

# **SA CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE**

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## **PASTORAL LETTER ON MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE**

Dear Brother and Sisters, especially you who are Fathers and Mothers, Husbands and Wives, Sons and Daughters in Catholic Families,

On Christmas Day 2005 our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI released his first pastoral letter calling it "*God is Love*." He instructs us to make sure that God's love is present in the world, so that "God's way of loving becomes the measure of human love". This is what makes the ideal of marriage a mirror image of the love of God.

In this pastoral letter we, your Bishops, want to show that this love of God is at the heart of family life and is the unique gift that God gives to the Church and to the world through the family.

The late Pope John Paul II spoke of "the future of the Church and of the world [as] passing through the family." In 1994 the African Synod saw the Bishops of Africa searching for a way to bring out the main qualities of African culture in an appropriate description of the Church. The bishops ended up with the image of "Church as the Family of God". They reminded us that the family is the domestic church, because that is where we learn and practice day by day "care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust."

### **The Catholic Family today.**

As we search for the true meaning of the family in today's world we turn first to the documents of the Second Vatican Council, which describe marriage as the way of holiness for the couple and as the natural ideal foundation of the family.

Following Vatican 2 the Synod on the Family in 1980 defined the family as an "intimate community of life and of love." A family is bound together for life and based on relationships of blood, marriage or adoption.

In the eyes of that Synod the family has four specific tasks:

1. to form itself into such an intimate community.
2. to nurture life from conception to natural death.
3. to build up society and finally
4. to share in the evangelizing mission of the church, by receiving and passing on the Good News of Jesus Christ, from parents to children, and from member to member.

We live in an extremely secularized world, a far cry from the ideal that we are holding up as Christians. Of particular concern is the small number of young couples that begin their life together with the blessings of the Sacrament of Matrimony. Of equal concern is the number of marriages, even those blessed in Church, that end in divorce. A third concern is the number of married couples who, even though they stay together, live so far apart that their marriage can in no way be said to represent, or even less reflect, the union of Christ with his Church which is the mystery that the Sacrament is meant to portray.

Another consequence of secularism is the erosion of traditional family structures, which are such a necessary support for the cultures of our people. In the secular worldview sex has been taken out of its proper context and made into a form of entertainment. Is it any wonder therefore that there is such a glaring lack of commitment, immorality and dishonesty? A third serious consequence is our nation's ineffectual effort to deal with the scourge of HIV/AIDS.

To the extent that the changes in the roles of men and women contribute to the fostering and strengthening of marriage and family life, they are good and desirable. However, where such changes lead to increased individualism or where they damage parent-child relationships they are to be decried and resisted.

### **How does the Church respond? What does the Church offer us?**

Christians are first and foremost people of faith, hope and love. This is why the African Synod says: "With the practical help offered by strong and committed Christian families, dioceses will develop the family

apostolate as part of their overall pastoral plan.” The Christian family as “the domestic Church” should strive to build on the noble values of the African tradition in particular the caring and sharing across generations which we know as “*ubuntu*.”

It was to single out this important aspect of The Family, that our own Pastoral Forum of 2000 gave priority of treatment to strengthening family life, together with ongoing adult formation. This falls in line with the rich teaching on marriage and family life given by Vatican 2 and the Synod of Bishops as mentioned above.

As a further step to give Marriage and Family life the importance it deserves, the Bishops’ Conference has set up a Family Life Desk within the Department for Evangelisation. The Desk is committed to promoting this apostolate of the Family. Dioceses and parishes have been asked too to appoint family life coordinators to promote this apostolate at local level. One of the initiatives is the current three yearly Marriage Awareness campaign which dioceses and parishes have already been asked to take up and follow through. The highlight of this is a suggested celebration of Marriage Day on 8<sup>th</sup> October.

Because we your Bishops realize the crucial importance of this work with, for and by Catholic families, we ask all parishes, through their different structures, especially Small Christian Communities, Faith Sharing Groups, Sodalities and Movements to make the building up of good Catholic families the top priority.

Much is said in society and in the Church about restoring family values, the most recent example being the TV programme *Heartlines*. That is not the task of society alone, but the task especially of evangelised and evangelising families. It is the task of the Church as Family of God. That is God’s will and God’s way, for the future of the Church and the world.

We, your Bishops, are like Shepherds filled with concern for their flocks. We believe in this mission, this calling to marriage and family life. We pray with you for the intercession of the Holy Family for the much-needed growth in your vocation.

Bishops of Southern Africa

12 September 2006

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

At the 2000 Pastoral Forum bishops and lay representatives identified the strengthening of family life in the home and ongoing adult faith formation as priorities. Pastoral councils, other groups such as Small Christian Communities and sodalities as well as families in the home can reflect and discuss the following:

- What are the most urgent needs with regard to marriage and family life in our community at this time?
- What programmes and support structures exist in our community for building healthy families?
- What can we do to ensure that marriage and family life is supported in our community?

The SACBC Family Life Desk can be contacted through 012 323 6458 or cel phone 082 5521275 or [trowland@sacbc.org.za](mailto:trowland@sacbc.org.za) to provide a comprehensive list of movements, programmes and resources for the family apostolate available in different places.