



19th October, 2010

122/2010

A CHARTER FOR THE FAMILY – 27 YEAR LATER

On 23rd October 1983, only two years after the promulgation of Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, the Pontifical Commission on the Family of the Holy See, released its '*Charter of the Rights of the Family*', a document of immediate and far-reaching significance for our society. In this Charter are enshrined "the fundamental rights that are inherent in that natural and universal society which is the family". It seeks to provide governments with a model for drawing up legislation affecting family policy.

In just 12 articles, the Charter vividly delineates what the fundamental rights of every family are. It is intended for all families, whether they are Christian or not, and constitutes a blueprint for building a healthy, humane society, founded on the integrity of family life. The Charter should serve as a source of reflection and as a guide to action in bringing the values of the Gospel to bear on secular life.

But what exactly does this Charter proclaim? Well, to begin with, by the Charter, the Church does not wish to impose its vision upon society, but rather, in a spirit of service and in the exercise of its mission, it is seeking to install within society, a higher respect of the law of the Creator. Thus, the Charter reminds us that we cannot invent the family: it is given to us and is inscribed in the heart of every human being. Hence, its rights are enshrined in the conscience of the human being and in the common values of all humanity.

In a nutshell, the Charter outlines the following themes:

- The foundation of the family

- The freedom of choice and one's own spouse
- The just exercise on the part of the spouses of responsible parenthood
- The respect and the protection of life from the moment of conception
- The role of the family in the education of the children
- The right of the family to exist and make progress
- The protection of the children
- The promotion of the family institution
- The rights of the family in the fields of religion, social life, culture, economy and finance
- The rights of persons who merit special consideration in society, like the elderly, migrants, people with different capabilities and prisoners.

Almost all these rights are contained in other documents, both of the Church and also of the international community. In fact, in the Charter, there is a continual reference to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Echoing traditional Catholic social doctrine, which calls for us to implement the principle of subsidiarity, the Charter reaffirms that, when applied to families, this means that the State cannot and must not take away from families, those functions that they can perform on their own or in free associations. In recent decades, many major institutions have assumed many of the functions that traditionally, families used to perform: health care, education, recreation and even catechesis. Yet parents should be convinced that they cannot delegate their primary responsibilities to any other institution – to the school, the state or the parish. These complementary institutions should help families when they are unable to meet their obligations, yet they should never substitute for them. When the family's responsibilities are curtailed, the whole fabric of society is weakened. For John Paul II, the principle is imminently clear "Nothing that directly compromises the family can benefit society". On the other hand, every policy that promotes the family furthers social life.

The Charter of the Rights of the Family affirms that family and society "are mutually linked by vital and organic bonds" and "have a complementary function in the defense and advance of the good of every person and of humanity". The social responsibilities

of the family are integral to its vocation and among its obligations, the family has the duty to further a social order that maximizes personal freedom. In other words, the family has the social task to form persons who are “open to the community, moved by a sense of justice and concern for others, as well as by a consciousness of responsibility toward the whole of society”. The family cannot exist only for itself, but for other communities and for society as a whole. In the words of John Paul II, the family must be an “active and responsible place for proper growth and proper participation in social life”.

Indeed, the scope of the Charter is to be one of the truths that the Church proclaims to the people of our times and its rights are conducive to the implementation and development of a healthy family policy. Yet, after nearly twenty-seven years, especially in the light of the current climate where the well-being of the modern family is beset by a host of challenges and strained by the twin forces of individualism and state power, how relevant is this Charter?

This is the question which Fr Rene' Camilleri will address during a seminar organized by ProgettImpenn. The Seminar will be held on **Friday, 22nd October 2010**, at Mons Gonzi Hall, Catholic Institute, Floriana, at 6.30pm. Archbishop Paul Cremona O.P. will deliver the closing address. The general public is invited to attend.