## Session 4

# The Family Animates Society

### A. Opening hymn and greeting

### B. Invocation of the Holy Spirit

### C. Reading from the Word of God

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same?

So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect..." (But) take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father. When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win the praise of others. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your alms-giving may be secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you" (Mt 5:43-48; 6:1-4).

### D. Biblical Catechesis

***You have heard it said... but I say to you...***

Why educate our children to generosity, hospitality, gratitude, service, solidarity, peace and all the social virtues that are so important for the human quality of their life? What advantage do they get from this? Perhaps there will be no increase in their wealth, prestige or safety. And yet, it is only by cultivating these virtues that people have a future on earth. They grow thanks to the perseverance of those, like parents, who educate the new generations to goodness.

The Christian message encourages us to something greater, something more beautiful, more risky and more promising: the humanity of the family, thanks to the divine spark present in it, which not even sin has taken away, can renew society in accordance with its Creator's design.

Divine love encourages us on the way of love of enemy, dedication to strangers, and generosity beyond what is due. The family shares in our God's overabundant generosity and so it can look farther and experience greater joy, stronger hope and more courage in its choices.

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Many of Jesus' words reported in the Gospels enlighten family life. Moreover, his wisdom regarding human life grew thanks to the family atmosphere in which he spent a great part of his existence. There he experienced the varied world of feelings, hospitality, tenderness, forgiveness, generosity and dedication. In his family he observed that it is better to give than to presume, to forgive rather than avenge, to offer rather than keep, to spend one's life without sparing it. Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom comes from his direct family experience and affects all of his relationships, starting precisely from his family relationships, and enlightens them with a new light and expands them beyond the confines of the old law. Jesus invites us to go beyond a selfish view of family and social ties, to expand our affections beyond the limited circle of our own family so that they will become a leaven of justice for social life.

The family is the first school of affections, the cradle of human life, where evil can be confronted and overcome. The family is a valuable resource of good for society. It is the seed from which other families will grow who are called to improve the world. However, it can happen that family ties prevent from developing the social role of affections. This happens when the family keeps energies and resources for itself and closes itself into the logic of the family's advantage which leaves no legacy for the future of society.

Jesus wants to free the couple and the family from the temptation to withdraw into themselves: "For if you love those who love you... if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that?" With revolutionary words Jesus reminds his listeners about the "ancient" likeness to God and invites them to dedicate themselves to others in the divine style, beyond apprehension and fear, beyond calculations and guarantees of one's own advantage.

Jesus astonishes his listeners when he teaches that it is possible to be children who resemble the Father. He removes us from the dullness of resignation and selfishness and tells us forcefully to love our enemy and to pray for those who persecute us; that we can uproot the violence from our hearts by forgiving offenses, and that our generosity can overcome the economic logic of a mere exchange.

### *2. Be children of your heavenly Father.*

Jesus asks for this unique lifestyle and in this way reveals that people are destined for this high calling. He trusts in the teaching which families, through God's design, can offer on the way of his love.

In the family, we are taught to say "thank you" and "please", to be generous and helpful, to lend our things, to pay attention to the needs and emotions of others, and to consider the toil and difficulties of those near us. In the little actions of everyday life a child learns to establish a good relationship with others and to

share in life. Promoting personal virtues is the first step towards educating to the social virtues. In the family, children are taught to lend their toys, to help their school companions, to ask politely, to not offend those who are weaker, and to be generous in doing favors. For this reason, adults should strive to give an example of attention, dedication, generosity and altruism. In this way the family becomes the first place where one learns the truest meaning of justice, solidarity, moderation, simplicity, honesty, truthfulness and uprightness, together with a great passion for the history of man and society.

Parents, like Joseph and Mary, are astonished when they see their children deal with the adult world with assurance. Children prove to be surprising teachers at times, even for adults: "After three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, and all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers" (Lk 2:46-47).

Like the family of Nazareth, every family gives society, through its children, the human riches it has lived, including the ability to love one's enemy, to forgive without seeking revenge, to delight in the success of others, to give more than what is required...

In fact, divisions and conflicts also occur in the family, and enemies crop up: a spouse, a parent, a child, a brother or sister can become an enemy...However, in the family the members love each another and sincerely want the good of the others. They suffer when someone is ill, even if he or she has behaved like an "enemy". They pray for those who have offended us and are willing to give up their own things in order to make the others happy. They understand that life is beautiful when it is spent for their good.

The family is the "first and vital cell of society". (FC 42), because in the family one learns the importance of the bond with others. In the family one senses that the power of affections cannot be confined " to us" but is destined to the broader horizon of social life. When affections are only lived within the small family unit they wear out, and instead of expanding the family's breathing space, they end up suffocating it. What makes the family vital is the openness of its ties and the extension of its affections, which would otherwise close its members into mortifying cages!

### *Your Father sees in secret.*

Care for family ties and affections is guaranteed more when families are good and generous with other families, attentive to their wounds and the problems of their children, however different they may be from their own.

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Between parents and children, husband and wife, the good increases to the extent that the family is open to society and gives attention and aid to the needs of others. This is how the family acquires important motivations to carry out its social function and becomes the foundation and principal resource of society. The acquired ability to love often goes beyond the needs of one's own family. The couple becomes available for the service and education of other children besides their own. In this way, parents become fathers and mothers of many.

"So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect...": the perfection that brings families closer to the heavenly Father is that "extra" in life offered beyond one's family unit, a trace of the superabundant love that God pours out over his creatures.

Many families open the doors of their homes to hospitality, to taking care of the difficulties and poverty of others; or they simply knock on their neighbors' door to ask if they need help, or to offer some clothing that is still good, or to give hospitality to their children's school companions while they do their homework... or they welcome a child that has no family or they help to preserve family warmth where only a father or mother is left.

Families associate to support other families with their countless daily problems, and they teach their children mutual support for those who are different by race, language, culture or religion. In this way the world is made more beautiful and livable for everyone and the quality of life benefits from this to the advantage of the whole society.

It is not by chance that after the call to perfection the Gospel text deals with alms, which in ancient times, in a subsistence economy, was a way to redistribute resources, a practice of social justice. Jesus exhorts us to not seek the recognition of others by using the poor to gain prestige, but to act in secret. In the secret of the heart the encounter with God confirms one's identity as a child so similar to the Father. This is a lofty, apparently unattainable goal but family life brings it closer.

### E. Listening to the Magisterium

The family gives society the precious fruit of gratuitous love, which includes sweetness, goodness, service, altruism and mutual respect. On the other hand, as the following passage from Familiaris Consortio shows, the magisterial teaching has always aimed at highlighting how the family, in addition to being the school of affections, is also known as the "first school of social virtues". In fact, the family has a specific and original public dimension, which has a positive influence on the good functioning of society and the stability of social bonds.

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### *The family's social task*

The family has vital and organic links with society, since it is its foundation and nourishes it continually through its role of service to life: it is from the family that citizens come to birth and it is within the family that they find the first school of the social virtues that are the animating principle of the existence and development of society itself. Thus, far from being closed in on itself, the family is by nature and vocation open to other families and to society, and undertakes its social role. The very experience of communion and sharing that should characterize the family's daily life represents its first and fundamental contribution to society. The relationships between the members of the family community are inspired and guided by the law of "free giving." By respecting and fostering personal dignity in each and every one as the only basis for value, this free giving takes the form of heartfelt acceptance, encounter and dialogue, disinterested availability, generous service and deep solidarity. [Familiaris Consortio, 42, 43]

## F. Questions for dialogue in the couple and as a group

### *Questions for the couple*

1. What values do our children learn from our way of life?
2. What attention does our family give to social life?
3. What help do we offer to the poor and needy?

### *Questions for the family group and the community*

1. What are the most urgent needs of our community?
2. What can we do for those in need?
3. Which families can we help? How?

## G. A commitment for family and social life

## H. Spontaneous prayers. Our Father

## I. Closing hymn