



ARCHDIOCESE OF DENVER

Family: Become What You Are



Most Reverend Samuel J. Aquila, S.T.L.
Archbishop of Denver

JUNE 29, 2014 • SOLEMNITY OF SAINTS PETER AND PAUL

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Pope Saint John Paul the Great wrote in 1981, “The future of humanity passes by way of the family. It is therefore indispensable and urgent that every person of good will should endeavor to save and foster the values and requirements of the family.”¹

The truth and timeliness of this statement is as relevant now as it was more than 30 years ago. In fact, many of the challenges our society is facing today can be tied to the breakdown of the family.

This is because, as St. John Paul explained, the family “is the basic cell of society. It is the cradle of life and love, the place in which the individual ‘is born’ and ‘grows.’”²

Our Church will be focusing on the family in a particularly intense way between October 2014 and October 2015. This period will begin with the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops meeting in Rome to discuss the challenges to the family in the context of the New Evangelization. It will continue with the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia in September 2015, and conclude with the Ordinary Synod of Bishops in October 2015.

Pope Francis has not declared an official “year” dedicated to studying and supporting the family, but I believe that God, in his Providence, has given us this period of time to build up family life and redouble our efforts to support “the cradle of life and love.”

Because the family and its future are so vitally important for our society and for the Church, I have decided to write this pastoral letter on the nature and mission of the family to help you “stand firm in your faith, be courageous, (and) be strong.”³ Family life is a great gift of God. Yet many families today feel weak and demoralized. Family life throughout the world is wounded, broken in many cases, and misunderstood.

My hope is that this letter will provide a solid foundation for the faithful of the Archdiocese of Denver, and all people of good will, to effectively

respond to the challenges that families experience today.

The letter is comprised of three sections. The first part is dedicated to explaining how the family’s mission and meaning comes from the Holy Trinity. The second section addresses the numerous challenges that the family and marriage are facing today. In the final section, I offer practical ways that families can live out their mission to be a place of love and life.

Part I

The Family’s Meaning and Mission

The Original Family and the Trinity

We live in an age of noise and competing messages, and whether or not we realize it, we are influenced by them. It is difficult to navigate these troubled waters and remain rooted in our faith, especially as the prevailing culture promotes the idea that “everyone has his or her own truth.”

The future Pope Benedict XVI described Western society today as being ruled by a dictatorship of relativism,⁴ and so, any discussion of the family should start by recalling its origins in the creation of Adam and Eve. By returning to our origins, we are able to recover the truth about the family’s meaning and purpose.

The first human family was formed by the union of Adam and Eve. In the story of creation we hear, “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful, and multiply’”⁵ Then we hear, “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh.”⁶ To “be fruitful and multiply” is a blessing bestowed by God on man and woman for the sake of their unity and it was not lost in the fall!

Since God created mankind “male and female, their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves man.”⁷ But our ability to reflect God’s love was damaged with the fall from grace that our first parents suffered when they chose to doubt God’s goodness

and love and disobey his commands.

The truly good news is that with his death and resurrection Jesus Christ restored families' ability to reflect the union in knowledge and love that is present between the three Persons of the Trinity. With his sacrifice of love, he "opened up vistas closed to human reason, for he implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God's sons in truth and charity."⁸

Here, we are given a window into the origin of our desire to love and be loved, to know others and to be known. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council explained that the reason man "cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself"⁹ is that he is created in God's image and likeness. That means we are made for a level of communion that we can only attain through an exchange of love and truth, and we won't be satisfied with less.

The Role of Marriage in the Family

The family is called to greatness! But today there is much confusion about the nature and purpose of marriage, which is the foundation¹⁰ of every family.

Why are people experiencing this confusion? Many intermediate causes can be cited, but the root problem is that married couples and families are not living according to their created purpose and are not embracing the fulfilling but challenging truths revealed to us by Christ through his Church.

When a husband and wife give of themselves and share love and truth with each other, they are able to reflect the image of the Holy Trinity. This sharing in life and love is in turn echoed in the hearts of their children and helps bring the Kingdom of God to earth. God created the world and the human race through the gift of his Word and the breath of the Spirit. In a similar way, men and women are able to participate in creation by bringing children into the world through their mutual consent and one flesh union.¹¹

Sadly, our society has lost this understanding of marriage. Instead, the

culture has dramatically shifted to promoting the individual and his or her supposed rights, often at the expense of the family. The idea of a “sincere gift of self” – even in the context of marriage – seems irrelevant and a distant reality. In contemporary Western culture, marriage and the family have suffered the consequences of this shift, and no one has been hurt more by it than children, who deserve the committed, selfless love of their mother and father.

Part II

Challenges to the Family

The Goods of Marriage and Modern Attacks

Because marriage is the cornerstone upon which a family is built, it is necessary to spend some time examining what marriage is and the various attacks or distortions present in our society.

Saint Augustine taught that there are three goods which define marriage. They are: the good of children, the gift of fidelity between the spouses, and the good of the unbreakable bond. This final good can be understood as the witness given by the permanent bond of marriage, which points toward the heavenly marriage of Christ and his bride, the Church.¹² I encourage you to commit these goods to memory, since they can help you discern what is a marriage from what is not.

In order for a union to be a true marriage, these three goods must always be respected. If they become separated one from the other, then any type of relationship could be considered “marriage” and any type of sexual act can be justified.

Over the last several decades, American society has seen the three goods of marriage undermined by growing confusion about sexuality, contraception and divorce.

When I was in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil for World Youth Day, I had the opportunity to lead three teaching sessions on the faith for young people. At each one of these gatherings, the youth raised the topic of same-sex

unions. On one hand, some of the young people did not see the distortion in such a proposal, and on the other hand, others were upset by the acceptance of same-sex unions.

I explained to them that same-sex unions are not marriages because a true conjugal union cannot take place between people of the same sex. They cannot realize the three goods of marriage and thus cannot realize between themselves a genuine one-flesh communion of body and soul. They can form a union of hearts and minds, as in any friendship, but marriage is more than this.

Marriage involves not only a spiritual and emotional union but also a bodily union. This union is founded on the complementarity of male and female, which the book of Genesis teaches is a type of human differentiation willed by God for the benefit and fulfillment of human beings. This complementarity is the foundation of a *wholly unique* kind of “human partnership” (*societas*)¹³ that has as its goal the formation and perfection of a husband and wife’s interior life, so that together they might increasingly grow in virtue and in true love of God and their neighbor.¹⁴

A central point, perhaps *the* central point of the Christian teaching, without which we can neither understand the nature of man and woman, nor the God-given institution of marriage, is that this partnership and the love that binds it together are “ordained for the procreation and education of children, and find in them their ultimate crown.”¹⁵ This is the embodiment of St. Augustine’s first good of marriage. Even if for reasons beyond their control, a couple cannot conceive, they still share and can realize this uniquely comprehensive type of human communion, founded upon human bodily complementarity and the commitment to permanency of the spouses.

There is nothing wrong with friendship and love between two people of the same sex. It can even be a great gift. Disorder enters in when same-sex friendships become sexualized. But since marriage is defined by its full bodily and spiritual self-giving – by its “one-flesh” nature – sexual activity is reserved to those who are married. This Christian teaching is unchanging and unchangeable.

One of the greatest confusions of the past 50 years is the idea that sex

is merely an instrument of pleasure, and beyond that, it is meaningless. Brothers and sisters, this is a false and destructive idea. Yes, great pleasure can accompany sexual behavior; but if we separate pleasure from the total and permanent self-giving of husband and wife in marriage, we confuse our human identity and dignity, misuse our bodies, and separate ourselves from God. Let me be very clear. *Not only homosexual acts, but the sexual acts of all non-married persons are contrary to God's design for human flourishing.* As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, "The deliberate use of the sexual faculty, for whatever reason, outside of marriage is essentially contrary to its purpose."¹⁶ They do not actualize true love in a total self-gift to the other because they lack one of the aspects of the three goods of marriage, and thus separate us from true love.

To those of you who suffer from same-sex attraction, I say to you with fatherly care: you carry a heavy cross; your struggle is more than most of us understand. Your tears do not go unseen by Jesus. He understands your needs and longs to draw near to you. Jesus calls you, like every disciple, to chastity. For those who are married, chastity means respecting the goods of marriage in all marital relations. For the unmarried it means refraining from sexual activity. Chastity recognizes the dignity of the human person and never treats another person as an object for pleasure. Chastity acknowledges the truth, dignity, meaning and purpose of sexual intimacy and requires self-mastery, which is difficult. *But with the help of Christ chastity is possible, for we know in faith, "All things are possible to him who believes."*¹⁷ Chastity is a gift that gives us the freedom to love as Christ loves and brings joy and peace to the human heart.

Another difficult area today for Catholics is what Vatican II refers to as "the responsible transmission of life."¹⁸ Many today are fearful of child-raising. They fear the expense and the commitment. They fear bringing children into a world of sin, selfishness and suffering. And they fear losing their freedom. This tempts them to use methods of avoiding pregnancy that inflict spiritual damage and harm their marriage. Rather than seeing contraception for what it is, namely, a barrier to married love and an enticement to selfishness, as well as something that can have serious health consequences for women, they see it as a solution to a problem.

When couples intentionally render their sexual union sterile through

contraception, they rewrite God's plan for sexual intimacy and make it no longer unitive and procreative. Sadly, whether the couple realizes it or not, they are degrading themselves and their sexuality by making their union one that is less than a "total" self-gift.

Their bodies' language of mutual, total self-giving is overlaid, through contraception, with the inherently contradictory language of withholding their fertility. This leads not only to a refusal to be open to life but also to a falsification of the nature of married love, which is meant to be a personal and total exchange of the gift of self.

When Pope Paul VI wrote his 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* explaining why the Church believes contraception is both sinful and harmful, he also made predictions about what its widespread use would do. He believed it would increase infidelity, bring about a "general lowering of morality," cause men to lose respect for women, result in women being reduced to "a mere instrument of selfish enjoyment," and promote the belief that we should have unlimited dominion over our bodies. Finally, he predicted that contraception would become a "dangerous weapon ... in the hands of those public authorities" who have no concern for moral issues.¹⁹

Forty-six years later, can anyone doubt that each of Pope Paul's predictions have come to pass? The fundamental problem caused by contraceptive use is that it short-circuits the exchange of love between husband and wife and it cuts them off from the creative power of God that they are made to participate in. It sets our sights too low and fails to bring lasting, true happiness.

The same problems arise with the use of in vitro fertilization and other illicit forms of assisted reproduction. The Church teaches that if some technological intervention "assists" marital intercourse in achieving its proper purposes, then it is morally legitimate to use. But if a procedure "substitutes" for the marital act, then the option is morally impermissible.²⁰ Children have a right to be brought into the world within and through the context of marital self-giving. Creating a child outside of marriage is both unjust to the child and corrupting to the ones who do it.

The Church teaches parents to be responsible and generous with the gift

of their fertility. That is why it advocates the use of Natural Family Planning, which utilizes an awareness of a woman's fertility cycle to allow a couple to prayerfully decide whether God is calling them to potentially bring forth life or to refrain from intimacy. A couple must have serious reasons to postpone having a child, and they must always be open to the gift of life if they unexpectedly conceive a baby.

Any couple that has practiced NFP to postpone pregnancy for long periods of time knows that it can be challenging. One spouse can pressure the other to have intercourse at times during which they both have judged it to be appropriate to abstain. The sacrifice of fidelity, however, is worth it. Spouses are called to be patient with each other and "be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ."²¹ Husbands must be especially sensitive to the needs of their wives, understanding that their wives bear a disproportionate amount of the burden of childbirth and child-raising in the first few years. Wives should be generous to their husbands. If couples have discerned that Jesus wishes them to refrain for a time from having children, they should recognize the difficulties this can impose. They should be careful not to grow distant from one another or be lax about charting in a way that might require them to abstain longer than necessary; they should come back together so that, as St. Paul teaches, "Satan will not tempt you."²² If spouses bear with each other's weaknesses and endure courageously the disciplines required for marital sexual chastity, it will yield in their marriage and their individual lives "the peaceful fruit of righteousness."²³

One final good that has come under attack is the permanent bond of marriage. Since 1960, the divorce rate in the United States has nearly doubled, rising to around 50 percent.²⁴ This has led to countless broken families, with both spouses and children suffering the fallout that accompanies divorce.

The permanent character of marriage can be traced to the beginning of creation, as Jesus explains when the Pharisees question him about Moses allowing divorce. Christ responds, "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female ... 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one?' So they are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder."²⁵

Furthermore, in the same passage of the Gospel when the Pharisees noted to Jesus that Moses permitted divorce, he replied to them, “For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.”²⁶ These words are important for us today as the hearts of many are more formed by the society and culture in which we live than by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Hearts have become hardened to the permanent, lifelong commitment of marriage and divorce has become much easier for couples today. Couples who truly reverence Christ and put him first in their marriage, loving one another as Christ loves, will remain faithful to each other even in difficult times in their marriage.

If the family is to thrive in the face of these many cultural challenges, then the Church must redouble her efforts to teach about the joy, beauty and goods of marriage. She must respond to our wounded and skeptical society with mercy and truth. She must be, as Pope Francis has said, like a “field hospital” where injuries can be healed and wounds bound up.²⁷

Part III

How to Live the Family’s Mission

Heralds of the Gospel of Marriage

In December 2011, Pope Benedict XVI gathered members of the Pontifical Council for the Family at the Vatican and spoke to them about how the evangelization of society is tied to the family. He observed, “In our time, as in times past, the eclipse of God, the spread of ideologies contrary to the family and the degradation of sexual ethics are connected. And just as the eclipse of God and the crisis of the family are linked, so the new evangelization is inseparable from the Christian family.”²⁸

By announcing the special Synod on the Family for October 2014 in conjunction with the Ordinary Synod of 2015, Pope Francis also recognizes this connection and is asking the Church to focus her energies on renewing the family.

Three important concerns that the Synod must address include: raising

children in broken homes where only one parent is present, providing effective pastoral care for couples who are divorced and “remarried” and improving marriage preparation so that it both spiritually awakens and educates couples in the truth, goodness and beauty of marital love rooted in the theology of the body. We have to help couples live the fullness of the Gospel in a broken, skeptical and hostile culture. Above all, the Church must shine a light on the joy of living a faithful Christian family life.

The solution to the wide array of issues affecting marriage and family life is not to adopt a pseudo-truth about marriage or a false pastoral approach that ends up justifying evil or contradicting the Gospel. Instead, the solution is fidelity to the only Truth that really saves the human person: Jesus Christ! What we need to do is to relate the truth about marriage and the family to the Father’s plan, as found in the original unity between Adam and Eve, and to the joy that comes from experiencing the redemption and freedom from sin Christ won for us.

To help you live out the call to make Jesus Christ and the Church the foundation of your family, I want to provide you with a few practical ways to assist with forming your family so that it has Jesus Christ and the Church as its foundation.

The first essential way is the personal encounter with Jesus Christ, who leads us to encounter the Father and the Holy Spirit. Opening our hearts to a personal encounter with each person of the Trinity, and freely entering into the communion of love with the Trinity will ground us in Christ and the Church. This is done through personal prayer and most especially the prayerful reading of the four Gospels. Following the example of St. Ignatius of Loyola and many other saints, place yourself in the Gospel story, listen with your heart to what Jesus is saying, and encounter his healing compassion, mercy and love. Through this experience, you will be brought into a heart-to-heart relationship with him.

This leads to the second way, which is to live the sacramental life of the Church, most especially in the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation. We keep holy the Sabbath by attending Mass each weekend and we go to confession regularly, at least monthly, to experience the mercy and forgiveness of Jesus and grow in the virtues. These sacraments strengthen our relationship with the Trinity, strengthen the love of hus-

band and wife for one another and for their children, and build up family life by keeping Christ at the center.

A third step is to pray together as a family. There is the adage, “Families that pray together, stay together.” This begins first with husbands and wives praying with one another, and then praying with their children. Praying at meal times, before making major decisions, or at bedtime with your children and then later with one another are all possibilities for going before God to lift up your hearts to him. Furthermore, having sacred images in your homes and crucifixes in every bedroom is a constant reminder that God comes first in our lives and we worship him alone.

A fourth practical way is to learn more about your faith. We are blessed in the Archdiocese of Denver with many parish and diocesan programs such as Marriage Encounter, “That Man is You,” Endow, The Catholic Biblical School, The Catechetical School, Families of Character, and The Augustine Institute, just to name a few. All of these programs can help you encounter Christ and help families grow.

Finally, it is important to give witness to the good news of family life in the public square. Too many Christian hearts and minds have been formed by the culture in which we live, and too many have left their faith at the doors of the church, rather than working for the transformation of culture and society as the Second Vatican Council teaches. Too many hearts have become hardened to the Gospel, turned to false gods and empty idols, and have become “blind guides.” In the debates of today, it is vital that Catholics give witness to the truth of marriage, the family and the dignity of human life from the moment of conception to natural death.

To close this letter I want to tell a story from my time as Bishop of Fargo that illustrates how the truth and beauty of Christ’s teaching about marriage and the family brings life and joy.

Aware of the widespread confusion and ignorance about the Church’s teaching on sexuality and contraception, I required that couples preparing for marriage take a full course on natural family planning and that they learn about St. John Paul II’s theology of the body. The term “theology of the body” refers to his explanation of how the human person’s

deepest identity and purpose can be learned by studying the language of the body, sexuality and marriage.

Many of the couples were resistant at first. However, as they listened, their hearts changed and they became open and receptive to the teaching.

A letter I received from a young woman captured the change of heart that occurred. She wrote: "At first I was angry that I had to take the course on natural family planning along with the theology of the body. But now, Bishop, while I am deeply grateful for what I have learned, I am angry, and I ask you, 'Why was I not taught this much earlier, in high school?' I would have been saved much hurt and heartache in college if I had been taught this earlier and not listened to the voice of the world. My younger sister is still in high school and I am going to teach her what I have learned so she does not make the same mistakes I did."

Her story could be told by countless men and women if they heard the beautiful truth about the goods of marriage and the family, and the meaning, truth, and dignity of human sexuality. The good news of the virtue of chastity and the preservation of virginity until marriage needs to be taught clearly, otherwise society and the media will continue to undermine the meaning, gift and beauty of the family and human sexuality.

Any solution to these many issues must be built on a solid foundation, because the family is the human space where each of us encounters Christ. The encounter with Christ must come first as can be seen so clearly in the Gospels. The personal encounter with Christ changes even the hardest heart. Pope Francis reminds us: "The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew."²⁹ If the Church is to succeed in bringing the good news about the joy of marriage and the family to the world, she must focus all of her energies on rejuvenating families and helping them become the first school of Christian life where children witness their parents reflecting the generous, sacrificial love of the Trinity.

There are many challenges and threats to the family today, so I realize that it is not possible for every difficult family situation to be neatly

resolved. But I do know that with the grace of God, every person and situation can more closely resemble the intimate exchange of love we were made to experience. I know in faith and from personal experience that hearts can be transformed and healed through an encounter with Jesus Christ. He alone can bestow peace and joy in the family that no one can take away. Because of his grace and mercy, every family can respond to the challenge presented by Pope St. John Paul the Great, “family, become what you are ... a community of life and love” that will find its ultimate fulfillment in heaven.³⁰

May God bless each and every one of you, and may he bless all families with a special outpouring of grace in this time of renewal of the family!

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Samuel J. Aquila". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Samuel J. Aquila, S.T.L.
Archbishop of Denver

June 29, 2014

+Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul

Endnotes

- 1 Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (FC), 86.
- 2 Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifidelis Laici*, 40.
- 3 1 Corinthians 16:13. All biblical references are from the Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition.
- 4 Homily of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger at the Mass for the Election of the Supreme Pontiff on April 18, 2005.
- 5 Genesis 1:27-28a.
- 6 Genesis 2:24.
- 7 Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), 1604.
- 8 Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), 24.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Cf. CCC, 2202.
- 11 Cf. CCC, 2205.
- 12 Cf. Saint Augustine of Hippo, *De bono conjugali (On the Good of Marriage)*, 3.
- 13 The Catechism of the Council of Trent, published in 1566.
- 14 Pope Pius XI, Cf. *Casti Connubii*, 23.
- 15 GS, 48.
- 16 CCC, 2352.
- 17 Mark 9:23.
- 18 GS, 51.
- 19 Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, 17.
- 20 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Vitae*, II, B, 7.
- 21 Ephesians 5:21.
- 22 1 Cor. 7:5.
- 23 Hebrews 12.
- 24 Cf. W. Bradford Wilcox, *The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America 2011*, 67, 69.

- 25 Matthew 19:4-7.
- 26 Matthew 19:8.
- 27 Cf. “A Big Heart Open to God,” Sept. 30, 2013 interview with *La Civiltà Cattolica*.
- 28 Address by Pope Benedict XVI to plenary session of the Pontifical Council for the Family, Clementine Hall of the Vatican, Dec. 1, 2011.
- 29 Pope Francis, *Evangelium Gaudium*, 1.
- 30 Cf. FC, 17.

For more resources, visit
archden.org/family

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But today there is much confusion
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marriage, which is the foundation
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The Most Rev. Samuel J. Aquila was named
Archbishop of Denver on May 29, 2012. His
episcopal motto is taken from the fifth verse of
the second chapter of the Gospel of St. John:
“Do whatever he tells you.”

