Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen!

I welcome you and I wish you well in your work in this Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences. And I thank Professor Zamagni for his kind and insightful words.

You have focused your attention on the reality of the family. I appreciate this choice and also the perspective from which you consider it, namely as a “relational asset”. We know that social changes are altering the living conditions of marriage and families all over the world. Moreover, the current context of prolonged and multiple crises is putting a strain on the projects of stable and happy families. This state of affairs can be responded to by rediscovering the value of the family as the source and origin of the social order, as the vital cell of a fraternal society capable of caring for the common home.

The family is almost always at the top of the ladder of values of different peoples, because it is inscribed in the very nature of woman and man. In this sense, marriage and the family are not purely human institutions, despite the many changes they have undergone over the centuries and the cultural and spiritual differences among various peoples. Beyond all the differences, there are common and permanent traits that reveal the greatness and value of marriage and the family. However, if this value is lived out in an individualistic and private way, as is partly the case in the West, the family can be isolated and fragmented in the context of society. The social functions that

the family performs among individuals and in the community, especially in relation to the weakest, such as children, people with disabilities and the dependent elderly, are thus lost.

It is a question, then, of understanding that the family is an asset for society, not insofar as it is a mere aggregation of individuals, but insofar as it is a relationship founded in a “bond of mutual perfection”, to use an expression of Saint Paul (cf. Col 3:12-14). Indeed, the human being is created in the image and likeness of God, who is love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8, 16). The mutual love between man and woman is a reflection of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves the human being, destined to be fruitful and to be fulfilled in the common work of the social order and the care of creation.

The asset of the family is not aggregative, that is, it does not consist in aggregating the resources of individuals to increase the utility of each, but it is a relational bond of perfection, which consists in sharing relationships of faithful love, trust, cooperation, reciprocity, from which the goods of the individual members of the family derive and, therefore, their happiness. Understood in this way, the family, which is a relational asset in itself, also becomes the source of many assets and relationships for the community, such as a good relationship with the State and the other associations in society, solidarity among families, the welcoming of those in difficulty, caring for the least, combating the processes of impoverishment, and so on.

This perfective bond, which we might call its specific “social genome”, consists in loving action motivated by gift, by living according to the rule of generous reciprocity and generativity. The family humanizes people through the relationship of “us” and at the same time promotes the legitimate differences of each one. This — take heed — is really important in order to understand what is meant by a family, which is not just an aggregation of people.

The social thought of the Church helps to understand this relational love proper to the family, as the Apostolic Exhortation Amoris Laetitia attempted to do, following in a great tradition, but with that tradition, also taking a step forward.

One aspect I would like to highlight is that the family is the place of acceptance. We don't talk about it much, but it is important. Its qualities manifest themselves in a special way in families where there are frail or disabled members. These families develop special virtues, which enhance the capacity for love and patient endurance in the face of life’s difficulties. Let us think of the rehabilitation of the sick, the reception of migrants, and in general the social inclusion of those who are victims of marginalization, in all social spheres, especially in the world of work. Integrated home care for the severely disabled sets in motion a caring capacity in family members that is able to respond to the specific needs of each individual. Let us also think of families that generate benefits for society as a whole, including adoptive and foster families. The family — as we know — is the main antidote to poverty, both material and spiritual, as it is also to the problem of the demographic winter or irresponsible motherhood and fatherhood. These two things should be

stressed. The demographic winter is a serious matter. Here in Italy, it is a serious matter compared to other countries in Europe. It cannot be ignored — it is a serious matter. And irresponsible motherhood and fatherhood is another serious matter that must be taken into account to help prevent it from happening.

The family becomes a bond of perfection and a relational asset to the extent that it allows its own nature to flourish, both by itself and with the help of other people and institutions, including governmental ones. Family-friendly social, economic and cultural policies need to be promoted in all countries. These include, for example, policies that make it possible to harmonize family and work; tax policies that acknowledge family burdens and support the educational functions of families by adopting appropriate instruments of fiscal equity; policies that welcome life; and social, psychological and health services that focus on supporting couple and parental relationships.

A “family-friendly” society is possible, because society is born and evolves with the family. Not everything is contractual, nor can everything be imposed by command. In reality, when a civilization uproots the tree of gift as gratuitousness from its soil, its decline becomes unstoppable. The family is the primary planter of the tree of gratuitousness. The relationality that is practised in the family is not based on the axis of convenience or interest, but on that of being, which is preserved even when relationships deteriorate. I would like to emphasize this aspect of gratuitousness, because it is not given much thought; it is very important to include it in the reflection on the family. Gratuity in the family: the gift, giving and receiving the gift gratuitously.

I believe that to rediscover the beauty of the family there are certain conditions. The first is to remove from the mind’s eye the “cataract” of ideologies that prevent us from seeing reality. This is the pedagogy of the inner teacher — that of Socrates and Saint Augustine — and not one that simply seeks consensus. The second condition is the rediscovery of the correspondence between natural marriage and sacramental marriage. In fact, the separation between the two ends up, on the one hand, by making people think of sacramentality as something added, something extrinsic, and on the other hand, risks abandoning the institution of the family to the tyranny of the artificial. The third condition is, as is recalled in *Amoris Laetitia*, the awareness that the grace of the sacrament of Matrimony — which is the quintessential “social” sacrament — heals and elevates the whole of human society and is a leaven of fraternity. “The common life of husband and wife, the entire network of relations that they build with their children and the world around them, will be steeped in and strengthened by the grace of the sacrament. For the sacrament of marriage flows from the incarnation and the paschal mystery, whereby God showed the fullness of his love for humanity by becoming one with us” (74).

Dear friends, as I leave you with these reflections, once again I assure you of my gratitude, my appreciation for the activities of this Pontifical Academy, and also my prayer for you and your families. I bless you with all my heart. And you too, please do not forget to pray for me. Thank you!

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