



16th October, 2010

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**PASTORAL LETTER BY THE BISHOPS
ON MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY AND THE CHRISTIAN FACING JESUS**

Beloved Sons and Daughters,

The more time passes, the more we come to realize that all the things which our Lord did while He was among us, serve to help us understand further His plan for mankind. The Gospels were written in order that we could get to know who Jesus was, how He lived, as well as become acquainted with His teachings, but that is not all. Through the Gospels we also discover how Jesus responded when confronted by the doubts of his disciples and other people, in order that we may understand how, in this day and age, He will reply to our own doubts.

This is applicable to all subjects, yet for the purposes of this Pastoral Letter, we wish to relate it to the present discussion on marriage and divorce and the effects of divorce. We wish to offer our fellow Christians, some food for reflection based upon faith. With profound love, it is also our desire to present an opportunity to those who are promoting divorce to comprehend how we, as Christians, look upon this reality in the light of our faith.

JESUS, MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

Two thousand years ago, some disciples came to Jesus and asked him: “Can a man leave his wife for any reason whatsoever?”

Jesus’ reply was two-fold. To begin with, He referred them to the splendour of God’s plan for mankind, as reflected in the Book of Genesis: of marriage between one man and one woman who “become one flesh” and secondly, how “what God has put together, no man should put asunder” (Mt 19, 5,6)

They retorted that nevertheless divorce already existed. But Jesus replied that this was not part of God’s plan: “Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, suffered you to put away your wives, but from the beginning it was not so” (Mt 19, 8). Not only did He

enlighten them on the beauty of everlasting marriage, but also highlighted the way this could be achieved. He explained to them that it was not possible – and this applies to all things – to embrace a value and at the same time concede to a reality which goes against that value: one must choose the right path towards achieving such a value. And such a path can never lead to divorce. Jesus tried to show them how divorce alters the intrinsic nature of marriage, any marriage. Once there is divorce, then one cannot speak of stable and everlasting marriage, as ordained by God from the very beginning: because divorce changes the very nature of marriage. At no point does Jesus specify any form of condition or manner in which divorce could be instituted – he simply insists that once there is divorce, then there is a shift in the nature of marriage.

Perhaps if Jesus lived among us today, we would tell him: “Lord, all over the world one finds divorce”. We are sure that his answer would remain the same: “It is because of the hardness of your hearts”. It is our attitude which must undergo a change and not marriage!

It could be that we too, like the disciples, would retort by saying that this is too arduous for us. Yet, we sincerely believe that Jesus would refer us to God’s plan for mankind, by saying that, in all probability, there exists more suffering in our society when we don’t live according to His plan, rather than when we do so. It is for our benefit – generally referred to as the ‘common good’ – that Jesus speaks to us in these words. Jesus’ words are proved to be true when we see the reality experienced in other countries. They introduced divorce because they felt that it would solve their problems related to marital breakdown, and instead, the problems multiplied. This is clearly demonstrated when one consults research studies and statistics. God’s Word does not distort the common good; rather it reinforces it in the face of all human weaknesses.

No Christian would have expected a different reply from Jesus. So, even today, how can we expect Him to say “Strengthen marriage by introducing divorce!”

US, JESUS, MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

We wish to convey to our brothers and sisters who do not share our point of view, that it is not possible for us to say we love our fellowmen unless we communicate to them the message of Jesus. There are those who would say: “Do this on your own...” To these people we say: “We cannot stop at that. We must serve Jesus by fulfilling our mission within society”. The world may not accept His word yet it would have heard it! These are the words of Jesus as we understand them: “Spread the Good News of the Kingdom throughout the world”, not simply in a religious context, but also for the benefit of society, so that the Good News may be beneficial for all. It is not an imposition but a contribution which we are offering to society.

After all, we do the same thing when we help those who are in need, and yet no one says that we are imposing; this is also the case when we speak out in favour of justice and the environment – once again, no one says that we are imposing. Similarly, with love, this is what we must do regarding marriage and the family.

It is the mission of the Church to put all her members in front of our Lord Jesus Christ and His teachings. By means of this Pastoral Letter, we wish to place in the very presence of Jesus Christ every Christian who has chosen to follow Him. May Jesus' words be a light for the Christian conscience: a moral responsibility which must be upheld. It is to Jesus himself that the Christian must be accountable, even in this matter of marriage and divorce!

Moreover, when faced with the words of Jesus, every Christian must shoulder his responsibility and participate in the mission of fulfilling and protecting His teachings. We appeal to all Christians, be it in their calling as Christians as well as in their role within society, to spread the words of Jesus as part of their mission. This is what St Paul, during his time, said to Timothy: "For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God ... for God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim 1,7).

In the history of the Church, moments such as these were important milestones in the development of the Church. We wish to place all of the above within a context of the New Evangelization. This means that the Church enables us to encounter Jesus Christ and goes beyond the Church itself. This is the message that we would like to convey through this Letter.

We encourage all Christian brothers – laymen, priests, religious – to undertake this teaching and pass it on to others with much love and with courage.

We impart upon you our pastoral blessing.

Issued today, 15th October 2010.

✠ **PAUL CREMONA O.P.**
Archbishop of Malta

✠ **MARIO GRECH**
Bishop of Gozo