

PASTORAL LETTER BY THE ARCHBISHOP OF MALTA AND THE BISHOP OF GOZO
on the occasion of THE FEAST OF THE ASSUMPTION 2003

SAFEGUARDING THE FAMILY

Beloved Sons and Daughters in the Lord,

The celebration of the Feast of Mary's Assumption into Heaven brings to mind in a special way the image of Mary, Mother of God and Mother of all of us. Although on this day we contemplate the elevation of Mary to the glory of Heaven, over the angels' choirs, Mary too has experienced as we do the suffering and tribulations of human life on this earth.

The moment the angel announced to Mary God's will for her, even though it was not easy for her to understand the full meaning of God's call Mary accepted and said a few words that initiated the story of Salvation: "Let what you have said be done to me."

That moment saw the beginning of the formation of the Holy Family; a family built on life, love, unity, personal giving, and a profound sense of sacrifice.

Evidence of all this may be found in the way the Holy Family lived its life. It may also be found in Joseph's and Mary's readiness to do all that circumstances required of them to ensure the best well-being of their son Jesus. Such was the case when they took the road to Egypt to keep the baby away from the terror of the man who wanted to eliminate him.

A Model Family

Mary, hand in hand with Joseph, gave to the world an everlasting model of the Christian family.

In our country we can say that, in the past, with the grace of God, successive generations of married couples sought to build their family on the model of the Holy Family.

If our family succeeded in resisting so much to so many challenges that risk undermining the foundations of a united and strong family, this was because our married couples, in their large majority, strived to follow the model of the Holy Family and give their children a comprehensive up-bringing also sustained with a good example.

The Church thanks all the couples that have always strived in word and deed, to give Christian witness in the way they conducted their marriage life and brought up their children.

The Church salutes those parents who give top priority to their life together as a married couple, as well as to the care of their children when it comes to deciding what is most important in their lives, and ensure that they never demote these priorities to a second place in relation to money, comfort, careers and lifestyles.

There is nothing wrong in man's endeavours to better the quality of man's life and to make use of the talents God gives him to develop a career and practice it. On the contrary, man's nature in itself pushes man to make every effort towards personal development, and to seek personal satisfaction through work, profession or some other participation in public life. This applies equally to one and all, to men and to women alike.

However, a person that gets married to build a family would be making a choice that, in effect, imposes on him or her responsibilities that he or she cannot push aside or fail to shoulder properly.

For married couples, their solid love and unity, as well as their complete self-giving to the upbringing of their off-springs, at whatever the sacrifice, have to be considered as the highest priorities.

Courageous couples, that in effect and in practice hold on to this form of married life and responsible parenthood, are a priceless treasure which a wise and forward looking society would cherish, encourage, help and protect from all kinds of risk.

Dark clouds over us

It would be a pity, a great pity, if in our country not everyone continues to understand how important it is to protect family life and the care of children from certain perils.

It would be an irreparable mistake if, in the belief that we would be expanding and strengthening our country's economy, we permit the entry of persons of licentious behaviour who generate the kind of attitudes and operate in such an environment that lead to serious risks to the moral fibre of our society, as well as to the honesty and integrity of our people, especially our youths.

The problems we are facing are already very serious.

Looking around us, we can notice that the model of the Holy Family is today being attacked ever more by a culture that puts God aside, and glorifies ways of life that may lead to a situation where the family would desist from truly living as a family, and off-springs lose their top place in the priority list; a situation where a sense of sacrifice is depicted as no longer fashionable, while the urge for a way of life according to one's whims and the drive for money are placed on a pedestal; a situation where faithfulness in marriage is shown as if it is something impossible in today's world, while infidelity is presented as something normal.

The consequences of these currents and the harm of a similar nature are already being felt. Broken marriages are on the upsurge. The number of young people reluctant to get married is increasing. The number of children born out of wedlock is becoming all the more preoccupying.

The Church, which has very much at heart the strength of family life, cannot but be concerned when it sees certain things that can only weaken the family and society take place.

The Church cannot but worry when she sees to what direction our society is being pushed, especially when certain means of social communication offer to people visual tales on false and misleading models of the family, while depicting cheating and unfaithfulness between couples as irreprehensible because they have become socially acceptable!

What would remain of the teaching and good example that parents passed on and are still giving to their off-springs, when these go out into society and meet an environment spoiled by a kind of sexual behaviour which is rotten and deprived of any sense of responsibility; where the values of fidelity and loyalty in relationships are undermined; where there is a deep urge for money; where suspicions of corruption and so many other damaging things, step by step, weaken the moral fibre of a nation?

An appeal to families

We invite and encourage all families to be vigilant.

Whoever wants to build a family on Christian principles and values has to understand, first and foremost, that God wills that marriage is to be between one man and one woman until death.

One also has to understand that the fidelity of married persons towards each other has to be total and everlasting -- no style of life, mentality or culture can justify a different outlook.

The self-giving of the husband and wife to each other has to be sincere, true and ceaseless.

When off-springs arrive, parents have to understand that, precisely because they are parents, the first and highest responsibility in the up-bringing of their children is jointly theirs according to their very nature as a father and a mother, and this responsibility cannot be passed on to grandparents, uncles, aunties or anybody else. This is a parents' obligation, even if and when it requires sacrifices and personal self-denials. It is also the children's right, a right that they cannot be deprived of.

The families themselves should strive and insist that laws, policies, institutions and everyone in the country must not only avoid doing anything which is contrary to the rights and duties of the family, but they must also seek to sustain and defend these rights and duties to the utmost. Families have to endeavour hard to change society towards the better, and to ensure that this betterment of society guarantees to families the ability and the means to truly live as a family, especially in the up-bringing of the children who are tomorrow's citizens.

Families have to do this as of right because society has an enormous duty to safeguard and help the family.

Let's seek the help of God

We exhort all families to seek always God's help through prayer.

The truth is that the family that prays together stays together.

We are currently celebrating the Year of the Rosary. May this treasured prayer help to bring together our families so that, through the intercession of Mary, they seek the shelter, comfort and protection of the Lord Jesus, the source of all that is good.

Mary was prompt in interceding with her Son when the Cana newly-weds were in need of help to solve the problem they were facing. Mary would also be prompt, in the same way, to help those families of our time who genuinely seek her help as our Saviour's Mother.

We impart on you our pastoral blessing as a pledge of every heavenly good.

Today, 6th August, 2003,

Feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord.

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Archbishop of Malta Bishop of Gozo