



The Holy See

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CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC, ZAIRE, KENYA AND MOROCCO

**MASS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
AND CELEBRATION OF MARRIAGES**

HOMILY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

Nairobi (Kenya)

Saturday, 17 August 1985

“There was a wedding at Cana in Galilee. The mother of Jesus was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited” (Jo. 2, 1-2).

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

1. The principal theme of the Eucharistic Congress in Nairobi is *the Eucharist and the Christian Family*. And it is a great joy for me to proclaim this truth to the young couples who are being married and to the many other young people present here today. The reading from the Gospel of Saint John helps us to enter into this theme and to understand its full meaning.

Jesus was present at Cana in Galilee with the newly-married couple. He had accepted their wedding invitation. He was with them. He was for them.

The Eucharist is the Sacrament in which *Jesus Christ* is with us today in a very special way. He is in our midst, offering in an unbloody manner the same Sacrifice that he offered on the altar of the Cross, giving his life for the salvation of the world. In this most holy Sacrament Christ is *with us* to the end of time, *and he is for us*.

2. According to Saint John, the first miracle of the public messianic activity of Jesus took place at

Cana in Galilee. And in his presence there we can see a distinctive *Eucharistic aspect*.

In a certain way Christ's presence at the feast of Cana prefigures the Eucharistic Supper. At the same time it also directs our Christian consciousness to the Sacrament of Marriage. *Jesus is present with every newly-wed couple*; he is in their midst as they commit themselves to each other for life in marriage. Jesus reaffirms God's plan for marriage as the most fundamental human institution, going back to the very beginning of human history.

In the book of Genesis we read: «God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying to them, 'Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it'» (*Gen. 1, 27-28*). Right from the beginning, God created them "male and female" and destined them to form a communion of persons which would be fruitful. "He calls them to a special sharing in his love and in his power as Creator and Father, through their free and responsible co-operation in transmitting the gift of human life" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Familiaris Consortio*, 28). United in God's sight and enjoying his special blessing, man and woman were to rule over the created universe. And thus we see that the institution of marriage coincides with the creation of man and woman in the beginning.

3. On one occasion, in a discussion with the Pharisees, *the Lord Jesus* not only repeated the teaching on marriage found in the Book of Genesis, but he reconfirmed it with particular emphasis. He said: "What God has united, man must not divide" (*Matth. 19, 6*). Therefore the mystery of marriage instituted by the Creator "in the beginning" of the existence of the human race, as the foundation of the future, is reconfirmed by Christ. He places on it *the seal of the Gospel*, the seal of *the New Covenant in his blood* (Cfr. *Luc. 22, 20*).

That is why in every age the Church continues to teach the unchanging truth, that *marriage is indissoluble*. When couples freely receive this Sacrament, as they are doing this afternoon, they establish an *unbreakable oneness*. Having become a new creation in the waters of Baptism, they are able in marriage to be a living sign of the ever-faithful love of Christ for the Church. Their love for one another, their conjugal love, can last until death, not because of their own strength or merits but because of Christ's grace at work within them.

4. The fact that we find Jesus of Nazareth with the newly-wed couple at *Cana in Galilee* right at the beginning of his messianic activity speaks most eloquently. It is like *a prophetic declaration* that henceforth he wishes to be with all couples who through their married vows become ministers of the Sacrament of their life together. He is *present with them through his grace*. This grace is the saving power of God, his gift, which makes human life - and in this case married life - worthy of man, worthy of the children of God.

5. Very significant also is the actual miracle performed at Cana, *the first sign* of the messianic Kingdom. Jesus changes water into wine. In so doing *he transforms and ennobles the drink* which

will be offered to the wedding guests. What is even more eloquent is this: the truth of the Gospel and the grace of the Sacrament of Marriage *transform and ennoble all married life* if the couple follow this truth faithfully, if they collaborate with this grace!

6. *Above all, what is ennobled is conjugal love*, that thoroughly human love which is united to the divine, and which is for the good of both husband and wife. It “leads the spouses to a free and mutual gift of themselves, a gift proving itself by gentle affection and by deed. Such love pervades the whole of their lives” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 49). It is a love such as Saint Paul describes in the First Letter to the Corinthians, which we have listened to in today’s liturgy: “Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous; love is never boastful or conceited; it is never rude or selfish; it does not take offence, and is not resentful. Love takes no pleasure in other people’s sins but delights in the truth; it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes” (1 Cor. 13, 4-7).

7. The fruit of faithful love is a communion of minds and hearts. The love of Christ on the Cross has overcome the divisions caused by sin, and married love which has been ennobled in Christian marriage shares in the power of Christ’s unifying love. Every married couple therefore, and all Christian families, are given *the grace and responsibility of becoming a community of persons*. That is why I said in my Apostolic Exhortation on the role of the Christian family in the modern world: “Its first task is to live with fidelity the reality of communion in a constant effort to develop an authentic community of persons” (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Familiaris Consortio*, 18).

Just as the Christian life requires continual conversion, so married life requires the couple to make *constant and generous efforts to deepen their conjugal communion*. By God’s design there exists a natural complementarity and attraction between man and woman. But these still have to be developed and fostered by loving attention to each other’s needs, and above all by recourse to the graces received in the Sacrament. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth and Love, is poured out upon the married couple in a special way in the Sacrament, and he will help them in their desire to overcome personal shortcomings and selfishness and to achieve ever greater communion in Christ.

It is also important to recall here that “such a communion is radically contradicted by polygamy: this, in fact, directly negates the plan of God which was revealed from the beginning, because it is contrary to the equal personal dignity of men and women who in matrimony give themselves with a love that is total and therefore unique and exclusive” (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Familiaris Consortio*, 19). In the Old Testament, polygamy was sometimes tolerated. But in the New Covenant Our Saviour restored marriage to its original state as a communion of one man and one woman.

8. Together with this task of fostering a communion of persons, husbands and wives also fulfil a vital role *in the service of human life*, in particular through that special honour and duty which is theirs of bringing children into the world and educating them.

The vocation of marriage requires great sacrifice and generosity on the part of both husband and wife. And *the fullest sign of this mutual self-giving* is expressed when the couple willingly accept *children* and bring them up in the knowledge and love of God. As the Second Vatican Council teaches: “While not making the other purposes of matrimony of less account, the true practice of conjugal love, and the whole meaning of the family life which results from it, have this aim: that the couple be ready with stout hearts to co-operate with the love of the Creator and the Saviour, who through them will enlarge and enrich his own family day by day” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 50). That is why anti-life actions such as contraception and abortion are wrong and are unworthy of good husbands and wives.

9. Because families play such a crucial part in society and in the Church, and because of the many threats and obstacles to stable family life today, *the preparation of young people for marriage is more necessary than ever before*. It is important to stress the interpersonal nature of marriage, built on a solid appreciation of the dignity of both man and woman and their natural complementarity. Young people planning for their future need to be made aware of the continual effort required to foster this unique interpersonal relationship, which rests on mutual respect and truth, open communication and a willingness to listen to the mind and the heart.

Perhaps there was a time when the family and local community prepared young people for marriage quite well, but in many places today little preparation is provided. Thus, it should not be too quickly assumed that young men and women are already aware of the basic requirements for a well-ordered family life. They may in fact have great fears and doubts about whether they can live up to the Christian ideals of marriage. They should therefore be *carefully instructed concerning the grace of marriage*, the role of the Sacrament in the mission of the Church, and its relationship with the other Sacraments, especially the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Penance. Important too is a proper understanding of *the nature of sexuality* and responsible parenthood, including the methods of natural family planning and the reasons for its use.

In this context, I would like to repeat what I said to the Bishops of Kenya at the time of my previous Pastoral Visit to your country: “Be assured of my solidarity with you in this great task involving the diligent preparation of the young for marriage, the repeated proclamation of the unity and indissolubility of marriage, and the renewed invitation to the faithful to accept and foster with faith and love the Catholic celebration of the Sacrament of Marriage. Success in a pastoral programme of this nature requires patience and perseverance and a strong conviction that Christ has come to «make all things new»” (*Apoc.* 21, 5).

10. The Eucharistic Congress in Nairobi - the second International Eucharistic Congress on the African continent, the first in the heart of Africa - *is a great invitation to the Banquet of the Lord*. In this Banquet *is renewed the mystery of our Redemption* through the Cross and Resurrection of Christ, and all of us are united in Christ and through Christ with one another as brothers and sisters: children of the same Father.

At the same time, this Eucharistic invitation to the Paschal banquet of our salvation should recall in a particular way the *Sacrament of Marriage*, which is ordered towards the Eucharist.

In the Eucharist is found *the source of life and holiness* for everyone, in particular for husbands and wives and their families, for the young couples who are being married today and for all the young people of Kenya.

11. Today then all those taking part in the Eucharistic Congress in Nairobi *have been invited to Cana in Galilee*. Reflecting on the marriage feast at Cana in Galilee, all husbands and wives and every family can fully realise that *Jesus Christ, Jesus in the Eucharist, is with them, among them and for them*. Jesus is present *through his apostolic Church* just as at Cana he was present with the Apostles. He is present in a special way *through the mediation of Mary, Mother of Christ*.

It was Mary who asked her Son to perform the miracle of changing water into wine. It is she who now asks her Son to sanctify human love; she asks him to grant married couples *the grace of true conjugal love*, - love which is faithful until death and which becomes for both parents and children *the great gift of human life*.

It is also she, Mary, who says to all husbands and wives and to all families: "Do whatever he tells you" (*Jo. 2, 5*). Dear brothers and sisters, dear spouses and parents, dear young people of Kenya: receive Jesus *into your communities!* Receive the Redeemer of the world! *Listen to Mary*, for Mary will lead you to Christ!

And it is Christ who offers to you, the youth of this land, the wonderful gift of the Eucharist. It is he, Jesus Christ, who proclaims to you the truth of marriage and human love. It is he, Jesus Christ, who offers you, young people of Kenya, the fullness of life, eternal life, in union with the Most Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.