

Before Session 1, read articles 1-3 of *Familiaris Consortio* (FC).

**Session I: Introduction** (FC, 1-3)

1. Prayer (formal/informal)

2. Scripture readings:

God said, "Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves, and let them be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all the wild beasts and all the reptiles that crawl upon the earth." God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying to them, "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and conquer it...." God saw all he had made, and indeed it was very good (Gn 1:26-31).

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After the meal Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these others do?" He answered, "Yes Lord, you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Look after my sheep." Then he said to him a third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was upset that he asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" and said, "Lord, you know everything; you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep" (Jn 21:15-17).

3. For an outline of articles 1-3, see p. 73.

4. Commentary:

*Familiaris Consortio* ("community of the family") is a long document with a surprisingly short introduction. Yet, in that short space, John Paul II tells us *how* the document came to be, *whom* the document is for, and *why* the family is the subject of a papal exhortation.

(1) How did the document come to be? The Synod of Bishops—a permanent body that advises the Pope on important Church matters—has met over 15 times since Pope Paul VI established it in 1965. (See Appendix A for a listing of the major Synods and their topics.)

At the end of the 1980 Synod on the Family, the Synod Secretariat gave Pope John Paul II numerous written proposals on family life and asked him to be their spokesman to the world. Responding to their request, he wrote *Familiaris Consortio*, which reflects their thoughts on the family as well as his own.

Through this important document, John Paul II is conversing with the contemporary family, which is threatened by "numerous forces" that seek to "destroy" or "deform" it. The Church, therefore, must come to the aid of today's family, and she is officially doing so through this document.

(2) For whom is the document written? In article 1, John Paul II addresses two distinct groups: all families of good will and the young who are preparing for marriage and family life.

John Paul II always had a special love and concern for family life and young people. First as a priest and then as an auxiliary bishop, Karol Wojtyla taught philosophy to students at the Catholic University in Lublin, Poland. And, throughout his years as a priest, bishop, and cardinal, he organized and went on annual outings with groups of young people. Sometimes they skied or hiked in the mountains, but usually they kayaked for a week or two down rivers or along lake chains. His last such trip was in August 1978, two months prior to his being elected Pope. (Through *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II hoped that young people preparing for marriage and family life would find a new vision of loving and serving life.)

Later, in article 3, John Paul II says that the Church knows all the truth about and the deepest meaning behind the values of marriage and family. Therefore, *Familiaris Consortio* is really for all people, without exception, since it proclaims the Gospel, especially the "good news" about marriage and family.

It is important to note that, when John Paul II uses the word "value," he is not talking about something that is relative or changeable. He is talking about a gift of creation that we must always accept as such. Life is one such fundamental gift or value, marriage and family another.

(3) Why is the family the subject of a major papal document? In John Paul II's view, the Christian family is a miniature or domestic church, because it is the "first community called to announce the Gospel" to the child. The Christian family, in effect, does what the Church does—evangelizes, catechizes, ministers, educates for greater love and justice, etc.—although on a smaller scale.

In article 3, John Paul II introduces God's plan for marriage and family, a plan which forms the theological backbone of the document. In Genesis, we see that God had a plan for marriage and family right from the beginning. Sin has badly distorted our understanding of that plan. Christ, through healing the "wounds of sin," has restored our capacity to live out God's original plan for marriage and family. Accepting the Gospel, therefore, is our only hope of finding true fulfillment in marriage and family.

John Paul II: "the future of the world passes through the family." In his eyes, the family was so important to the present and future life of the Church and the world that he made it the subject of a major papal document, one of the most important documents to come out of the Vatican and, yet, still one of the "best-kept secrets" in the pastoral Church.

5. Questions for discussion:

- a. Why is it important to rediscover God's original plan for marriage and family?
- b. What are some of the "rapid and profound" changes that still affect our society and culture?
- c. How have these changes affected marriage and family?
- d. Why does John Paul II say that "only by the acceptance of the Gospel are the hopes that man legitimately places in marriage and family capable of being fulfilled"?

6. Personal reflection:
  - a. In what ways was/wasn't the family you were born into consistent with John Paul II's vision of the "domestic church"?
  - b. In what ways could your family be more reflective of this vision?
  - c. Think of a family you know that most closely resembles this vision. Can you see yourself living this life?
  - d. What are you hoping to learn from John Paul II's teachings and this book?
  - e. Are you willing to examine your own beliefs and values?
7. Read *FC*, articles 4-7, before Session 2.

## Session 2: Bright Spots and Shadows for the Family Today (FC, 4-7)

1. Prayer (formal/informal)

2. Scripture reading:

But you have had the Holy Spirit poured out on you by Christ, and so all of you know the truth. I write, then, not because you do not know the truth; instead, it is because you do know it, and also know that no lie ever comes from the truth (1 Jn 2:20-21).

3. For an outline of articles 4-7, see pp. 73-74.

4. Commentary:

Part I of *Familiaris Consortio* is really a second introduction which more clearly defines the situation of the family in the modern world.

Before defining that situation in article 6, John Paul II cautions us on two counts. First, we must be wary of popular solutions to marriage and family problems, solutions which are often supported by media programming but do not take into *full account* the truth and dignity of the human person (see Appendix B). Secondly, we must realize that truth, as seen through the eyes of faith, is not a numbers game. The Church must seek and profess the truth regardless of the majority opinion, even when that may make her unpopular with the majority of her own members.

Along with the Church, Christian spouses and parents are called to discern and preserve the "entire truth and full dignity of marriage and the family." They are able to do this by virtue of their special charism or gift, the sacrament of matrimony.

In article 6, John Paul II lists the positive and negative signs concerning the situation of today's family. At the root of the negative signs is selfishness. Psychologist Paul Vitz called today's widespread and unrestrained self-interest (self-affirmation) the "cult of self-worship." One of the more obvious and tragic results of this egocentric focus is the growing fear, even hatred, of new human life. (For relevant works by Paul Vitz, see Selected Bibliography, Appendix B.)

There is a modern, popular notion that human history evolves at a fixed rate and always toward the better. In other words, given time, human beings can look forward to more love, peace, and justice. Our present problems, therefore, are due not so much to the effects of sin but to the fact that we, as a species, have not yet "arrived" at a higher moral and spiritual plane.

John Paul II challenges that notion, saying that human history has always been a struggle between two conflicting freedoms or loves. We have the choice to love—first and foremost—either ourselves or God. Based on that choice, we will become either more self-centered or more self-sacrificing.

But today's subtle and negative influences can make it difficult to sort out which of those loves is which. The media, for example, can make an immoral act appear fulfilling and a

moral act seem silly and out-of-date. We must learn, therefore, how to read the signs of God-centered love versus the signs of self-centered love. We can do this, says John Paul II, only through an "education for love rooted in faith."

In article 7, John Paul II points out that many Christians are not immune to the world's negative pressures or its values. And he lists several disturbing signs of that negative influence, including rejection of the Church's teachings on sexuality within marriage.

5. Questions for discussion:

- a. In your view, what are some modern solutions to marriage and family problems that are very appealing yet mask the truth and dignity of the human person?
- b. In article 5, John Paul II talks at length about "evangelical discernment." Where does this kind of discernment come from, and why is it so important?
- c. Concerning the family, what are some concrete signs that the salvation of Christ is operating in the world? (See article 6.)
- d. Which of the negative signs listed in article 6 do you believe to be the most destructive of marriage and family?

6. Personal reflection:

- a. Do you believe that in your life you can influence the culture to be more Christ-like? If so, how?
- b. In your life, where do you find help with "evangelical discernment" (see question 5.b)? Do you belong to any organizations that promote Catholic values?
- c. How has your family supported or challenged the Church's teachings on sexuality?
- d. Are there some teachings concerning marriage and human sexuality that are difficult for you to understand? If so, what are the blocks and/or questions you're struggling with?

7. Read *FC*, articles 8-10, before Session 3.

### Session 3: Bright Spots and Shadows for the Family Today (*FC*, articles 8-10)

1. Prayer (formal/informal)

2. Scripture reading:

Wisdom is bright, and does not grow dim.

By those who love her she is readily seen,  
and found by those who look for her.

Quick to anticipate those who desire her, she makes herself  
known to them.

Watch for her early and you will have no trouble;  
you will find her sitting at your gates.

Even to think about her is understanding fully grown;  
Be on the alert for her and anxiety will quickly leave  
you....

Of her the most sure beginning is the desire for discipline,  
care for discipline means loving her,  
loving her means keeping her laws,  
obeying her laws guarantees incorruptibility,  
incorruptibility brings near to God... (*Wis 6:12-19*).

3. For an outline of articles 8-10, see p. 74.

4. Commentary:

In the second half of Part I, John Paul II outlines what we must do to counter the negative pressures on marriage and family, and evangelize the world with Christian truth and values. (In Part IV, he gives specific, practical counsel on difficult marriage and family issues.)

First, he says, we need to cultivate wisdom if we are to convert the "new humanism" (of the secular, scientific world) into a humanism\* which truly reflects life's deepest meaning and its fundamental values. How do we become wiser? By educating our moral consciences so that we can really discern—not just guess—who we are as human persons and how we should act. By restoring a covenant with divine wisdom, we can help build a more just and loving world.

Secondly, we must oppose the considerable injustice in the world by denying our own selfishness and converting our minds and hearts to Christ. Only through a constant and

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\*Humanism is a philosophy of life which emphasizes the dignity and worth of the human being. John Paul II espouses a Christian humanism rooted in the belief that we have immeasurable dignity and worth because God created us in His own image and Christ redeemed us. The "new humanism," being essentially secular, is vulnerable to today's emphasis on scientific and technological advancement for its own sake. John Paul II is strongly suggesting that, without evangelization and the influence of a science whose primary goal is the advancement of the human person, the "new humanism" will become increasingly anti-humanistic.

permanent inner conversion can we hope to positively influence the world and its structures. Injustice is the result of sin, and sin is no stranger to any of us. Justice, like charity, begins in the home.

John Paul II concludes Part I with an important statement on "inculturation," the process by which individual cultures enrich the Christian faith. Only with the help of all cultures, he says, will the Church be able to become more completely and profoundly aware of the "unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph 3:8). Especially helpful to the Church will be those cultures which may lack technology but have an abundance of human wisdom and moral values.

Ironically, it may be the most technologically advanced cultures of the world—imbued with the "new humanism"—which have the least to offer in the way of enrichment. During her visit to the United States in 1981, Mother Teresa of Calcutta spoke of people's needs:

People are not just hungry for bread, they are hungry for love.

They are not just naked for a piece of clothing; they are naked for human dignity.

They are not just homeless for a room made of bricks, but because of rejection.

For me, abortion is the greatest poverty that a nation can experience.

In Mother Teresa's eyes, poverty was not so much the opposite of economic wealth as it was the opposite of fundamental, enriching values like love and respect for life.

5. Questions for discussion:

- a. Why is it important for science to be allied with wisdom?
- b. In article 9, John Paul II introduces the idea of gradualness. Relative to permanent and continuous conversion, what does he mean by gradualness?
- c. What two principles are important to keep in mind when talking about "inculturation" of the Christian faith, especially concerning marriage and family?
- d. Before starting the "inculturation" process, why is it necessary to study God's original design for marriage and family?
- e. What are some cultural prejudices which might hinder us in seeking the truth in the lives of others?

6. Personal reflection:

- a. In the community you were raised in, where did you see the poverty (lack of love and respect for life) of which Mother Teresa spoke?
- b. What cultures in your community have impacted your Christian faith?

7. Read *FC*, articles 11-13, before Session 4.