

THE FAMILY  
AND SOME DIMENSIONS OF THE ROLE OF THE STATE

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January 16, 2009  
VI World Meeting of Families

I would like to begin by drawing our attention to Blessed Pope John XXIII, in *Pacem in Terris*, who drew our attention to the importance of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* adopted by the United Nations on December 10, 1948.

Therefore, we have just celebrated the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of this important *Magna Carta* of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Now I would like to draw your attention to Article 16 (3) of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* which provides as follows:

*“The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the state.”*

As we begin the year 2009, we should ask ourselves what might society and what might the state undertake to promote and protect the family of today.

Given the current global financial crisis it is critical that governments continue to develop and deliver programmes which are supportive of the economic, social and cultural needs of the family. In many parts of the world the challenge remains much the same, with the first and highest priority being to ensure that families and individuals have adequate food, water and shelter.

In other areas of the globe, where the most basic needs are generally met, the priority for the state will be to ensure that economic stability is achieved and that there are appropriate mechanisms in place to ensure that those charged with taking care of their families are able to meet their obligations.

The extended family has always been a reality throughout the world, but has gained additional prominence and importance in industrialized countries, where we find increasing numbers of people taking on the responsibility of providing care for elderly parents while also raising their own young children. It

seems to me that governments must become more supportive of these working families as their resources are stretched to the limit.

St. Thomas Aquinas has been instructive for the world of today by his articulation of the “*principle of subsidiarity*”. The message is that the state is not to replace the family but rather to be available to assist the family when the latter no longer has the means or the capacity to meet its needs. In *Christian Education* Pope Pius XI taught that: “the function of civil authority residing in the state is twofold: to protect and to foster but by no means to absorb the family and the individual, or to substitute itself for them”.

Indeed the end or the purpose of the family and the end of society has as its objective the ultimate goal of the human person’s unity with the creator. The family has the principal responsibility and right to respond to the needs of its members therefore whenever the family can possibly address the economic, social and other needs it should be allowed to do so. The state is there to assist the family not to usurp its role for love, nurture and care. The family as the unit of love and life is at the core of civilization.

In some states the legislative authority has acted recently in ways that have not fostered the family. We have seen action taken which has been based on sociological theories of “families”, as opposed to the substantive nature of “the family”. While rejecting those actions, it is important to identify the positive areas where governments can take actions to foster the family in the world of the third millennium. For example governments can be very supportive of marriage and the contemporary family through the tax system, providing assistance to low income families and providing child tax credits. Additional measures to help families and children could be put in place in areas as diverse as public transit, textbooks and schooling and investing in values-based early learning and a universal child care benefit. In given circumstances, special attention should be available from the state, as for example when helping families with children with disabilities.

Governments could undertake many initiatives in these areas, with general support for families including specific tax benefits.

Let me conclude here friends, as we are joined here at this tremendously successful VI World Meeting of Families to share our vision and our accumulated wisdom, experience, and best practices by repeating the words of Blessed Pope John XXIII, who said:

*The family, founded upon marriage freely contracted, one and indissoluble, must be regarded as the natural primary cell of human society. The interests of the family, therefore, must be taken very specially into consideration in social and economic affairs, as well as in the spheres of faith and morals. For all of these have to do with strengthening the family and assisting it in the fulfillment of its mission.*

Thank you.