

JOHN PAUL II



*The*  
*Role of the*  
**Christian**  
**Family**  
*in the Modern*  
**World**

ANNIVERSARY  
EDITION

With Commentary by  
John and Claire Grabowski

The Role of the  
Christian Family in the  
Modern World

*Familiaris Consortio*

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Pauline  
BOOKS & MEDIA  
Boston

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Catholic Church. Pope (1978-2005 : John Paul II)

[Familiaris consortio. English]

The role of the Christian family in the modern world : Familiaris Consortio / Pope John Paul II ; with commentary by John and Claire Grabowski. -- Anniversary Edition.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8198-6503-8 (pbk.) -- ISBN 0-8198-6503-6 (pbk.)

1. Families--Religious life. 2. Catholic Church--Doctrines. 3. Church work with families--Catholic Church. 4. Christian life--Catholic authors. I. John Paul II, Pope, 1920-2005. II. Grabowski, John S., joint writer of added commentary. III. Title.

BX2351.C29513 2015

261.8'3585--dc23

2015000077

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Excerpts from *Gratissimam Sane, Evangelii Gaudium, Gaudium et Spes, Veritatis Splendor, Laborem Exercens, Mulieris Dignitatem, Humanae Vitae, Apostolicam Actuositatem, Centesimus Annus, Lumen Gentium, Evangelium Vitae, Evening of Witness: Address of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI*, "A Big Heart Open to God," The Prayer for the Synod of the Family and The Prayer for the New Evangelization © Libreria Editrice Vaticana. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

Cover design by Rosana Usselman

Cover photo istockphoto.com/ © digitalskillet, © Omela

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Published by Pauline Books & Media, 50 Saint Pauls Avenue, Boston, MA 02130-3491

Printed in the U.S.A.

www.pauline.org

Pauline Books & Media is the publishing house of the Daughters of St. Paul, an international congregation of women religious serving the Church with the communications media.

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## Preface

At the Mass for the canonization of Saints John XXIII and John Paul II, Pope Francis referred to Pope John Paul II as “the Pope of the family” and noted that this was how John Paul II himself had hoped to be remembered.\*

Why? Why would the twentieth century’s most prolific pontiff—who redefined the papacy with his incredible 104 apostolic journeys to 129 countries, his eloquence in many languages, his impact on the world stage, and his charismatic personality—want to be remembered most for his service to the family?

The reason was his deep conviction of the family’s importance for the life of the Church and the world. This conviction was born of his personal experience, his observation of life as an artist and philosopher, and his work as a pastor. Family is

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\* Pope Francis, Homily of Pope Francis for the Holy Mass and Rite of Canonization for Blessed John XXIII and Pope John Paul II. Available at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2014/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140427\\_omelia-canonizzazioni.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140427_omelia-canonizzazioni.html) (accessed 9/2/14).

the place where persons learn the meaning of their own humanity—where they learn to share, to care for others, to live in the communion of truth and love. And these family members are the present and future members of the wider society. “The future of humanity passes by way of the family,” he would write in this apostolic exhortation (*FC* no. 86).

The same can be said for the mission of the Church. In his Incarnation, “The only-begotten Son, of one substance with the Father . . . entered into human history through the family.”\* Salvation entered the world through the family in the Incarnation, and it continues to do so in the life of the Church. The family is “the domestic church”—the Church in miniature—carrying on Christ’s work as priest, prophet, and king (see nos. 49–50).

Because of its importance, the family is often “a sign of contradiction,” as Simeon prophesied of the child Jesus (see Lk 2:34). Saint John Paul II knew this well. He saw firsthand the suffering of families in his native Poland under the brutal ideologies of Nazism and Communism. In his work as philosopher and bishop, he sought to help families live and experience the Church’s teaching on family despite the opposition of a hostile State. He saw the Church wracked by controversy after Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. He also saw the devastating impact in many parts of the world of

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\* John Paul II, *Letter to Families (Gratissimam Sane)* (1994), no. 2. The citation is from [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/letters/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_let\\_02021994\\_families\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_02021994_families_en.html) (accessed 9/2/14).



the sexual revolution—a revolution fueled by oral contraception.

On his elevation to the Chair of Peter in 1978, the family was at the top of John Paul II's pastoral agenda for the Church. Less than two months later, he announced a World Synod of Bishops on the topic of "the role of the family." This synod met in the fall of 1980 and produced propositions that formed the backdrop for *Familiaris Consortio*. Many times in his papal teaching John Paul II returned to the subject of the family and the challenges it faced. He described its vital role in building a "civilization of love"\* or a "culture of life."†

John Paul II did not only teach about the family, but he also worked and suffered on its behalf. In May 1981, six months before he promulgated *Familiaris Consortio*, he founded the Pontifical Council for the Family. On his way across Saint Peter's Square to announce this new dicastery, he was felled and almost killed by a would-be assassin's bullet—an attack that he took as a sign of how the powers of evil in the world oppose the family.

For the last five years, we have had the great privilege of serving together on the Pontifical Council for the Family, giving us a sense of the truly global nature of the Church's pastoral care of families. While we never had the opportunity to meet Saint John Paul II during his life, he has had a profound and lasting influence on our own family and our

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\* See *Gratissimam Sane*, nos. 13–14.

† See the 1995 Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 26.

ministry as a couple. His teaching has helped us to better understand our own vocation as spouses and parents. It has also shaped our work in teaching, preparing couples for marriage, and doing marriage ministry.

*Familiaris Consortio*, the most comprehensive statement of the modern Magisterium on the family to appear in the twentieth century, gives us a vision of what the Christian family can be despite the challenges it faces. In it we hear the clarity of a trained philosopher, the voice of a poet, the heart of a pastor, the faith of a theologian, and the courage of a saint still calling out to Christian families to “become what you are” (*FC* no. 17). Let us listen again to “the Pope of the Family.”

# Topical Outline

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PART ONE

**Bright Spots and Shadows (4–10)**

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**Conclusion (86)**

APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION  
OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

**On the Role of the  
Christian Family in the  
Modern World**

*Familiaris Consortio*

To the Episcopate, to the Clergy, and to  
the Faithful of the Whole Catholic Church

# Introduction

## The Church at the service of the family

1. The family in the modern world, as much as and perhaps more than any other institution, has been beset by the many profound and rapid changes that have affected society and culture. Many families are living this situation in fidelity to those values that constitute the foundation of the institution of the family. Others have become uncertain and bewildered over their role or even doubtful and almost unaware of the ultimate meaning and truth of conjugal and family life. Finally, there are others who are hindered by various situations of injustice in the realization of their fundamental rights.

Knowing that marriage and the family constitute one of the most precious of human values, the Church wishes to speak and offer her help to those who are already aware of the value of marriage and the family and seek to live it faithfully, to those who are uncertain and anxious and searching for the truth, and to those who are unjustly impeded from living freely their family lives. Supporting the first, illuminating the second, and assisting the others, the Church offers her services

to every person who wonders about the destiny of marriage and the family.<sup>1</sup>

In a particular way the Church addresses the young, who are beginning their journey toward marriage and family life, for the purpose of presenting them with new horizons, helping them to discover the beauty and grandeur of the vocation to love and the service of life.

## **The Synod of 1980 in continuity with preceding synods**

2. A sign of this profound interest of the Church in the family was the last Synod of Bishops, held in Rome from September 26 to October 25, 1980. This was a natural continuation of the two preceding Synods:<sup>2</sup> the Christian family, in fact, is the first community called to announce the Gospel to the human person during growth and to bring him or her, through a progressive education and catechesis, to full human and Christian maturity.

Furthermore, the recent Synod is logically connected in some way as well with that on the ministerial priesthood and on justice in the modern world. In fact, as an educating community, the family must help man to discern his own vocation and to accept responsibility in the search for greater justice, educating him from the beginning in interpersonal relationships, rich in justice and in love.

At the close of their assembly, the Synod Fathers presented me with a long list of proposals in which they had gathered the fruits of their reflections, which had matured



over intense days of work, and they asked me unanimously to be a spokesman before humanity of the Church's lively care for the family and to give suitable indications for renewed pastoral effort in this fundamental sector of the life of man and of the Church.

As I fulfill that mission with this Exhortation, thus actualizing in a particular matter the apostolic ministry with which I am entrusted, I wish to thank all the members of the Synod for the very valuable contribution of teaching and experience that they made especially through the *Propositiones*, the text of which I am entrusting to the Pontifical Council for the Family with instructions to study it so as to bring out every aspect of its rich content.

## **The precious value of marriage and of the family**

3. Illuminated by the faith that gives her an understanding of all the truth concerning the great value of marriage and the family and their deepest meaning, the Church once again feels the pressing need to proclaim the Gospel, that is the "good news," to all people without exception, in particular to all those who are called to marriage and are preparing for it, to all married couples and parents in the world.

The Church is deeply convinced that only by the acceptance of the Gospel are the hopes that man legitimately places in marriage and in the family capable of being fulfilled.

Willed by God in the very act of creation,<sup>3</sup> marriage and the family are interiorly ordained to fulfillment in Christ<sup>4</sup> and have need of his graces in order to be healed from the wounds

of sin<sup>5</sup> and restored to their “beginning,”<sup>6</sup> that is, to full understanding and the full realization of God’s plan.

At a moment of history in which the family is the object of numerous forces that seek to destroy it or in some way to deform it, and aware that the well-being of society and her own good are intimately tied to the good of the family,<sup>7</sup> the Church perceives in a more urgent and compelling way her mission of proclaiming to all people the plan of God for marriage and the family, ensuring their full vitality and human and Christian development, and thus contributing to the renewal of society and of the People of God.



## PONDER

Marriage and the family are perennial concerns of the Church. From its beginning Christians have seen the family as vital to the Church and its mission in the world. In the rapidly evolving culture of the modern world, the family has been subjected to jarring changes and new challenges. This observation of Saint John Paul II was apt in his day. The Industrial Revolution moved economic production out of the home. The sexual revolution battered the family and the Church. The growth of communication technology made the world seem smaller.

The changes and challenges facing the family are even more pronounced in our own day. Now the very definitions of marriage and the family are under dispute. The family is threatened by a pervasive individualism and subjectivism. As Pope Francis has observed: “The family is experiencing a profound cultural crisis, as are all communities and social bonds. . . . Marriage now tends to be viewed as a form of mere emotional satisfaction that can be constructed in any way or modified at will. But the indispensable contribution of marriage to society transcends the feelings and momentary needs of the couple.”\* For many people these realities mean whatever those entering into them

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\* Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), no. 66. The citation is from [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124-evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124-evangelii-gaudium.html) (accessed 9/8/14).

want them to mean. They are simply private arrangements ordered to the happiness of individuals.

In offering this teaching over thirty years ago Saint John Paul II emphasized that the Church is at the service of the family. The Church serves the family by underscoring its great value to the human community as well as its preciousness in the eyes of its Creator. The Church does this in its own unique way by allowing the light of its faith to illuminate the family's nature and purpose. The full truth about the family emerges only in the light of God's eternal plan: "Willed by God in the very act of creation, marriage and the family are interiorly ordered to fulfillment in Christ and have need of his graces in order to be healed from the wounds of sin and restored to their 'beginning'" (*FC* no. 3).

This document was written, and the Synod that preceded it took place, while John Paul II was delivering his series of weekly general audiences, now known as the theology of the body. In them he reflected on the human person in light of the basic triptych of salvation history: creation, the fall, redemption in Christ. The aim of these reflections was to highlight the basic purpose and vocation of the human being: love. God created the person, the body in its masculinity and femininity, marriage, and religious celibacy in order to give and receive love—what the Second Vatican Council called "the sincere gift of self."\* This rich catechesis forms the backdrop for many of the ideas presented in this apostolic exhortation.

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\* See *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* (1995), no. 24.

1. What changes in your lifetime (whether social, economic, or technological) have impacted families in the world around you? How have these affected your own family? How have you seen the Church respond to these changes?
2. Have you witnessed the individualism and subjectivism that Pope Francis warns against in regard to the family? What happens when marriage is understood as a private arrangement ordered only to the happiness of those who enter it? What are some things that we can do to protect young people from being infected by these poisonous attitudes?
3. When you think about the family in light of God's eternal plan for the world, how does that change your perspective on your own family? Can you think of instances in the Bible where specific families played an integral role in bringing about God's plan for his people?
4. How have you experienced God's care for your family both as a child and as an adult? Have you experienced the Church's vision of family as an encouragement in your own family's life? How?

#### PRAY

Reflect on the words of Saint Paul in his prayer to the Ephesians (3:14–21).

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that he

may grant you in accord with the riches of his glory to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner self, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine, by the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Conclude by slowly saying the prayer Jesus gave us: the Our Father.

#### ACT

Take some time to read and reflect on the words of Saint John Paul II in his *Letter to Families (Gratissimam Sane)* (no. 4): “Prayer makes the Son of God present among us: ‘For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them’ (Mt 18:20). . . . Prayer increases the strength and spiritual unity of the family, helping the family to partake of God’s own ‘strength.’”\*

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\* The citation is from [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/letters/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_let\\_02021994\\_families\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_02021994_families_en.html) (accessed on 9/16/14). If you have access to the internet, read all of section 4.