who is always ready to give the other priority, can expect recognition, attention and reception. But also if this is withheld, one must not stop one’s selfless love. To love really means: to show love even when no love is, or seems to be, given in return.

True love is difficult. To be there for somebody who only wants to be loved and does not return love, or does so only half-heartedly, requires readiness for sacrifice. This is also the case in regard to the love of parents for their children. But how should children live true love if their parents do not show it in their lives? It is exactly in patient devotion to each other, that married people experience that such a devotion will pay off. For if both of them, according to their matrimonial promise are ready to do that, then their happiness in loving will grow. The loss of oneself is worthwhile, since one wins the other and that is exactly what was wished for in the beginning.

4.2 The Acceptance of Children

Marriage must be open for children. This is so significant that an exclusion of children by one or both of the married couple, makes the contract of marriage invalid, because God himself when he created man and woman said: “Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1, 28). All cultures look at children as a blessing. Everyone who does not acknowledge this, has misunderstood love and tried to enjoy life for himself or eventually together with somebody else. Such an attitude is contrary to married love, since the begetting of children was intended to confirm and deepen it. It is its fruit.

The woman alone does not have the children, but the child needs a mother and a father, who want to found a family together and build it up. Only parents who really love each other and live this love, can raise a child in true love. Therefore children should only be begotten within a stable marriage, that is built on love. The child needs to experience this love, so that it will come to know love and practise it.

God gave man and woman sexuality in order to beget children, although it is possible that they will not succeed in this. Married people who gladly want to have children are allowed to seek the help of medical science. Artificial insemination in every form however may not be seen as an expression of mutual love and also does not correspond to the dignity of the child. The child always remains a gift of God. He is the creator, who makes use of the sexual disposition of man and woman in order to awake new life.

God gives new life and it belongs to him. Therefore it is untouchable from the conception onwards. The parents should always be conscious of that. They should accept the child in love, also if perhaps it does not fulfil their expectations or even is disabled. God himself entrusted them with the child, so that they would nourish it, protect and above all, love it. They may expect God’s help in this endeavour.

As is well known, many married people can, despite their wishes, not have children in the normal way. Children are always fundamentally a gift of God. God has however found a task for childless married people. They for example may adopt children, receive and raise abandoned or rejected children or orphans and build a family with them, so that they also will experience parental love – for each other and for the children. Childless married people also may have a special task within the Church and in society and in this way become fertile.

This requires that the lovers and married people want to live according to God’s plan. For that they need a sincere faith in the goodness of God and a deep trust in his leadership. Prayer for God’s light, power and strengthening through the sacraments, provides help for this.

4.3 The Charge of the Parents

Marriage is based on fruitfulness and therefore on the family. In the family, as a true community, the parents have a vital role. The caring support is the love that the child should feel already in its mother’s womb. It should experience that its parents are happy with its arrival and look forward to its birth and welcome it in their midst and in the midst of its brothers and sisters.

The conditions in which the child grows up in its first years, later characterize its opinions about fundamental questions of life. The child must experience openness, trust, optimism and especially true love. At the same time it should in its early years learn not

to intrude into the lives of others, to try and adjust its wishes to what is possible and learn to put up with restrictions. If it makes mistakes or behaves wrongly, it must not only accept reprimands and show remorse, but it must also experience forgiveness. It must especially be stimulated to show sympathy and readiness to help the sick, the disabled and old people.

Since, in our countries, both parents often do not belong to the same ecclesial denomination or one of them is not baptized, the parents should from the beginning be clear that the Catholic Church expects them to give their children Catholic baptism and Catholic upbringing. The Catholic parent is first and foremost responsible for that. It is however desirable that the non-Catholic parent supports this if possible. It is important that the children be given a clear and unequivocal view of the faith and Christian life, so that they can make its contents and requirements the guide of their behaviour. As soon as they can understand, they should be informed about the different faith and Church-membership of their parents and learn to respect this. But at the same time they should be called upon to stand by their own faith and to be loyal to their Church. For this to succeed, the example of their Catholic parent is decisive.

The life of the child, that has become God's child through baptism, is under the blessing of its heavenly Father. It must be reminded of that regularly. Therefore an introduction to the stories of the Bible should be part of its upbringing. It should especially build up a loving relationship with Jesus, and in Mary the child should see its heavenly Mother. Prayer should be part of the daily life of the family. Also the parents should bring their children with them to church and explain to them that God lives there and that he is always waiting there for them. Gradually the children will learn what is going on in the liturgy and how to behave accordingly. The catechesis of the parish may assist this basic religious upbringing by the parents. It prepares the children especially for the reception of the sacraments and introduces them as conscious living Christians to life of the community.

The religious life of the parents is very important. Their example will unmistakably have its impact on the children, also if they, during their adolescence, should choose to go different ways, which their parents would not find desirable. Loving warnings and the parents' own behaviour will bear fruit with time. It is decisive that they speak their own conviction and always keep the door open for discussions about it.

It is of great importance for the children, which kind of carers and teachers, the parents trust them to and which circles they associate with. Basically, the parents decide the contents of the upbringing of their children and they should expect that this will be respected. The children need a uniform environment where they can grow up harmoniously with respect to truth and values. They will slowly come to understand that outside of their families, other values about good and evil often prevail. They have to learn to judge them correctly and to regulate their behaviour with others accordingly.

4.4 The Danger of Mutual Alienation – Divorce

Love must grow if it is to survive over time. Often marriages which are contracted in love, fail because of a lack of durable love. Since lovers don't want to give up their

supposed independence and self-realization, they often lack the power and the patience to hold out in true love. Maybe they had false expectations about the love that would fittingly be returned to them. Or they would like to keep a part of their lives for themselves and through that they remain partly distant to the other. Instead of moving closer to each other, they move away from each other and live separate lives instead of becoming one. This may lead to the coming of a third person, who can give more understanding and recognition for one's self. Sometimes violence and alcoholism, wrong priorities in work and career, unusually big financial difficulties or a severe illness, are a big challenge to marriage and family-life. In such difficult circumstances, a civil divorce is often seen as the only solution to the problems and to save one's self.

In spite of all this, people really don't want divorce, least of all those who seriously gave each other a lifelong promise of faithfulness. Therefore a hasty declaration of guilt should not be given, since only the participants and God are justified to do this.

Also if divorce seems unavoidable, everything must be done to save the marriage, not least because of the children. In these situations understanding pastoral guides, good friends and relatives, and other married couples, may help by words and deeds. Suitable advice and therapy should also be considered.

If the break can no longer be mended, or if the divorce exists for some considerable time already, or if a new relationship has been entered, the spouses should not give up or even turn their back upon the Church. As a Church, we must always be open for these people. Then it must be investigated, whether the marriage bond from the beginning fulfilled the requirements of the Church for a legal marriage. It is the task of the marriage courts of the Church to investigate this and their work must be considered an important pastoral activity.

It is possible, that because of the incompatible behaviour of one or both partners a separation is unavoidable, not least in favour of the children who suffer greatly because of the constant quarrelling of the parents. In such a case, divorce is out of the question, only the married couple no longer share the same living quarters. The Church will allow this under special circumstances. However ongoing efforts must be made to find ways to restore the cohabitation in mutual peace.

If the divorce is followed by a new relationship, which in spite of a legal investigation by the Church cannot be deemed a marriage, the Church can not approve of it. Whoever makes such a step, should however feel sure that God keeps his heart open to him. "If we are unfaithful he remains faithful" (2Tm 2, 13). The abandoned partner in the marriage must be strengthened in his fidelity. Special attention and care must be shown to the children. They are always the innocent victims of divorce. They need a family that is based on a truly stable marriage of parents, that love each other. If this collapses, then one can only hope and work towards the goal that the love of the parents for their children is nevertheless preserved.

The evil of divorce makes clear how much married people depend on the help of God and the Church, if they are to live their love truly and in faithfulness. Without the grace of God this will be impossible. The Christian couple must therefore repeatedly make the selfless love of Christ for his Church (cf. Eph 5, 25–32), their model. Regular prayers together at home and the reception of the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist, are necessary, in order to preserve and strengthen married love. These sources of strength

should also be used quite early for the children since they are absolutely necessary for the solidarity and the correct development of family life.

5. The Christian Family in Today's Society

5.1 The Mission of the Family

The family not only refers to God and the Church, it is simultaneously also the basis of society. Therefore the family must be open to society and take part in its life. Parents and children should neither isolate themselves from society nor lose themselves in it. The family is the first community that the child gets to know and where it may find its place. In society many impressions are imprinted on the child. It is influenced by television, the internet, by the school and by interactions with other people. The effects of these impressions are various. The parents have to assist the child to evaluate them, to judge them in a right way and to deal with them. This applies to adolescents as well as to little children. Even if the adolescents, independently want to investigate the world and what it has to offer, the opinions of their parents and their judgements are important and have influence, especially if they are conveyed in sincere and patient discussions.

It is especially important to assist the children in their search for a future path in life. This should not, simply, be decided by the wishes of the parents, but should take into account, the deepest feelings and abilities of each child. Parents and children must remember that God has a purpose and a plan for every human being, which each individual, however, has to discover and strive for, in freedom. Such a plan may not only include marriage, but also life outside of marriage, for the building up of God's kingdom, for example as a priest, religious and member of other communities of consecrated life or in various different ways in service to others. Often one finds this plan in roundabout ways. It is however important to stay open to such a plan and when it has finally been recognized, to follow it through, in good conscience. The parents should assist their children in this, with the help of their experience of life.

In this task both parents and children need God's help. Only through intensive contact with him and with the strength he gives, they will be able to find the right way.

5.2 A High Goal

The present considerations about marriage and family may seem too idealistic to many people. It is indeed a description of an idealistic goal. Especially the justification of the indissolubility of marriage and the exclusive practise of sex within marriage, make this obvious. Many will say: Such an opinion of marriage and family life is unthinkable for us. Are we, the bishops, therefore allowed to reject the Christian image of God and man and the requirements for married people, that follow consequently from that? Are we allowed to join the common trend or accommodate it through a relativism of values? Are we allowed, since we live in varying cultural circumstances, to keep quiet about Holy Scripture and the Church? As bishops we would neglect our duties, if we would not, even on this issue, proclaim the Catholic faith, in its entirety. We are of the opinion, that it is

necessary both for the individual as well as for the society, especially today, to ask about what is really true and of lasting value and to answer those questions.

5.3 Ways to Realize the Goal

No less challenging than the aims expressed above, will be their compliance by married people and family members. They often meet little understanding and are exposed to real difficulties.

This starts with young people who want to distance themselves from the culture of sex and pleasure, of their age group. It takes a lot of strength and courage to distance oneself from that. Young people, as is well known, do not readily step out of line, if there is a question of a universally accepted behaviour within their age group, not least if they themselves find it attractive. Only a convincing upbringing and an encouraging assistance of parents and educators, as well as the possibility of finding others, who think in the same way, can help them to assert themselves and to value more a growth towards a true love-relationship than to start having sexual relationships before marriage.

The adolescents should know that a fulfilling and delightful sexual dedication, is based on an all-embracing love relationship of man and woman in marriage, who show each other lasting fidelity and are open for the begetting and raising of children. Love is much more than only “sex”

As long as the young people live with their parents, they are protected in a way, although already affected by the incentive of liberal dealings with others. As soon as they leave their parents’ house for studies, work or because of their own wish to live independently, it becomes all the more difficult to protect them from damaging relationships. Also, then, the parents must try and keep close contact and dialogue with them.

If a serious relationship has grown between a young man and a young lady, then both should from the beginning agree on the boundaries of their mutual interaction. They should discuss this openly and also receive the advise of others.

If they are convinced that they would like to build a stable family together, the future husband and wife should discuss married life seriously and set their goals, which they can later go back to. In this they should, if at all possible, seek the advise of their parents and other trustworthy adults. Especially during the preparation-time for marriage, they should, both privately and together, pray for God’s help and power and regularly participate in Mass in church, also when they do not belong to the same denomination. Then the parishioners may through their positive interest, strengthen them in their intention to build their future life together, based on God’s plan.

We know that today, in society, within the legal framework of the State, and in certain ecclesial circles, marriage is no longer considered a life long commitment. Also the importance of the family and especially its significance for the children is no longer sufficiently valued. They are often considered less important than the interests of married people. The young married couple must therefore nurture their love-relationship and be prepared for having children. Individual or mutual wishes concerning housing, comfort and leisure may not prevent the rearing of a family. When children have finally arrived, their care must have absolute priority, above all other things. Therefore the parents, in time, should try to arrange their work in such a way, that this does not adversely effect them in providing for and raising their children. State and society have the duty to see to

that this will be possible. The parents themselves sometimes have the difficult task of reconciling their wishes for careers and comfort, as well as their personal leisure, with the wishes and needs of the children. The raising of children should be a joint matter for father and mother. The parents should further nurture their love-relationship and form it in such a way that it may lead to the realization of the plan that they made for their family.

Contact with relatives can be of great value. It is also desirable to meet regularly with like-minded married couples and their children to exchange experiences and to encourage each other. Not least the family should be a “domestic-church”: Parents and children should pray together and celebrate the Christian feasts at home. The family should go to church in order to seek power and strength. It is desirable to take an active part in parish life.

Life in a stable marriage and the formation and organisation of a stable family, in which the members feel accepted, is not an easy task, in the present situation. However such marriages and families are not outdated models for life, but they represent a challenge to reflect on the meaning and aim of one’s own, often disappointed, life-fulfilment.

Marriage and family, as we have described them, may stimulate society to rethink its ideas. As we already mentioned in the introduction, materialism, individualism and considerable liberalism have spread. But these offer no lasting support in life. In contrast to this, a marriage and a family that is based upon unselfish love, towards each other, and has been stabilized by God, may offer true durability and security. Such marriages and families are the real foundation of society.

Christians, who live in a stable marriage and build up a solid family, are therefore fulfilling an important task. They are a sign of the realization of salvation through Jesus Christ and they are also proclaiming his gospel.

6. Assistance of the Church: Family and Parish

From the beginning the Church was conscious of the high value, but also the difficulties of marriage and family-life. Jesus Christ made such high demands to married people that the disciples cried: “It is better not to marry!” (Mt 19, 10). The Lord calmed them, but he retracted none of his demands concerning the indissolubility of marriage and the unconditional faithfulness of married people. He also clarified that the children always have a claim to attention and tenderness, and that they may never be pushed aside (cf. Lk 18, 15–17).

The apostle Paul emphasized that in marriage, man and woman should love each other “as their own bodies” (cf. Eph 5, 28). Here, he is talking of a deep love, like the love Jesus has shown his Church (cf. Eph 5, 25). Furthermore the apostle stresses that the children owe their parents, and parents their children, love and care (cf. Eph 6, 1–4; Col 3, 20f).

Throughout history there have often been violent disputes about adherence to ecclesial instructions. But the Church was always steadfast in her defence. She knew it was her duty to be unyielding, since the matter was about a demand of the Lord. The Church has also defended the equal worth of man and woman within marriage. She promotes a good

upbringing of the children. For this purpose she has established her own schools, that offered good instruction for all. The Church has always sharply criticised abortion and abandoning children.

The Church also defends marriage and supports a correct family life. In its Constitution, “The Church in the Modern World”, the Second Vatican Council unmistakably expressed its opinions about this matter. Later the Popes have published encyclical and apostolic letters. We mention especially the still relevant apostolic exhortation of Pope John Paul II, “Familiaris Consortio”, about marriage and the family, from the year 1981. On the basis of such publications, also we, the bishops and priests, in our proclamations and catechesis, portray the truth about marriage and the worth of matrimony and the family, so that everyone can learn about them and come to value them.

Special attention should be given to young people who are preparing for marriage. We therefore suggest that courses should be offered, in which marriage as such would be discussed, as well as the correct conduct in regard to sexuality, the building up of a family and the upbringing of children. We also recommend establishing parent groups, where experiences could be exchanged and where people could give each other encouragement in deepening their marriages and making them more fruitful. Such courses could eventually be lead by elderly married couples with the participation of a priest.

The parishes should try to find good ways of caring for children and to build up an attractive pastoral service for the youth. Those should not be an alternative for the parental home. Rather the parents should be helped to make it possible for children in a wider circle and with good leadership, to acquire the necessary development and openness for others.

The Catholic schools are and will be important. They must teach at a high level and offer relevant guidance for their development. Within this framework a correctly based sex education can and should be offered.

As a Church we must not forget single parents who are raising their children alone, regardless of whether they are unmarried or divorced. Possibilities and ways to deal with their situation and their difficulties, should be sought together with them. At any rate they should experience that the Church is also for them. The same applies to widows and widowers. Special attention should also be given to children from broken marriages. They need a suitable and encouraging guidance.

All of this requires the prayers of those affected, as well as other parish-members and especially the religious, so that as many as possible will, through the help and strength of God, lead a good marriage, be steady in their marriage and build up a solid family, in favour of their children. Adolescents, married people and those that have been disappointed by their marriage or family, should find stability both in their prayers and participation in the life of the Church, and always feel loved by God.

We, the bishops, would like to put great emphasis on married life and family life in the pastoral work. We suggest to the deacons and priests, to form the sermons and liturgy in such a way that especially married people and adolescents find it attractive and receive strength and help from it. All others, who work in the pastoral service for the youth as well as for the preparation for marriage, should emphasize the high value and deep contents of Christian marriage and family. At the same time we call upon the public to

give marriage and family life the necessary help and to value and regard the family as the pillar of society.

7. Conclusion

We would like to end this pastoral letter with a citation from the apostolic exhortation “Familiaris Consortio”, about marriage and the family, by Pope John Paul II. At the end of it the Pope refers to the holy family of Nazareth as a model and source of strength for all Christian families. He says:

“Through God’s mysterious design, it was in that family that the Son of God spent long years of a hidden life. It is therefore the prototype and example for all Christian families. It was unique in the world. Its life was passed in anonymity and silence in a little town in Palestine. It underwent trials of poverty, persecution and exile. It glorified God in an incomparably exalted and pure way. And it will not fail to help Christian families – indeed, all the families in the world – to be faithful to their day-to-day duties, to bear the cares and tribulations of life, to be open and generous to the needs of others, and to fulfil with joy the plan of God in their regard.

St. Joseph was “a just man,” a tireless worker, the upright guardian of those entrusted to his care. May he always guard, protect and enlighten families.

May the Virgin Mary, who is the Mother of the Church, also be the Mother of the “domestic-church”. Thanks to her motherly aid, may each Christian family really become a “little Church” in which the mystery of the Church of Christ is mirrored and given new life. May she, the Handmaid of the Lord, be an example of humble and generous acceptance of the will of God. May she, the Mother of Sorrows at the foot of the Cross, comfort the sufferings and dry the tears of those in distress because of the difficulties of their families.

May Christ the Lord, the Universal King, the King of Families, be present in every Christian home as He was at Cana, bestowing light, joy, serenity and strength. On the solemn day dedicated to His Kingship I beg of Him that every family may generously make its own contribution to the coming of His Kingdom in the world – “a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love, and peace,” towards which history is journeying.” (No 86).

We, bishops, would like to make this wish of the Pope our own and convey it to you with all our hearts.

+ Anders Arborelius,
Bishop of Stockholm

+ Gerhard Schwenzer,
Bishop of Oslo

+ Czeslaw Kozon
Bishop of Copenhagen

+Johannes B.M. Gijzen
Bishop of Reykjavík

+ Józef Wróbel
Bishop of Helsinki

+ Gerhard Goebel
Bishop-prelate of Tromsø

+ Georg Müller
Bishop-prelate of Trondheim

+ William Kenney
Auxiliary bishop of Stockholm

+ Hans Martensen
former bishop of Copenhagen

M. Bernt Eidsvig
bishop elect of Oslo

Reykjavík, 12 September 2005