Family, the Joy of Life

Contents

Introduction 5

Part One: 9
The Theological Basis for the Concept of Christian Marriage

- The Human Being, Temple of the Living God 9
- Marriage, the Sacrament of Joy 11
- Marriage, the Sacrament of Love 12
- Marriage, the Sacrament of Communion 13

Part Two: 17
Contemporary Challenges for the Family

- Secularism 17
- The Economy and Consumerism 19
- Globalization, Social Media, and the Virtual World 20

Part Three: 23
Bioethical Issues

- Issues Related to the Beginning of Life 23
  - The Embryo and Abortion 24
  - Artificial Insemination 24
  - Birth Control 26
  - Adoption 26

- Issues Related to the End of Life 27
  - Euthanasia 27
  - Palliative Care 28
  - Organ Donation 29

- Other Ethical and Life-Related Issues 29
  - Refraining from Marriage 29
  - Cohabitation 30
  - Homosexuality 30
  - Addiction 31
  - Child and Adolescent Abuse 32

Part Four:
The Role of the Family in the Life of the Church 35

Part Five:
Pastoral Recommendations 39

- Specialized Pastoral Care 39
- Family Guidance Centers 39
- Continuing Pastoral Training 40
- The Spiritual Role of the Priest 40
- Christian Education 40
- A Culture of Accompaniment 41
- Encouraging Procreation 41

Conclusion 43

Introduction

To our beloved children in the Lord,

The clergy and faithful of the Holy Patriarchate of Antioch,

In accordance with the decision of the Holy Synod of Antioch, held in Balamand on October 3-10, 2019, and building on its discussion of the topic “the concept of the family, its situation and its needs” as a primary concern because of the worries, difficulties and challenges affecting the family today, we address this pastoral letter to all of our children in the Holy See of Antioch, in the homeland and the countries abroad. We are seeking to fortify them, as individuals and as families, with the Church’s approach to the dangers of these challenges. In doing this we are seeking ways to avoid their repercussions for the soundness of their life in Christ and the stability of their families, relying on the mind of the Gospel and the teaching of the Church and the holy fathers.

The decision of the fathers of the Holy Synod of Antioch to prioritize the family in their study and concern stems from the fact that it is the nucleus, heart and conscience of society, despite the questions that modern sociology raises about its proper place. Likewise, preserving the family and securing the joy of Christ in its life is of the greatest concern for the Church because the adverse targeting of the family and of the stability of its life that we are witnessing in our world today threatens a basic pillar of

Christian life. Our Holy Church therefore places at the forefront of her priorities helping people to realize God's will in their families, stabilizing them in correct faith, in living Christian values, and in standing firm in joy and hope. "The little church" is a living witness to Christ, a lamp shining in the world.

As a brief preface to the contents of this letter, we note that our Orthodox theology is distinguished as a healing theology that attends to the human being in his or her totality and is concerned with his or her salvation. This requires first of all diagnosing the illness and its causes, the dangers if it persists and the consequences if it worsens and then specifying the effective means of treatment. Both the treatment and the methods of prevention rely on the experience and tradition of the Church, while they benefit from modern science in the search for ways to heal and from the necessity of believers respecting them. The Church is a hospital that treats and heals people through the power of God. Treating her children is also tied to spiritual fatherhood and the pastoral care of the Eucharistic community for the "believers" through love and inviting them to rely on God and His Holy Spirit in confronting difficulties. In doing so, the Church draws inspiration from her patristic and liturgical heritage in all programs for raising awareness, providing treatment, and healing on account of the encouragement for spiritual vigilance, receptivity and growth that it contains.

Since preserving the stability of the family is the first requirement for desirable steadfastness in the face of economic crises, our Holy Church affirms that the effort to activate all energies and capabilities to support the family is a priority for her. She calls upon her children to be constructively engaged in this effort to humanize societies and work to make their structure more equitable.

This letter raises essential issues of life pertaining to the family and it remains for each diocese to implement the ideas set forth according to its situation, its circumstances and the society in which it exists and to work according to its regulations and laws. In this way, the task of implementation belongs to us all, pastors and people, because every believer is responsible for the knowledge and gifts that God has given them.

May God strengthen us so that in grace we grow, in service we transcend, and in love the structure is strengthened, and our families flourish in the joy of life.

Issued by the Patriarchal Headquarters in Damascus

December 4, 2019

By the grace of God

John X

Patriarch of Antioch and All the East



Part One

The Theological Basis for the Concept of Christian Marriage

The Human Being, Temple of the Living God

1. God loved humankind and created them out of nothing, "in His image and likeness." He gave them life, will, and freedom, and asked them to make good use of these gifts. In the second century, St. Theophilus, Bishop of Antioch replied to someone who asked him to show him his God by saying, "Show me yourself and I will show you my God."[1] This means that the human being can reflect the invisible God and reveal His love and glory to the universe. This highlights the magnificence and responsibility that we have in our personal and family life.

2. The Orthodox view of the human being is distinguished by an approach, which considers the human being as a whole: body, soul, and spirit. The soul gives life to the body and the spirit makes the whole human being, body and soul, a spiritual being. Throughout his or her earthly journey, the human being's goal is to watch over his or her body and soul and make them permeable and obedient to the Spirit. The human being is a unified entity, called to become a "partaker of the divine nature,"[2] deified by

1 *To Autolycus*, Book 1.2, PG 6: 1028.

2 2 Peter 1: 4.

grace. One may also “quench the Spirit,”[1] silencing the soul within oneself and enslaving it to the body, thus weakening the unity of one’s being. This happens when one rebels against the will of his Creator by renouncing Him, cutting oneself off from the source of life. The Creator, on the other hand, does not renounce humankind. He constantly opens to them the way of repentance and victory over death through life in Christ, who - by His life-giving death on the Cross and Resurrection - defeated corruption and death. Through His Incarnation, Death, Resurrection, and bodily Ascension into heaven, the Lord has sanctified human nature. He gave humankind the means to reactivate the state of being created in the image of God. Through control of the passions, the acquisition of virtues, knowledge of the Bible, commitment to Church life, the practice of sacraments, and the encounter with Christ and His service in every person, the human becomes capable of overcoming death and resuming the path to deification.

3. Practicing self-control consciously and by free will, the human takes as his motto the words of the Apostle Paul: “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable.”[2] This is what every Christian experiences in Church life. The Church’s Sacraments transmit divine life to us. The Bible strengthens us in the Lord and exhorts us to imitate Him. Fasting fortifies us against temptations and lusts. Asceticism leads us away from passions. Matrimonial communion within the Church makes it easier for spouses to walk this “narrow” - yet glorious - path through their striving together in Christ, their imitating Him and their shared longing for holiness. In this way, they achieve their perfection and, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within them, they form a nucleus of the Church, “a temple of God,”[3]

1 1 Thessalonians 5: 19.

2 1 Corinthians 6: 12.

3 2 Corinthians 9: 6.

a communion of openness to God, their children, and others, through the sacrament of marriage.

Marriage, the Sacrament of Joy

4. God instituted the sacrament of marriage from the very beginning when He said, “a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”[1] By saying “one flesh,” the Lord meant a permanent existential union - not only an emotional union, but also a union in body, mind, spirit, and all life. In this existential union, the spouses are a living icon of the Triune God: two people at once united and different, brought together by God in a unity anticipating perfection.

5. Christ gave us a new understanding of God’s presence in marriage by performing His first miracle at the wedding at Cana of Galilee.[2] He thus gave marriage a new dimension, not limiting it to the ancient, human purpose of procreation nor to its Roman legal concept as a social contract. “Everything has been made new”[3] in marriage through Christ’s presence. Christian marriage has thus become a holy sacrament, which fills the spouses with the grace of the Holy Spirit and makes available to them the “joy of salvation”[4] in Christ.

6. Salvation and joy are not magically acquired. The Holy Spirit does not impose His grace upon a human being, disregarding his or her freedom, but rather waits for him or her to activate it willingly by striving to be freed from the yoke of sin and to grow in “the fullness of Christ.”[5] It is the Church’s hope that the spouses

1 Mark 10: 7-8.

2 John 2: 1-11.

3 Revelation 21: 5.

4 Psalm 50: 14.

5 Ephesians 4: 13.

become aware of the grace given to them and put it into action through daily prayer, abandoning selfishness and self-love. In this way, they may be filled with love of the Lord and their neighbor, so that the Holy Spirit may act in them and lead them on a journey from division to union, from two bodies to "one flesh," a journey that epitomizes life according to "the likeness of God,"[1] in the life of the divine love that belongs to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Marriage, the Sacrament of Love

7. The New Testament describes the Lord Jesus Christ as the Bridegroom and the Church as Bride. The Apostle Paul states that in the marriage of man and woman "there is a great mystery"[2] when he likens it to the mystery of the marriage of Christ and the Church, which is thus an image of this divine love that is revealed in the Incarnation and the Cross. Marriage is therefore a unique union between two persons who are bound not only by mutual love, but also by their union with Christ. During the marriage service, the crowning of the bride and groom takes place in the name of the Most Holy Trinity because their love for each other-- and all love-- emanates from God's love for humankind and from the love that is in Holy Trinity, which is perfect giving. The spouses manifest this giving to each other, their children, their relatives and their brothers and sisters in the parish and the world. All giving presumes self-sacrifice and love given to others.

8. The Cross, the revelation of God's love in the sacrifice of His Beloved Son, holds a central place in the marriage service. It is placed with the book of the Gospels before the bride and groom to remind them of the Lord's words: "And he who does not take up his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me."[3] To take

1 Genesis 1: 26.

2 Ephesians 5: 32.

3 Matthew 10: 38.

up one's cross is to voluntarily accept life's difficulties and to be prepared to express love through self-sacrifice and service because this is the path to true joy, since "through the Cross joy has come into all the world."[1]

9. The entire Christian life is based on living out this love with God, neighbor, and creation and, especially, between husband and wife. Married life is a laboratory for practicing this love, which must have the features described by the Apostle Paul: patience, faithfulness, the abandonment of jealousy and boasting, kindness, inner peace, forgiveness, sacrifice, hope in God, mutual trust and enduring all things.[2] This love grows through spiritual effort, restraining the will, controlling the passions, and continuous effort to empty the self of the mother of all vices, self-love. This love also grows through the practice of virtues, of "all that is true, noble, just, pure, lovable, and honorable."[3] It is obvious in this context that any form of domestic violence is unacceptable, as it destroys the foundation of a balanced relationship.

Marriage, the Sacrament of Communion

10. Husband and wife live in a relationship of communion, making every decision by mutual consent and realizing the likeness of Christ in themselves through their effort, by their own free will, to be united to Him, "giving things always and for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ"[4] and at the same time "submitting to one another in the fear of God."[5] They must therefore strive to nourish their love so that it may grow with time and to realize the greatest possible harmony

1 Prayer from the Service of Pascha.

2 1 Corinthians 13.

3 Philippians 4: 8.

4 Ephesians 5: 20.

5 Ephesians 5: 21.

between diversity and unity, individual freedom and mutual decision-making.

11. The spouses' union is made complete through the practice of love in obedience, and obedience in love. Through reciprocal obedience, each spouse fulfils his or her role and vocation within the family. Obedience is not submission to someone who is stronger or more controlling, but a gift of self, based on trust in God and attentive listening, with the ears and heart, to His words. Listening is an expression of love, since it reflects a partner's attention to the other, initiative for dialogue, and joy in sharing. The expression "man is the head of woman"[1] does not suggest a higher rank, since Christ is the head of the Church and this does not put Him in a position of domination, but rather in a position of leadership in the sense of service through self-emptying.

12. The entry of the couple into the Church is their entry into the Kingdom of Christ. The covenant is on the one hand between themselves and on the other hand between them and Christ. The union of man and woman in Christ forms a little church, "the church that is in their house."[2] The precondition for Christian marriage is a common faith in Jesus Christ, which must be shared by the couple. For this reason, in the Church of the first centuries, weddings were celebrated during the Divine Liturgy, when the bride and groom were united to Christ in the Eucharist, the precious Body and Blood of Christ, which today is symbolized by the wine offered to them from a common cup. By partaking in the Eucharist together, their human love takes on a new dimension, one with a taste of eternity, which gives them the power to become witnesses to God's love. Their human love

1 Philippians 2: 7-8.

2 Romans 16: 5.

then becomes faithful and true, without any separation or divorce, because their love has become "as strong as death"[1] and the first fruit of the mystery of the Kingdom. It is therefore strongly recommended that the engaged couple receive Communion together before their marriage, so that it may receive the seal of the precious Body and Blood of Christ.

13. The family strives to live this mystery of the Kingdom from this very moment and to become a "domestic church"[2] because the family's life in Christ is not merely a human life, but rather a small image of the Kingdom, a lived experience of it. For this reason, St. John Chrysostom says: "When man and wife are united in the sacrament of marriage, they transcend what is earthly and become the image of the heavenly God Himself."[3] The husband and wife therefore strive to be firmly rooted in this image of the Kingdom and do not bow to the temptations of this world, to the great challenges of consumerism, or to anything that hinders the growth of their life together in Christ.

14. Procreation is a natural consequence of marriage. It is the fruit of conjugal union and an expression of the spouses' participation with God in the process of creation. Procreation is not the sole fundamental aim and purpose of marriage, but one of the means that help the couple to spiritual perfection. Through it, the family grows, and so too does the openness of the spouses to exaltedness of life and their role in it and to transcending themselves through greater engagement in giving and free sacrifice. Procreation broadens the couple's horizons and creates oases of thanksgiving where love is made manifest, securing the progress of their union with Christ.

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1 Song of Solomon 8: 6.

2 Romans 16: 5, 1 Corinthians 16: 19, Colossians 4: 15, and Philemon 2.

3 Homily 12, On Colossians, PG 62: 387.

Part Two

Contemporary Challenges for the Family

15. It is necessary to examine the challenges resulting from the rapid changes to human life in the modern and post-modern eras, in order to assess their effects and to examine how to approach them.

Secularism

16. Secularism, or the materialist mindset, which proclaims that everything in this world, including the human being, is of this world and has its end in it, is opposed to Christianity's call for dying to the world, which specifically means dying to the lusts of the world[1] and keeping a fixed gaze on eternal life. The refusal of the materialist mindset to accept that the human being is created in the image and likeness of God also leads to a distorted vision of humankind's centrality. Human life comes to be centered on itself and no longer on God. In addition, conscience, sin, the passions, or Satan –which is considered superstition— are excluded, and so are their effects on the human soul. Materialism does not believe that the soul becomes ill when it loses its peace with God, and that this in turn may lead to illness of the body and it does not accept the

1 Matthew 16: 25.

principle of recovering peace with God through the Sacrament of Repentance.

17. Secularism, in the sense of materialism, is deep down an assertion of individualism to the detriment of openness and communion. It considers the individual to be the “supreme god” and this opens the way for a freedom without responsibility that leads to a lack of respect for others and to treating them according to a logic of acquisition and the severing of all communion, under the banner of “personal freedom.” People today tend to treat others with possessiveness, which results in a deadly isolation reflected in all aspects of life, while the real need is for sincerity, loyalty, free sacrifice, fidelity, courage, generosity, and nobility.

18. One of the characteristics of secularism is that it weakens humans’ relationship with God and corrupts their relationship with themselves, which prevents them from having any other sound relationships, particularly that of a married man and woman. These effects are sometimes reflected in the children in a tendency to rebelliousness and a refusal to accept or trust parental authority.

19. The predominant mindset calls for questioning traditional values and for doubting old customs, while applied scientific and technological progress and the conveniences it offers have amplified humans’ esteem for their own capabilities, talents and superiority, reinforcing their desire to dominate and rule the world. Humans thus came to trust in their capabilities and progress much more than in spiritual and human experiences accumulated over the centuries, which were made concrete as values, customs, and traditions. Hence education suffers from confusion as a result of the calling into doubt of standards,

points of reference and moral values, whether they are from faith and the Gospel or were built by human experience. This questioning rejects the role of these experiences in the progress of human communities and erects an artificial barrier between science and its achievements in the service of humankind and faith, something that the Church rejects, even if science has contributed in some situations and circumstances to the sifting of some concepts, beliefs and prevalent customs.

20. We are all aware that the rhythm of contemporary life drives members of the family to be dispersed daily, weakening the emotional support, embrace and love between them. The father and mother often work late hours, and their children do not enjoy their care for long enough. Parents are therefore no longer their children's point of reference, leading to an emotional void in them that increases the danger of behavioral problems in the future. The solution, then, lies in reinforcing the family's embrace of children, so that the love that nourishes the child in the family becomes this child's surest path to God's love. At that point, children realize that God is their Father and the Church their Mother.

The Economy and Consumerism

21. The consumer society transforms humans who submit to its dictates into something like instruments in the service of money, power and the pursuit of luxury. Being immersed in consumption causes the individual to lose the ability to distinguish between what is useful and necessary for a dignified life and what is superfluous. The joy of taking, possessing, and acquiring more prevails over the spirit of sacrifice and benevolence. It likewise makes humans prisoners of their egos and casts them into a vicious cycle of obsession with the desire to possess the newest

and consume the most, placing them in a state of alienation from themselves and from their brothers and sisters and emptying their life of meaning.

Globalization, Social Media, and the Virtual World

22. The revolution triggered by information technologies has dramatically transformed many old and traditional methods of education. The internet is a platform for expression that is absolutely free, instantaneous, global, decentralized, interactive, widespread, unlimited, and adaptable to every topic. This modern technology has become a fundamental part of the lives of millions of people, and a reality that must unavoidably be dealt with and controlled before it controls us. The Church has entered every arena of society to proclaim the word of truth and preserve the dignity of the human being and the family. Today, in societies whose values are blurred, she is striving hard to Christianize the internet by manifesting the truth and values that will bring humanity back to its proper place in creation and so consequently back to the authentic human being. With the experience of the twenty-first century in information technology, it has become clear that if this world is directed toward what is good and useful, it can be a blessed tool for evangelism, teaching and communication: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations."[1] The Church's most important role in the world is evangelism, bearing witness, and guiding humankind to salvation at a time when those things that separate them from salvation are multiplying. The Church therefore aims to elevate the technological revolution by putting it into the service of proclaiming the Gospel, uplifting the human being and reviving values in societies.

1 Matthew 28: 19.

23. On the other hand, rapid technological progress and the digital revolution have created a new world. Through it, the media has succeeded in reducing the distances between people, while at the same time broadening the gap and erecting intangible barriers between them. Inasmuch as the media is filled with everything the eyes desire: science, arts, entertainment, religion and much else. Humans have come to be drawn to it and find in it their own private worlds, far removed from the real world. They are content with it, trading their desire for acquaintance and communication for a state of self-sufficiency and social reclusion. This situation endangers the family today with a danger that has become palpable, that of its members becoming isolated from each other in independent virtual worlds under the guise of privacy and personal freedom, which is apt to lead to more problems in marriages and crises in the family. Warning about this isolation, the Church calls upon families to intensify and persist in their live and effective communication in daily life. She calls parents' attention to the pivotal necessity of their educational supervision of how of their children deal with the virtual world which knows no limits; of controlling this use quantitatively and qualitatively; and of directing it toward that which enriches their mind, develops their culture, serves an upright education, and refines their personal character on every level.

24. The virtual world has transformed the range and venue for making acquaintance and has succeeded in making communication between people easier, but it has introduced new fault lines into our societies. The challenge of the virtual world lies in reducing the human being to an image, particularly an attractive outer image. One can find oneself in an inner conflict between how one is and how one desires to be or must be.

Part Three

Bioethical Issues

25. Life is a sacred gift from God. The Church therefore considers bioethical issues to belong to the domain of divine values. A human being's life is not limited to only biological, psychological and social health without the possibility of spiritual growth and openness to divine grace. The Church therefore helps believing families to ascertain God's will and commandments when faced with physical and psychological difficulties, to hold fast to the hope that "does not disappoint,"[1] and to rely on God when confronted with various forms of suffering. Hence the Church's interest in the bioethical issues of contemporary society comes out of her emphasis on the sanctity of life and the necessity of respecting it alongside her openness to scientific advancement, political action, and human rights.

Issues Related to the Beginning of Life

26. We must be knowledgeable about the challenges posed by techniques of assisted reproduction in addition to their social and legal ramifications, especially as they pertain to techniques of birth control and the diagnostic dilemmas that accompany pregnancy, such as sex selection.

1 Romans 5: 5.

27. **The Embryo and Abortion:** The Church regards the embryo as life-bearing, existing and belonging to its family from the first moment of its formation "with the help of God"[1] and the cooperation of its parents. In her view, its place is no less than the place of the human being "created in the image and likeness of God."[2] The Church therefore insists on the necessity of defending the fetus and its development, no matter the difficulties and circumstances of the family, and rejects abortion at any stage of development. In cases where extremely pressing health circumstances require something that would have this outcome-- such as a threat to the mother's health and right to life-- following a clear and conclusive medical diagnosis, the Church calls on parents to seek her guidance in order to make the responsible decision before God Who is Just.

28. **Artificial Insemination:** Procreation is an act blessed by God, who bestowed upon humankind the natural desire to beget sons and daughters. Just as much as there is a need for motherhood, there is also a need for fatherhood. For this reason, infertility can be difficult to endure and can lead to psychological hardship and negative consequences for the couple, which may cause a weakening of marital life and disruptions in the relationship between husband and wife.

29. Technological advances have helped to provide solutions for some conditions of infertility and to heal some illnesses that prevent fertility. This has helped couples to fulfil their desire to be mothers and fathers. On the other hand, however, this has confronted believers with psychological, ethical, medical, legal and social challenges.

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1 St. John Chrysostom, Homily 49, On Genesis, PG 54: 445.

2 Genesis 1: 26.

30. Modern techniques of artificial insemination have caused for the faithful a sort of confusion and hesitation about making certain decisions. Among the issues that cause this bewilderment are, for example, the dilemma of fertilization by a donor who is not the husband; the issue of how to deal with extra embryos and whether it is permissible to destroy, donate or sell them; as well as the experience of a surrogate mother in bearing a couple's embryo.

31. The Church is seriously disquieted by the issue of frozen embryos. Usually, several eggs are fertilized, resulting in several embryos. Some of them are implanted in the mother's womb and the rest are kept frozen in specialized facilities, either with the aim of donating them to mothers who desire to have children or for use in scientific research. In other cases, they are killed. The embryos implanted in the uterus are also selectively reduced. All of this is accompanied by the danger of selecting the best embryos, choosing their sex, and discarding the rest, since both discarding them and preserving them indefinitely contradict Christian ethics. Likewise, although prenatal examinations can solve some problems of treatment, they nevertheless in certain other situations pose dilemmas of faith and ethics. Certain illnesses that are discovered after conception and which, at least until today, cannot be treated, often cause couples to choose abortion, something that the Church categorically rejects.

32. The Church looks upon the pregnancy of unmarried women by artificial insemination with distrust, as it leads to the birth to fatherless children. This also applies to the use of frozen sperm from a dead man or the use of a frozen eggs from a dead woman. The Church rejects recourse to artificial insemination by homosexual persons because of its negative social, spiritual, and psychological consequences for the child and the confusion it causes.

33. **Birth Control:** In order to regulate family life, the Church accepts the use of preventative methods of birth control that are not abortifacient and do not harm fertility. In this context, she reminds that conjugal love is not exclusively expressed in sexual relations, but in everyday mutual love and respect and self-giving that touches upon every aspect of life, bestowing upon it its glorious splendor. While encouraging the faithful to multiply and procreate, the Church distinguishes between "family planning" and "birth limitation." Limitation suggests an arbitrary reduction, whereas planning means that each family prayerfully makes its own decision in consultation with the family's spiritual father or parish priest on the basis of its spiritual, health, economic and social circumstances.

34. **Adoption:** Many suffer from the inability to have children on account of the infertility of the man or woman. In some cases, this leads to a life filled with listlessness and instability, since the couple feels yearning and longing for fatherhood and motherhood and wishes to have children to fill their life. Here adoption emerges as a holy icon of the Word of God's philanthropy toward human nature which takes place through the mystery of the Divine Incarnation. Adoption is a cause for limitless joy, the joy of those upon whom God has bestowed grace as children after they had been estranged or the joy of the Good Samaritan whose life's meaning is seen by taking charge of another, treating their wounds and making them, through the love he gives, his "neighbor."[1] It is a committed pledge to another, a great imitation of Christ's tender giving. We find various acts of adoption in the Bible.[2] Therefore, the Church blesses the initiative of a couple, suffering from health problems that prevent them from having children, to choose adoption, without limiting this noble deed to those who do not

1 Luke 10: 30.

2 Exodus 2: 10, 1 Kings 11: 20, Esther 2: 7-15.

have children. In this context, in countries where these laws are absent, the Church calls for legislation facilitating the process of adoption within the framework of local systems of personal status law. This is in order to avoid cases where families resort to illicit means of adoption, as well as to preserve children's rights and prevent their being trafficked.

Issues Related to the End of Life

35. **Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide**: Because life is a good gift from the Creator, no one has the right to take, denigrate, or squander it. Suffering, which reminds humans of their finitude and which should be reduced by all medically-legitimate means, does not justify physical assisted suicide or euthanasia. The Church emphasizes life's meaning as a time of returning to God and inner purification, which Christians live out in repentance and reconciliation with God, all people and also themselves. Therefore, we lift up the prayer, "For a Christian end to our life, painless, without shame, peaceful, and a good defense at the fearful Tribunal of Christ."[1]

36. The Church believes that the human reposes at death and that his or her existence does not end, but rather death is a passage to eternal life. At the Second Coming of Christ, the human will rise in a spiritual body.[2] The Church therefore asks doctors to preserve as much as possible the consciousness of the patient with the least degree of suffering, conferring their life to the custody of the merciful God.

37. Development in the use of techniques for preserving life and technology which extends it have led to the problem of

1 From the litanies of the daily prayer services.

2 1 Corinthians 15: 43-44.

euthanasia. With modern medicine, it has become possible to preserve human life through the use of artificial devices, even in the absence of any hope of the patient being healed. This situation is merely the forced extension of the dying process. The voluntary ending of life merely to avoid suffering is not compatible with hope in God. Therefore, it appears that facing the end of life without resorting to medical devices is the simplest and most natural, as one allows matters to proceed according to the divine will without recourse to medical devices for extending the patient's lifespan. In the Church's opinion, science is beneficial when it helps people to give their life meaning, to repent and to live with God and when it helps them to face the end of life in a Christian manner, in certainty of faith and spiritual wakefulness.

38. The Church understands that intense pain can drive a person to a state of anger, despair, depression, and revolt which sometimes bring them to the point of requesting euthanasia. Nevertheless, as she shares in their suffering, she believes that suffering in faith and reliance upon God produces patience and consolation and leads to thankfulness and the hope of salvation and inner healing, as the Apostle Paul says: "We know that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint."[1] The Church stresses the role of the ecclesiastical community in accompanying patients and demonstrating its love, its embrace of them, its prayer for them and commemoration of them in the Divine Liturgy, helping them to persevere and be patient.

39. **Palliative Care:** This care aims to strengthen patients and make this difficult stage bearable by offering them methods of comfort and care until they reach a peaceful end without resorting to

1 Romans 5: 3-5.

medical techniques that are exhausting for them. This palliative care requires providing patients with daily service, loving accompaniment and prayer.

40. **Organ Donation:** The Church accepts organ donation as an act of love, which donors suggest in complete freedom, provided that they do not hurt themselves. In cases of sudden death, the decision belongs to the deceased's executor. The Church warns against the spirit of utilitarianism and commercialism which can exploit medical standards with the aim of removing parts of a living person in order to sell them to others, since it is not permissible in any circumstance for human parts to become a commodity.

Other Ethical and Life-Related Issues

41. **Refraining from marriage:** The Church looks with pain upon this phenomenon and other phenomena such as refraining from ecclesiastical marriage in favor of civil marriage alone or cohabitation without marriage and the appearance of so-called "new styles" of marital life, such as the marriage of homosexuals and their resorting to various means of having children. All of this leads to various aberrations contrary to the customary form of the family which contradict the Church's view of procreation as the fruit of love and union between spouses. We have started to witness the existence of children who do not know their fathers or their mothers or who have two fathers or two mothers, mothers who live with their children in the total absence of the father, fathers who live with their children in the absence of the mother, or groups living together collectively in which children grow up being "raised" in an environment that recognizes neither the need for the role of the mother nor the necessity of the father's presence.

42. **Cohabitation:** Confronted with the spread of the phenomenon of cohabitation between persons who are not bound by legitimate marriage, our Christian faith stresses that the life of marital communion is blessed by God, since marriage is one of the Church's sacraments and not merely a contract or agreement. This sacrament is performed by the Lord Jesus Christ, who invites the bride and groom to be united in Him, "so that the two of them may become one flesh," and by this the marriage may be a dwelling-place for the Lord. Cohabitation between a man and a woman does not lead to a stable and harmonious marital life, despite this phenomenon having become accepted in some countries and societies. The Lord Jesus called the Samaritan woman who was cohabiting with a man to repentance and purification before should could be able to partake of the "living water."[1] This communion, which is the way to enduring joy, is what the Church wishes for her children.

43. **Homosexuality:** God created man in His image and likeness, male and female.[2] Therefore, relying on the Bible and her experience, the Church believes that homosexuality contradicts the order established by God from the beginning in humankind's sexual differentiation into male and female and is contrary to the sacrament of Holy Matrimony as it is understood by the Church. It is therefore incompatible with the natural course of marital life that was willed by God for humankind.[3] Although certain countries have issued laws accepting homosexual marriage, this does not confirm its legitimacy from the Church's perspective. This is in addition to non-traditional contemporary phenomena pertaining to "gender" and other phenomena that

1 John 4: 10.

2 Genesis 1 and 2, Matthew 19: 4-6.

3 Genesis 19: 4-8, Leviticus 18: 22, 20: 13, Romans 1: 24-27, 1 Corinthians 6: 9 and 1 Timothy 1: 10.

are spreading in societies today, such as sex change and genetic manipulation. The Church welcomes scientific and especially medical progress but she has reservations about it when it strips humans of their humanity.

44. The Church calls upon the faithful to respect and love all people and urges them to strive to realize the fullness of their human stature through the life in Christ that is achieved by the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. This life requires believers to strive for repentance with all their heart, soul, mind and ability, arming themselves with faith in Christ, prayer and reading the Bible, struggling and controlling themselves and their passions.[1] The Lord, in His boundless love, gives repentant persons grace to bear their cross and to reach the harbor of salvation. In this way, they are able by their own will and God's help to return to correct behavior, even if they suffer pain and hardship at the beginning.

45. The Church, while following the results of various medical studies on homosexuality, stresses the need for a spiritual father to accompany and guide these persons with love, the support of the family, and the prayers of all, so that God's grace may be active in their souls so that they may follow appropriate paths leading to correct behavior. This requires great patience and love on the part of those providing guidance and the family, as well as close and constant cooperation between them and the person concerned.

46. **Addiction:** Addiction is an expression of a psychological and behavioral state which a person undergoes as a result of crises and a feeling of alienation from oneself and the environment in which one is raised—particularly, the family. Addiction is

1 1 Corinthians 9: 25.

not hereditary, but rather the result of a series of accumulated causes, among which are the intensification of difficulties in family life, an emotional void, an incorrect upbringing and those things that these causes may lead to taking hold of a person, such as depression and isolation. Human beings resort to withdrawal and addiction to things that relieve them from their crises, provide for their desired mood and calm their nerves, such as drugs, sex, violence, electronic media or any sort of exaggerated behaviors.

47. The way out from the depression that pushes a person to addiction lies in working to activate the grace of baptism by returning to commitment to life in the Church and attachment to all that is good, in addition to the necessary medical treatment. God always opens the door of repentance and the beginning of repentance is for one to realize that one is loved by God and then to change. Although leaving addiction is not an easy matter, it is possible with God, if the addict seeks His help. Here the Church calls attention to the importance of the priest or spiritual counselor accompanying the addict in the communion of the Church and to the necessity of using rehabilitation centers in the hopes of moving from the emptiness of a sterile, virtual void to green pastures.[1]

48. **Child and Adolescent Abuse:** Children are sometimes exposed in society to painful experiences, sexual abuse being only one of the most dangerous. The Church condemns sexual abuse in any form, by any perpetrator. She regards it as a violation of their innocence and a crime that requires the prosecution and punishment of the perpetrator. The Church requests that all those concerned, pastors and family, take all necessary measures to protect children from any form of abuse, and to ensure that they

1 Psalm 23: 2.

have a healthy and caring environment. She likewise requests that the family provide an ongoing education that contributes to their children's awareness and to the development of the virtue of discernment in them, as well as necessary sex education in order to prevent them from being exploited or manipulated, whether through the media, social media or in a direct, physical manner.

49. The Church encourages families to educate children in the critical sense that helps them to discern the truth and what is right when they watch television or use social media. Sexual education in the home is also important because it fortifies children against the dangers of permissiveness or incorrect sexual behavior.

Part Four

The Role of the Family in Church Life

50. Saint John Chrysostom calls upon husband and wife to make their household a little church: "Let your entire home be a church."[1] This is achieved through their prayer, fasting, common participation in the life of the Church, the respect that each one has for the other, and their strengthening one another in the practice of love and the life of the virtues, so that they may be role models for their family.

51. The model of the parents' daily life is the best way to imbue children with the life in Christ. This takes place through the embodied teaching of actions and behaviors, which influences children with great effectiveness and gives them an experiential model in life. St. Porphyrios says: "What saves and makes for good children is the life of the parents in the home. The parents need to devote themselves to the love of God. They need to become saints in their relations to their children through their mildness, patience, and love."[2] The holiness of parents through their living a life of repentance and forgiveness is the best way to educate children in the Lord. Then the home becomes a school

1 Homily 26, On the Acts of the Apostles, PG 60: 201-204.

2 Elder Porphyrios, *Wounded by Love: The Life and the Wisdom of Elder Porphyrios* (Limni, Evia, Greece: Denise Harvey Publisher, 2005), p. 196.

of love and sacrifice, which are an effective guarantee when the family faces all the challenges in society.

52. Some people pay excessive attention to their children's knowledge, health and social future at the expense of the dimension of faith. The Church advises pregnant women to start praying for their babies with the awareness of the divine gift that is growing in their bodies. The same Saint Porphyrios states that education begins from the moment of conception.[1] As a first step along the path of training in a life of holiness, the Church advises to return to the ancient and blessed Orthodox tradition and to take one of the saints as an intercessor for their newborn child and to interact with him or her prayerfully. This cements the family's relationship with the saints and brings spiritual benefits to both the parents and the children.

53. The Church Fathers remind parents that they are raising "an athlete and citizen of heaven."[2] They must therefore raise their children with great skill and art. This requires attention, as mentioned above, to an embracing familiarity and devoting time for the parents' presence in all aspects of their children's daily life. The regular absence of parents, their resignation from their responsibility as educators and, frequently, their leaving their children in the care of domestic help or childcare, causes anxiety for the child and influences future behavior. Education is holy and blessed work. It is the task of both mother and father and their responsibility together. The responsibility also remains great for all pastors and members of the Church to supply families with that which simplifies the complexities of daily life and offers them the consolations that come from God, so that the children will grow up in a way that refines their personality

1 Ibid., p. 195.

2 St. John Chrysostom, On Vainglory and Education of Children, SC 188: 104.

with human values, especially brotherly love and communion with the other, and helps them to grow in the freedom that serves their salvation, so that they will have consciousness, broad horizons and the ability to make responsible life choices.

54. The Holy Fathers advise Christian parents that every Christian home should be a place for prayer in which all members of the family participate, in addition to each member's individual prayer. Likewise, reading the Bible at home every day nourishes the soul and enlightens the intellect, which is a fundamental necessity for all members of the family. It is a calm harbor amidst the whirlpool of life and its many preoccupations. Saint John Chrysostom says: "Acquire books that are like medicine for the soul. Read the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles at the very least so that you may learn from them."[1] The Church again recalls the importance of family participation in the liturgical services for family life and its role in its spiritual advancement.

55. The family is considered to be a laboratory of living out virtue, a workshop of faith, a nursery of growth in love. In the family, a person is trained in living love in all its dimensions without reservation, despite the diversity of points of view among its members.

56. Within the family, one grows in the spirit of responsibility, communion and mutual help, inasmuch as each of its members fulfills a role, putting the good of the family above personal interests and realizing that individual needs are only met within the scope of a family life that is focused on the spirit of solidarity between its members at every level. At that point, his or her good becomes the good of the family as a whole and his or her personal requirements in life become the requirements of all.

1 Homily 21, On Ephesians, PG 62: 151.

57. The model of the “domestic church”, which grows in faith, living the life of prayer, reading the Bible and participating in the liturgy unites families who are spread out to the furthest corners of the world. No matter how far apart they are geographically, it brings them together in God’s great family. Shared faith is what brings together and what must be developed. Acting according to the love and communion that result from unity of faith, the liturgy and the Eucharist is a unifying expression that develops family members’ sensitivity and participation in what affects their brothers and sisters in the greater family and their kinfolk in humanity.

Part Five

Pastoral Recommendations

58. **Specialized Pastoral Care:** To deal with the numerous emerging problems and challenges, there is a growing need for specialized pastoral care through the activation of the role of believers qualified for this service. Turning to qualified people and specialists among the faithful, alongside priests, has become a pressing need and a requirement for helping the priest to perform his pastoral task as required as problems become more complicated and sciences, especially human sciences, develop. Necessity demands that the Church provide pastoral care to all segments of the faithful, from children to the elderly, and especially those who are sick and have special needs, orphans, widows, etc.

59. **Family Guidance Centers:** Service for the family in pastoral work is embodied in dioceses and parishes though holding regular meetings for families, marriage preparation programs, pastoral activities and spiritual exercises in which the entire family (parents and children) participates, in addition to workshops in which are presented patristic and scientific studies dealing with the situation of the family in various societies. This is followed by the establishment of specialized centers for supporting marriage and providing family guidance and social

assistance which contribute to solving marital disagreements and conflicts. There are various experiences in the dioceses from which benefit should be drawn.

60. **Continuing Pastoral Training:** A pressing need is emerging for priests and laypeople who are trained in providing spiritual guidance, giving legal and medical advice and conducting workshops about the art of listening, reconciliation and conflict resolution. The Church must be careful to meet this need through programs of preparation and specialized training courses.

61. **The Spiritual Role of the Priest:** The priest's awareness of his spiritual role is the foundation for forming the families that he serves in the life in Christ. This takes place through his efforts to establish meetings and spiritual gatherings for them; to motivate their members to be sensitive to the meaning of liturgical life and the value of participating in the Divine Liturgy, receiving communion and participating in the sacrament of repentance and confession; and to help them develop prayer life, especially at the level of the family. There remain other broad fields for the priest to create pastoral initiatives for strengthening life in Christ for couples.

62. **Christian Education:** Christian Education and evangelism is of central importance in the life of the family and the Church. The Lord Jesus was the first Teacher and He spent the final years of His life on earth teaching and evangelizing. The Apostle Paul says: "Woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel!"[1] Therefore, Christian education has a fundamental role in forming both children and their parents, which contributes to the establishment of Christian families. Starting from this basis, the Church uses all beneficial means for evangelism, whether

1 1 Corinthians 9: 16.

print, audio-visual, lectures, seminars, conventions, meetings, activities, etc. This is in order to ensure that there prevails in the family a peaceful spirit and a mindset inspired by the teachings of the Bible and the experience of the Church, so that the family is equipped to face the consumerist mentality that is prevalent in modern societies.

63. **A Culture of Accompaniment:** The Church seeks the assistance of specialist knowledge in order to accompany people in certain situations, such as the terminally ill, people with special needs, couples experiencing marital conflict, etc. Accompaniment requires serious and profound knowledge of how to approach the persons concerned and their situation. On the other hand, the Church needs to develop this culture systematically and thoughtfully and spread it among those working in the pastoral field, not only because it is new, but because it is sensitive and delicate on account of each individual's specialization. It is a necessary way to address contemporary people and to help them to discover the face of Christ the Savior who died and rose in order to give them life.

64. **Encouraging Procreation:** The presence of children in a family has many benefits for the couple and for the children. It consecrates the life of thanksgiving among members of the family, just as it develops among them a sense of responsibility, giving and service. A large family does not allow space for the parents to think of themselves selfishly, since most of their attention is dedicated to their children, so their unity together is cemented in the process of raising the children that they share. A large family with kinfolk and relatives causes children to grow up in a beautiful atmosphere of love and embrace. It develops in them the social sense of belonging, communicating, sharing, interacting and practical experience in the spirit of giving.

Conclusion

65. This pastoral letter about the family comes at a time that is witnessing many social transformations, great global openness and rapid scientific development. This situation imposes a new reality and different ways of thinking and living which have serious effects on the family. The family today now runs the danger of losing its structure and identity with the appearance of new forms of families, new forms of couples and different types of marriages, which have led to many unprecedented problems. Therefore, amidst these challenges, the fathers of the Holy Synod wish to remind members of the Church that acquiring and living the Christian understanding of the family, starting with establishing the marriage according to faith in Christ, remains the armor with which the family is protected from that which threatens it and with which it keeps itself from harm, whether yesterday, today or tomorrow.

66. Although the issue of the family, with all its dense ramifications today, cannot be comprehensively treated in pages such as these, our Holy Church is issuing this letter as a first overview of these concerns, with the intention of organizing colloquia around the various issues addressed, in which the faithful may participate with the aim of studying them more profoundly and arriving at more effective ways of facing and preventing them.

67. “The family is the little church of Christ,” from which the universal Church is formed. All persons are the product of their family. They receive Christ from their parents and grandparents in the hope of offering Him to the world. Our Church is full of models of holiness born of family education. Saints Joachim and Anna, the grandparents of Christ God, offered the world the Most Holy Mother of God, who gave joy to the whole world. The blessed spouses Saint Basil the Elder and Saint Emmelia gave the Church Saints Basil the Great, Peter of Sebaste, Gregory of Nyssa, Naucratius the hermit and the righteous and wise Macrina. This exemplary family extended to the Church and the world light from the unfading Light and knowledge surpassing all sciences.

68. It is the Church’s hope that the family remains the joy of life and that the mystery of joy in it appears as communion of life, love and reconciliation, as an image of the Kingdom of God. All of this is in the hope that our families will give the Church and the world paragons of faith, love and peace.

منشورات

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