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## **PASTORAL NOTE ON MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY**

The Church considers it a duty before God and a service to the nation to proclaim what it believes on many topics, including Marriage and the Family. This Pastoral Note is meant to convey the position of the Catholic Church for those who look towards the Church for direction. Through it, the Church also wants to share its outlook with Maltese Society at large.

The Church has always spoken about the beauty and importance of marriage, the basis of the family as a fundamental gift from God. This is valid for marriage as a sacrament as well as for marriage as a natural institution.

The Church bases its faith on marriage especially on the words of Our Lord Jesus Christ: "Have you not read that the Creator from the beginning 'made them male and female', and that he said 'This is why a man leaves his father and mother and becomes attached to his wife, and the two become one flesh?' They are no longer two, therefore, but one flesh. So then, what God has united, human beings must not divide' (Mt 19, 4-6: The New Jerusalem Bible translation).

This Christian heritage which we have received through the Catholic Church has helped most families throughout the centuries to be reared in stable marriages, even in times of poverty and emigration. Even today, in their desire to form a family, most spouses still look towards entering into a stable marriage. Thank God most spouses in Malta still live faithfully this commitment. But now, unfortunately, we are confronted with an increasing number of marriage breakdowns. Each breakdown of a marriage brings much suffering, to the spouses themselves, to their immediate relatives, but especially to children. It is a challenge which the Church and Maltese society at large have to confront.

The Church has helped couples in preparing for marriage, and has sustained them throughout. It has also offered its help when marriages break down. For decades it has provided services, and still does, for couples with problems. It has also provided shelter for children and young people, and victims of violence in the home. It is convinced that

only by investing in more stable marriages will this suffering decrease. The Church promotes marriage and defends it because ultimately this will result in fewer breakdowns. How can one now expect that it will not be speaking out for preventive measures by promoting and defending the stability of marriage? This is the reason why it always produces statistics and studies which prove that society suffers both in human terms and financially from the introduction of divorce.

The Church is committed to convey these values: for its members who seek its direction, and for many others in society who would like to hear alternative views so as to be able to make a better enlightened choice as responsible citizens. In a pluralistic society there should never be just one opinion voiced and it is a disservice to democracy to try to silence other points of view! As there are those who promote divorce in a pluralistic society, the Church's mission is to promote the stability of marriage, insisting on the moment of consent as the focal point of one's commitment. In divorce there is a shift from this focal point towards each moment which is presented as giving the spouse a potential right to consider his/her consent and commitment thus ending one's marriage (see Catechism of the Catholic Church nn. 1650 – 1; 2382-6).

The Church always seeks to make its members ever more aware and willing to carry also personally the responsibility of promoting Christian values in society. This includes stability in marriage. It also urges its members to choose marriage as a value: promoting and defending it. In this way they will be in conformity with what they believe in.

Each and every member of the Church is committed to fulfill the values of the Kingdom of God. They should realise that they are responsible to promote and defend the dignity of each person, justice in society, the environment. How can one reason that each member of the Church is not also responsible for the plan of God on marriage and the family?

Every Christian is accountable before the Lord for his/her every action. We as Bishops have spoken on many occasions about the accountability of every person even in this matter. It should be a great privilege for every committed member of the Church to say before the Lord that he/she has done his part in promoting and defending these values that Jesus insisted so much upon in His teachings.

We urge committed members of the Church, both on a personal level, according to one's state in life and responsibility in society, and in ecclesial groups, to contribute and to contribute positively to this debate. They will be doing a service not only to the Church but to the whole of Maltese society. We ask everybody who contributes to this debate not to distort the love for each person ingrained in the Christian message by embarking on some kind of crusade, even in the case of clear signs of provocation. A 'crusade' implies seeking a victory over the other person of different belief and opinion, by

whatever means. Spreading the Good News must never be just a reaction. It implies respecting even those who do not agree with us to a point that one wants in love and humility to share one's convictions with them without fear, but in convincing love.

Pope Benedict has given us a mission to perform. At the welcoming ceremony, on his arrival to Malta, he told us: "Your nation should continue to stand up for the indissolubility of marriage as a natural institution as well as a sacramental one, and for the true nature of the family, just as it does for the sacredness of human life from conception to natural death, and for the proper respect owed to religious freedom in ways that bring authentic integral development to individuals and society." May his words encourage us to carry out this mission for our Maltese society!

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