



May 10, 2015

*Letter of the Catholic Bishops of Southern Manitoba  
Marking the National Week for Life and Family  
10-17 May 2015*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

During the week of May 10- May 17, 2015, the Catholic Church in Canada celebrates its annual National Week for Life and Family. This yearly event is an opportune time to reflect on the dignity and sanctity of both Human life and the Family. Our theme this year is: *The Family, A School of Christian Love - where Life begins and Love never ends.*

**The Christian Family Rooted in Scripture**

A key scriptural principle taught by the Second Vatican Council was that each Christian is called to holiness. *"This is the will of God, your sanctification..."* (1Thess. 4:3). Since the family is the primary community in which a person matures, it is clear that the Christian Family should be a place where we are helped to grow in holiness. And holiness cannot grow without a life of love, and without love we would only be like a noisy gong or clanging cymbal (1Cor. 13:1-4). It is in fact, God's will that each of us increase and abound in love for one another and for all (1Thess. 3:12), just as the Lord has loved us (Jn. 13:34). With this in mind, St. John Paul II reminded us that at its heart, the Christian family is essentially missionary in character: *"The family has the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love"* (*Familiaris Consortio* #17). The Council and certainly the Church in recent times, has stressed the importance for the baptized to evangelize and this means becoming a witness, a missionary for the Good News and asks us to bring a message of God's great love for humanity to the modern world. Our faith teaches us that the Christian family is able to communicate God's love in a special way when it is lived as a sacramental sign of Christ's love for the Church (Eph. 5:21-32). But this gift of God's love is also a task to be undertaken. Christian marriage and by extension, Christian families, can be viewed as a true apostolate that is meant to serve others in love.

## **The Spiritual Mission of the Family in the World**

The task of Christian spouses is to live and communicate this gift of love, first to each other and then to their children and ultimately to others around them. This is at the center of the family's mission in the world – a mission and a task that can only be learned within the school of divine love that the Christian family truly is. It is here that we begin to grasp the immense importance of the Christian family at the very heart of the Church's task to evangelize and when « the Christian family takes up the task to become what it is – *a living icon in our world of God's own communion of love within the Holy Trinity, (FC#17)* — it truly becomes a Domestic Church. In this way the Christian Family becomes fully alive.» (Carl Anderson, Supreme Knight, 7 Jan. 2014)

## **The Crisis of the Family Today**

This reality that Christian families are meant to be schools of love means that they are a light of hope in our contemporary age. When Jesus said that he was the Light of the world (Jn. 8:12) he meant the same for every disciple and most certainly the family itself. It is very clear that the question of the family is becoming ever more crucial to the Church; in fact we can speak of a crisis of the family today, a crisis fueled by our prevailing culture of the individual. A culture that puts the “me” first; worships the “me”, and directs all our efforts towards self-realization with the individual prevailing over the common good of society and the rights of the individual prevailing even over those of the family. In such a context the personal choice for “no-commitment” cohabitation is becoming preferable for many people to the lifelong commitment of marriage and its interdependent relationships. The family's meaning is turned upside down to the point that it is no longer the “basic cell of society” but rather the basic cell of the individual with the “me” as the new measure of reality as well as the measure of marriage.

Moreover, just about everywhere in the developed world our laws reflect the primacy of the individual over the family. Within this environment, one can understand how the traditional family, as it has been understood for thousands of years, is ignored or worse yet, is vilified and persecuted. Sadly, the decline of the family unit has brought about a predictable weakening of society both from the sheer financial cost of the effects of family breakdowns in society as well as in our mode of life as a people. The sense of living within a community of families where we look out for others, especially in our cities, has given way to an avoidance of the other and to keep them from getting too close. We are now seeing a society with fewer families and children, and more people who choose to remain alone or live in or live in no-commitment unions. In addition, people have convinced themselves that they can “be family” in all sorts of different ways. Any kind of living together can be a family as long as there is love. With this development, the family is not so much rejected as to be simply grouped among other possible ways of living in relationships. This philosophy, in fact, is a way of demolishing the family step by step.

## **The Family as a Source of Hope**

Yet in spite of the disintegration that we see in family life today, we know very well that any society rises or falls depending on the family. This is clearly seen in times of crisis throughout history where, without families, society would not survive. No other way of living can create the positive and lasting relationships that are found in the family, no other form of relationship has such societal

potentiality. Nowhere can humans fully learn and experience solidarity that family ties provide and the love and mercy without which other virtues lose their meaning. The family is an indispensable resource for society. This truth clearly shows that the family is unmatched as a school of love in which future citizens are formed in virtue and the Christian family itself, as a school founded in divine love, is a light for our time and culture. And if the Christian family is to be faithful to its vocation, it must allow the Sacraments to strengthen its life and mission. In this way the Christian family can truly become a Domestic Church. Pope Francis recently said: *"Families are the Domestic Church where Jesus grows; he grows in the love of the spouses; he grows in the lives of children. That is why the enemy so often attacks the family."* (Pope Francis, Rome, June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014) In this statement by Pope Francis, we learn that the Christian family is a place of encounter not only on the temporal level but on the spiritual one as well.

### **What Must We Do?**

The Church as the People of God must support families both in pastoral services and in the endorsement of family friendly social policies. We must begin to see the family as a resource to renew the parish and the Church. Marriage is not just a blessing for the couple, but like every sacrament, marriage is a gift of Grace given for the building up of the Church. The married vocation is not just fulfilled within the four walls of the family home but meant to be a building block of the Church and society. An Irish archbishop has stated that, *"We need a Church where the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ witnessed to within families and through families in the life of the Church."* (Bishop Diarmuid Martin, Dublin, June 14<sup>th</sup> 2014) And Pope Francis said there are three expressions that form the basis of family relationships: *"Please, Thank you, I'm sorry"*. These are expressions that you will not hear at the level of public debates, but they are in fact the opposite of what individualism means and are at the core of building loving relationships.

The failures of the Church have usually been failures in love. The Church needs to be a place where the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ is witnessed to in marriage and family and through the family into the Church itself. Every new marriage is an expression of the desire for happiness and fulfillment. There is need to build up a cultural climate in which that love can flourish. There is a great need to restore confidence in marriage and family today.

Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph,

Pray for us!

Sincerely in Christ the Lord!

✦Albert LeGatt  
Archbishop of Saint-Boniface

✦Richard Gagnon  
Archbishop of Winnipeg

✦Lawrence Huculak  
Ukrainian Archbishop of Winnipeg