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PASTORAL LETTER FOR ADVENT 2010

'THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CRIB IN OUR FAMILIES'

Dear brethren,

As Christians, at Christmastime, we rejoice for the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, an event which we acknowledge as the coming of the Son of God, as man, in our midst.

Yet we cannot fail to stand in awe if we pause to consider the greatness of the love with which God the Father prepared for the coming of his Son among us. God laid the foundations for Jesus' Mother, Mary and his putative father, Joseph to merge their engagement and marriage with the birth of the baby which God would bless them with. This baby was the focal point of their married life. During these coming days, every Christian will reflect upon the heart-warming scene of the Baby Jesus flanked by both his parents. This scene brings us so much joy that in our homes we delight in setting up a crib for us to rejoice. We read in Holy Scripture how lovingly Mary and Joseph brought up Jesus: in the episode of the flight to Egypt, when the life of their baby was threatened (Mt 2, 13-15) and also of their anxiety when Jesus was lost in the Temple (Lk 2, 41-52).

Dear ones, as believers, it is not possible to contemplate upon our Lord Jesus Christ without simultaneously reflecting upon humanity. During this Advent, which leads us to Christmas, we would like to ponder upon this thought: Could God the Father wish anything less than this for *every* baby who is born into the world?

The birth of a Baby in our midst

We thank God that most babies are born and bred within surroundings which mirror the birth of Jesus Christ. Yet in many cases – and here, even one single baby constitutes too many – in our society, this vision is marred. It could be the case that a baby is born to a single mother, which results in its up-bringing being shrouded by much suffering. In

circumstances of parental separation, children are denied the love of both parents, requiring them to make several choices as to how to conduct themselves with their parents in order to protect their emotions. As Christians, we do not judge people in these situations, but we view it as a challenge to love and contribute our share towards bettering our society for our children. We need to strive harder so that this crib – a Baby flanked by a father and a mother – is not tarnished for us humans, for every child!

Sometimes, the Catholic Church and even we as Catholics, are criticized for being too idealistic because we do not take the world around us to be our starting point and we accept things as they are; then to a certain extent we try to remedy the damage. This is what is happening in our day and age with respect to the family, most particularly in the legal sphere. We are all aware that in this area, it is mostly children who are suffering.

All those who truly believe in our Lord Jesus Christ hold his teachings firm in their hearts: to love all those who are living this harsh reality and to strive to change it for the good of mankind. In the Pastoral Note we issued lately, we stated: “It is our attitude which must change, and not marriage”. Christmastime is a moment when each and every one of us, together, must make a choice: inspired by our reflection on the crib, we should strive to live in a similar fashion within our own families, then disseminate this vision in order to create a society that becomes one of service to mankind – in this case, of service to the baby and the child.

We are proposing this line of thought because although it pleases us when children are declared to be the focal point of our reflections, this is not always the case in our society and where proposals to legislation are concerned. These do not always reflect the Christian ethos and are not always for the benefit of children.

Scientific progress

Many times, scientific progress serves for the benefit of mankind because it presents new possibilities and offers new horizons which enhance his capabilities. In our day, we can appreciate the beauty of science in the fields of medicine and information technology. Yet, sometimes, in the midst of all the enthusiasm which is felt at the moment of scientific breakthrough, discoveries are not always applied for the good of mankind and his basic principles, which are those that encourage us to retain a basic respect towards Creation, or nature. Failure to do this is to the detriment of mankind itself.

Perhaps the best example we can illustrate, concerns the environment. The modern means which man has at his disposal are more powerful, with the result that they can dominate over nature. Over a span of several years, we notice that we have not afforded nature its due respect; rather we are disrupting nature in its totality. In the light of this power, we have abused nature and now we are trying to encourage respect

towards it once again! Man's selfish interests have caused this damage to creation with the result that mankind has itself been affected negatively.

One of the disadvantages we encounter as a small country is that we do not immediately benefit from scientific discoveries. However, on the positive side, this puts us in a position to evaluate what happens in other countries and learn from their experience.

In this Pastoral Letter, we wish to share with you the reality regarding children and their place in the family

An good environment for children

One of mankind's challenges is precisely mankind itself. All of this has happened because personal interests have taken over from other values. This is happening also today if – and when – we allow other considerations to take over from the interests of our children. Every child ought to be embraced as a value and a gift in itself, more and more if one bears in mind that a baby is a gift from God.

Much in the same way that God expected Joseph and Mary to prepare themselves mentally and emotionally in order to accept the Lord Jesus in their lives, God also expects Christian spouses to view the conception of their baby not as a purely physical act. Their lasting love for one another should be enhanced by a spiritual formation which encourages them to go beyond merely the actual birth of their child, but which allows their child to be fostered by their love.

For this reason, any teaching on human sexuality should have as its starting point all that which is humane – the love of the spouses, respect towards one another – and only afterwards, should it address the physical aspect of sexuality which in itself is a source of happiness and satisfaction and which serves to draw a couple closer to one another. This should be the proper environment into which God wills a child to be born, knowing that it is conceived and welcomed through the loving sexual encounter of its parents.

If we rely upon a sexual education that does not give due consideration to the consequences which are intrinsically bound to human sexuality, then we would not be giving babies and children their due. We need to bring to the attention of our youth the beauty of God's holistic plan.

Technology in conception

It has become common to use technology for the conception of babies. Here too, there could arise a conflict between the potential which such technology offers and that which is of benefit for the baby in the womb and the baby born as a result of this technology. It

is easy to confuse the primacy of the baby with the desires of parents. We would like to make it clear that we are referring only to the consequences which may be suffered by the children themselves and not to the moral aspect.

We need to ensure that the choice made in favour of the baby is a pure and holy one. Once this choice is left in our hands, in the hands of technology, we need to check whether there are any of its rights which are being violated. The well-being and the privileges due to the child are a greater right than that of any other person and we can never become subject to it. In our world, it is unimaginable that we should subject one person's rights to the detriment of another. For us Christians, every right which is afforded to an adult person should also be afforded to a baby in the womb and to children.

Lately, some recommendations have been made regarding this technology. How can we carry on insisting that children are at the centre of our social and civil life if we condone the freezing of embryos when in other countries, this has ultimately resulted in the killing of embryos? How can we not offer the child who is born solely through technological aids the same ambience as the child who has been born to a couple who have committed themselves to a stable marriage? Do these embryos, and these children, not also belong to us?

Conclusion

Modern society has tried to keep these values apart. Ultimately, it is always the baby and the child who are at the receiving end: babies are killed in the womb as a result of abortion; demographic problems arise due to lack of births; children suffer because they are not loved by both parents. All of this serves to demonstrate that it is a natural fact that the crib is complete just as it is.

So during this Christmas, we call upon all those who choose to be inspired by Jesus to connect their spiritual joy at the birth of Jesus – during midnight mass, through the setting up of a crib or a Baby Jesus in the home – with the joy of every new born baby and children in our communities. May we pledge to do our utmost in order that our own family and other families may be strengthened.

We impart to you our pastoral blessing as a pledge of every heavenly good.

✠ PAUL CREMONA O.P.
Archbishop of Malta

✠ MARIO GRECH
Bishop of Gozo