

RCIA CLASS 20 – THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT, THE FAMILY, AND SOCIETY

I. The family is both the primordial society for all people and, for the Catholic Church, the domestic church.

A. God created three institutions Himself, the family, the nation of Israel, the Catholic Church (the new Israel and the household of God.) See Gen. 2:18-25, 12:2-3; Matt. 16:17-20.

B. The family begins with husband and wife, father and mother. For man and woman reflect God's love and creative goodness in complementary ways.

1. As the Bible says, "God created man in His image; in the divine image He created him; male and female, He created them." Genesis 1:27. Or, as the Catechism puts it, "The respective perfections of man and woman reflect something of the infinite perfections of God: those of a mother and those of a father and husband." Catechism of the Catholic Church 370.

2. There are many images of this complementarity. For example, in most languages, as in St. Francis' Canticle of the Creatures, there is a reference to such things as the sun, the sky, and fire as masculine, and such things as the moon, the earth and water as feminine. See C.S. Lewis, Perelandra ch. 16; Peter Kreeft, Angels (and Demons) question 46. In music, harmony and melody enrich each other, as do primary and pastel colors in painting, rhyme and meter in poetry, nouns and verbs in prose. In the Old Testament, there is the thundering masculine voice of prophesy, and the kind, maternal voice of Wisdom, who is portrayed as a maiden or a mother. Compare Is. 8:1-22, 55:10-11; Jer. 1:9-10 with Prov. 9:1-12; Wis. 7:7-27, 8:2-8; Sir. 4:11-19. In addition, as St. Pope John Paul II noted in footnote 52 of his encyclical letter Dives in Misericordia (Rich in Mercy) the Old Testament has two terms for mercy: the masculine hesed, the unfailing loyalty to the objective covenant; and the feminine rahamim, which reflects the personal love of a mother for her children.

3. Children should be raised in the context of that complementary love. Thus, father and mother, grandfathers and grandmothers, uncles and aunts show God's goodness in different and mutually perfecting manners.

4. The family thus comes before society, and should be respected and supported by it. For there cannot be a strong society or a virtuous people for long without strong families. As the Vatican II Council said, "The family is the place where different generations come together and help one another grow in wisdom and harmonize the rights of individuals with other demands of social life; as such it constitutes the basis of society." Gaudium et Spes, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (1965) 52.

5. The point is not that family life is easy or comfortable, or always peaceful or harmonious. The point is that the love lived out in family life, not despite, but largely through the sacrifices needed, makes the family, in the words of the Vatican II Council, the first "school for human enrichment."

C. This natural complementarity of masculinity and femininity comes to a higher level in Scripture, as marriage becomes the image of the love between Christ and His Church.

1. Marriage is often presented in Scripture as an image of God's relationship with His people. For example, the prophet Isaiah said, "For the Lord delights in you and makes your land His spouse. As a young man marries a virgin, your Builder shall marry you; and as a bridegroom rejoices in His bride, so shall your God rejoice in you." Isaiah 62:4-5

2. A Christian marriage in particular is a deep image of Christ's relationship with His Church. "In virtue of the sacrament of Matrimony, by which they signify and share in the mystery of the unity and fruitful love between Christ and the Church, Christian married couples help one another to attain holiness in their married lives and in accepting and educating their children." Vatican II Council, Lumen Gentium 11. Thus, after giving advice to married couples, St. Paul says, "Husbands love your wives even as Christ loved the Church and handed himself over for her. . . . This is a great mystery; I meant in reference to Christ and the Church. Let each of you love his wife as himself; and let the wife respect her husband." Eph. 5:25, 32-33; see also Rev. 19:6-8, 21:1-4.

3. The words of Saint Paul about husbands and wives can be seen as addressed to both of them, calling for mutual service and love, sometimes with one emphasis, and sometimes with another. See 1 Cor. 11:2-16; Eph. 5:21-33; Col. 2:18-19; Titus 2:4-6. St. Peter's admonition to serve one's husband can be seen in the light of attempts to convert a non-believer; he later affirms that men and women are co-heirs of Christ. See 1 Pet. 3:1-7.

D. This centrality of marriage to society and to salvation then becomes the basis for the duties and rights between children and their parents.

1. Parents have the right and responsibility to care for and bring up their children in all respects, physically, intellectually, morally and spiritually. Parents are the primary educators of their children. See Catechism 2221-2223. They may use schools, as a builder may hire others to help him, but theirs is the final responsibility, especially because education is not merely a matter of learning things, but above all else a matter of becoming a wise and virtuous person.

- Central to this right and duty is the responsibility for handing on the faith and morals to one's children. There is a solemn duty of parents to bring children up in the practice of the faith and educate them in the faith until the children are emancipated. See Vatican II Council, Gravissimum Educationis (Declaration on Christian Education) (1965) 3. It will not do to wait for them to be adults to decide on what faith they will have, any more than one would wait until they are adults to decide whether to be educated, well-mannered, honest, etc.

- A father and mother should be to the children and image of God the Father and Holy Mother Church.

2. Children have the obligation to respect and obey their parents as those given by God first of all to show them His goodness.

- As with all authority, this obedience is under the law of God and must be referred back to it. Thus, children should uphold moral law before any other allegiance.

- However, as long as the parents are trying and at all able to raise the children, they deserve respect despite what are no doubt going to be many failures and shortcomings.

- In addition, after emancipation, children still have the duty to love and care for parents, especially when they are in advanced age. As St. Paul wrote to St. Timothy, "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever." 1 Tim. 5:8; see also Sir. 3:1-16.

3. Furthermore, the extended family should care for each other, as the Blessed Virgin Mary went to help her cousin Elizabeth. This mutual assistance is the first extension of society built upon the family. In fact, in the ancient Jewish culture, the word adelphos meant not only brothers and sisters, but all relatives (uncles, aunts, cousins, and the like) for the idea of the family, and their love for each other, was meant to be a very broad one.

4. There is also an obligation to care for and reverence the dead. We pray for the deceased and give them honor, reflecting our gratitude to them. See Tobit 1:16-18; Catechism 2300.

II. All other authorities are an extension of the family and have rights and responsibilities within their rightful sphere.

A. Each person and each family are naturally a part of a society, and are meant both to uphold the society and benefit from it. The Catechism speaks of contributing to "the good of society in a spirit of truth, justice, solidarity, and freedom." Catechism 2239. At Pentecost, each person heard the Gospel in the language of his own nation. And Scripture seems to indicate that not only individuals, but even nations will come before the throne of God. See, e.g. Ps. 87; Is. 60:3, Rev. 21:24.

1. Thus, the great Catholic teachers, building upon the classical traditions of Greece and Rome, have included both love of family and love of country under the virtue of piety. See, e.g., Summa Theologica II-II question 101, article 3.

2. As St. John Paul II explained in his last book, Memory and Identity (2005), the Fourth Commandment implies the virtue of patriotism, or love of the fatherland (patria in Latin.) Catholic social teachings regard both the family and the country as "natural institutions not the product of mere convention," divinely given aspects of human nature that the government should serve, not dominate. As love of family involves love of the members of the family and its traditions, culture, learning, faith, and the like, "patriotism is a love of everything to do with our native land: its history, its traditions, its language, its natural features" extending also "to the works of our compatriots and fruits of their genius."

B. Especially since Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical letter Rerum Novarum (On the Conditions of Workers), the Church has increasingly described a vision of the just society as based upon a culture that supports families and individuals in making a free choice for God and neighbor. Other authorities, such as those in the political and economic sphere, should support rather than dominate family and culture.

1. Subsequent to that encyclical letter, there have been several other major statements including:

- Pope Pius XI's 1931 encyclical Quaragesimo Anno (On the Fortieth Year of Rerum Novarum)

- Saint Pope John XXIII's 1961 encyclical Mater et Magister (Mother and Teacher) and 1962 encyclical Pacem In Terris (Peace on Earth)

- The 1965 Vatican II document Gaudium et Spes (The Church in the Modern World)

- Blessed Pope Paul VI's 1969 encyclical Populorum Progressio (On the Progress of Peoples)

- Pope St. John Paul II's encyclicals Laborem Exercens (On the Dignity of Human Labor), Sollicitudo Rei Socialis (The Church's Concern for Social Affairs), and Centissimus Annus (On the Hundreth Year of Rerum Novarum.)

- Pope Benedict XVI's 2009 encyclical Caritas in Veritate (Charity in Truth)

2. Rerum Novarum was written in the context of the Industrial Revolution and tried to focus people's attentions back to the centrality of developing human nature and away from the impersonal forces that were increasing at the time. He spoke both against laise faire capitalism and socialism because they both have the similar fundamental flaws. In particular, they both consider progress to consist primarily of material satisfaction, and both would subordinate the person, as well as faith and the family, to something else, the government in the case of socialism and economic forces in the case of excessive competition. He argued that the state and economic institutions should both support smaller groups and especially the family and the Church that each person may grow to be the son or daughter of God that he is called to be.

3. Saint Pope John Paul II wrote Centissimus Annus in the context of the fall of communism and the Soviet Empire and the rise of many new independent countries.

1. He emphasized that in the new situations arising after the fall of the Soviet Empire, the focus, now as ever, should be on the perfection of each person and on a society that pursues virtue and holiness above all else. He wrote, "The main thread and, in a certain sense, the guiding principle, of Pope Leo's Encyclical and of all of the Church's social doctrine, is a correct view of the human person and of his unique value, inasmuch as man is the only creature on earth which God willed for himself. . . . It is by responding to the call of God that man becomes aware of his transcendent duty. Every individual must give this response, which constitutes the apex of his humanity, and no social mechanism can substitute for it." Centissimus Annus 11, 13.

2. While no one can make this decision for a person, “man’s social nature is realized in the context of the numerous social groups beginning with the family and including economic, social, political and cultural groups which stem from human nature itself.” Centissimus Annus 13.

3. The Pope promoted a model of society, in which the government and the economic structure would support a culture and families, who in turn support each person’s ability to seek the true, the good, the beautiful, the holy, and above all God, who is the source of each of these things. The Church is a part of this culture and should be a part of each family, but also is in the society of heaven, joining the two realms.

4. Saint John Paul II rejected several popular alternative models, including: (1) socialism, which would subordinate individual, the family and culture to the state for a merely economic end and treat people primarily as material beings; (2) excessive economic and social competition, which would subordinate the person, family and culture to the economy or to the powerful for the sake of gain; (3) moral relativism, which values the individual and his freedom above all else, but fails to answer the question of what freedom is for and downplays the need for family and society; (4) a consumerist society that balances competition and regulation, but is focused merely on gaining more things or pleasures for people and fails to recognize the deeper call of mankind, which are brought out in a devout culture, families, and God’s call to each person; and (5) religious totalitarianism, which would like socialism subordinate the individual, the family, and culture to the state for what may be a good intention, but one that negates the free choice to love and believe, a free choice that is essential to the realization of the vocation God gives to each person.