

Faith&Culture offers this selection from St. John Paul II's Letter to Families (1994) in homage to the incomparable gift that was his pontificate.

The universe, immense and diverse as it is, the world of all living beings, is inscribed in God's fatherhood, which is its source. This can be said, of course, on the basis of an analogy, thanks to which we can discern, at the very beginning of the Book of Genesis, the reality of fatherhood and motherhood and consequently of the human family. The interpretative key enabling this discernment is provided by the principle of the "image" and "likeness" of God highlighted by the scriptural text (Gen 1:26). God creates by the power of his word: "Let there be...!" (e.g., Gen 1:3). Significantly, in the creation of man this word of God is followed by these other words: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen 1:26). Before creating man, the Creator withdraws as it were into himself, in order to seek the pattern and inspiration in the mystery of his Being, which is already here disclosed as the divine "We". From this mystery the human being comes forth by an act of creation: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27).

God speaks to these newly-created beings and he blesses them: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28). The Book of Genesis employs the same expressions used earlier for the creation of other living beings: "multiply". But it is clear that these expressions are being used in an analogous sense. Is there not present here the analogy of begetting and of fatherhood and motherhood, which should be understood in the light of the overall context? No living being on earth except man was created "in the image and likeness of God". Human fatherhood and motherhood, while remaining biologically similar to that of other living beings in nature, contain in an essential and unique way a "likeness" to God which is the basis of the family as a community of human life, as a community of persons united in love (*communio personarum*).

In the light of the New Testament it is possible to discern how the primordial model of the family is to be sought in God himself, in the Trinitarian mystery of his life. The divine "We" is the eternal pattern of the human "we", especially of that "we" formed by the man and the woman created in the divine image and likeness. The words of the Book of Genesis contain that truth about man which is confirmed by the very experience of humanity. Man is created "from the very beginning" as male and female: the life of all humanity—whether of small communities or of society as a whole—is marked by this primordial duality. From it there derive the "masculinity" and the "femininity" of individuals, just as from it every community draws its own unique richness in the mutual fulfilment of persons. This is what seems to be meant by the words of the Book of Genesis: "Male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27).

Here too we find the first statement of the equal dignity of man and woman: both, in equal measure, are persons. Their constitution, with the specific dignity which derives from it, defines “from the beginning” the qualities of the common good of humanity, in every dimension and circumstance of life. To this common good both man and woman make their specific contribution. Hence one can discover, at the very origins of human society, the qualities of communion and of complementarity.

The family has always been considered as the first and basic expression of man’s social nature. Even today this way of looking at things remains unchanged. Nowadays, however, emphasis tends to be laid on how much the family, as the smallest and most basic human community, owes to the personal contribution of a man and a woman. The family is in fact a community of persons whose proper way of existing and living together is communion: *communio personarum*. Here too, while always acknowledging the absolute transcendence of the Creator with regard to his creatures, we can see the family’s ultimate relationship to the divine “We”. Only persons are capable of living “in communion”. The family originates in a marital communion described by the Second Vatican Council as a “covenant”, in which man and woman “give themselves to each other and accept each other”.

The Book of Genesis helps us to see this truth when it states, in reference to the establishment of the family through marriage, that “a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen 2:24). In the Gospel, Christ, disputing with the Pharisees, quotes these same words and then adds: “So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder” (Mt 19:6). In this way, he reveals anew the binding content of a fact which exists “from the beginning” (Mt 19:8) and which always preserves this content. If the Master confirms it “now”, he does so in order to make clear and unmistakable to all, at the dawn of the New Covenant, the indissoluble character of marriage as the basis of the common good of the family.

When, in union with the Apostle, we bow our knees before the Father from whom all fatherhood and motherhood is named (cf. Eph 3:14-15), we come to realize that parenthood is the event whereby the family, already constituted by the conjugal covenant of marriage, is brought about “in the full and specific sense”. Motherhood necessarily implies fatherhood, and in turn, fatherhood necessarily implies motherhood. This is the result of the duality bestowed by the Creator upon human beings “from the beginning”.

I have spoken of two closely related yet not identical concepts: the concept of “communion” and that of “community”. “Communion” has to do with the personal relationship between the “I” and the “thou”. “Community” on the other hand

transcends this framework and moves towards a “society”, a “we”. The family, as a community of persons, is thus the first human “society”. It arises whenever there comes into being the conjugal covenant of marriage, which opens the spouses to a lasting communion of love and of life, and it is brought to completion in a full and specific way with the procreation of children: the “communion” of the spouses gives rise to the “community” of the family. The “community” of the family is completely pervaded by the very essence of “communion”. On the human level, can there be any other “communion” comparable to that between a mother and a child whom she has carried in her womb and then brought to birth?

In the family thus constituted there appears a new unity, in which the relationship “of communion” between the parents attains complete fulfilment. Experience teaches that this fulfilment represents both a task and a challenge. The task involves the spouses in living out their original covenant. The children born to them—and here is the challenge—should consolidate that covenant, enriching and deepening the conjugal communion of the father and mother. When this does not occur, we need to ask if the selfishness which lurks even in the love of man and woman as a result of the human inclination to evil is not stronger than this love. Married couples need to be well aware of this. From the outset they need to have their hearts and thoughts turned towards the God “from whom every family is named”, so that their fatherhood and motherhood will draw from that source the power to be continually renewed in love.

Fatherhood and motherhood are themselves a particular proof of love; they make it possible to discover love’s extension and original depth. But this does not take place automatically. Rather, it is a task entrusted to both husband and wife. In the life of husband and wife together, fatherhood and motherhood represent such a sublime “novelty” and richness as can only be approached “on one’s knees”.



St. John Paul II (1920-2005), actor, poet, philosopher, and exemplary priest, was known for his deep mystical attachment to Christ and his unquenchable faith in God’s providential care for his people.