

Address
Most Reverend Vincenzo Paglia
President of the Pontifical Council for the Family
at the 2014 Spring General Assembly of the
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
New Orleans, Louisiana
June 11, 2014

My Dear Brother Bishops, Dear Friends,

Thank you for inviting me to speak about the Two Thousand Fifteen World Meeting of Families together with Archbishop Chaput. This event, in my opinion, will be special. First, for the location, here in the United States. Second, because it will be an important element of the Family Synod process, a sort of bridge between the Extraordinary Synod and the Ordinary Synod.

The question of families is becoming ever more crucial in the Church, and it wasn't by chance that St. John Paul II and Pope Francis both chose the family as the theme of their first Synod. I want to add that Pope Emeritus Benedict, in his homily at the Opening Mass of Synod on New Evangelization, said that there is a clear link between the crisis in faith and the crisis in marriage. There is also, in my view, a clear link between the crisis in families and the crisis in society at large.

The family today is living out a paradox. On the one hand, great value is given to the bonds of family; everywhere in the world the family is described as the key to happiness. On the other hand, the family today is an institution whose every weakness is magnified. We see and hear of families that lose their way, that split, that create new unions.

The crisis in families is above all cultural. The prevailing tendency is to put the "me" first, to worship "me" (a famous Italian sociologist speaks of "egolatri"—a sort of new cult), to direct all our efforts toward self-realization. As one French philosopher put it, "What we are facing is a second individualist revolution, where the individual views societal institutions, and society itself in a self-referential context. The individual prevails over society, and the rights of the individual prevail over those of the family. In such a context, it is obvious why "no-commitment" cohabitation is becoming

preferable to marriage and individual independence prevails over committed interdependence. The family's meaning is turned upside-down to the point that family is no longer the basic cell of society but rather the basic cell of the individual. "Me," the new measure of reality, has become the measure of marriage as well. Moreover, just about everywhere in the developed world, our laws reflect the primacy of the individual over the family. In this context, it is easy to understand how the family, as it has been understood for thousands of years, is ignored or is, worse yet, vilified and persecuted. Sadly, however, we don't realize that the weakening of the "culture of the family" has brought with it a weakening of society as a whole, and the principal strategy for survival in our contemporary megalopolises has become not "looking out for others" but rather avoidance of the other and keeping them from getting too close.

We are in the middle of a serious societal crisis, a crisis of the many forms of community that until now we have taken for granted. We are building a society that has fewer families and more people who choose to remain alone or to live in "no-commitment" unions. In synthesis, unstable families and unstable societies. In addition, people today are convinced that they can "be family" in all sorts of different ways. Any type of "living together" can be called a family as long as there is "love." With this approach, the family is not rejected, it is simply grouped among various other ways of living, with forms of relationship that might seem compatible with the family as the Church understands it but that in reality demolish the family piece by piece.

My Brothers, we are on a divide that history has never before encountered. On one side is the biblical affirmation that "It is not good for man to be alone" (which the origin of the family and of society itself) (Gen. 2:18), but on the other side we hear the exact opposite "it is best for individuals to go it alone" (a belief that forms the basis of social and economic individualism). According to one author, in the United States there are more than thirty-two million people living alone, that is, about twenty-eight percent of all households. The same tendency is also quite evident in Europe and beyond, as we see the formation of large cities, which facilitate the rapid spread of this phenomenon affecting the vast majority of our world's population.

This dismal situation, however, cannot leave us discouraged. In spite of the many difficult circumstances that it is facing, we know that the family will always be the most important resource for society. Especially in times of crisis, we see that without the family: father, mother, children, grandparents and grandchildren, society just couldn't survive. No other form of living can create the positive relationships that are found in the family. No other form of relationship has such societal potentialities, or such economic potential; nowhere else can humans fully learn and experience the solidarity that family ties provide, and the mercy without which the other virtues lose much of their meaning. The family is an indispensable resource for society. Even two thousand years ago Cicero defined the family—a very good definition—as “*principium urbis et quasi seminarium rei publicae*” (“*the foundation of the city and, as it were, the seed-bed of the commonwealth.*”) De Off. I, 17

This concept is what I emphasized at the United Nations last May 15, *The International Day of Families*. At that gathering, however, I made sure that on the speakers' dais with me were a rabbi and an imam so that the international community would see all three of us in agreement that the family is at the heart of human development. In a world where loneliness has been globalized, we Christians must globalize family love. The Synod will bring forth a new spring for families, and their joyous witness can overcome the individualism that is poisoning our lives. So, the Synod's real document will not be words, it will be witness, and we must invite to that witness all in the world who see in marriage, and in the family it produces, the perfection of our humanity and of society.

In addition, I can give you some good news. The Pope has decided to have a special meeting with grandparents from all over the world next September in St. Peter's Square in order to underline that the extended family is a resource for society.

Our Philadelphia meeting, in conclusion, just before the Ordinary Synod of the Family, has to be a great celebration for families from all over the world. We must show that it is possible and beautiful to create joyful and solid families. Catholic American families must do this first, Hispanic families in particular. We see in their love for each other, their solidarity -- their mercy -- toward those in need, their respect for the elderly and their joyful welcome of new life a model for the whole Church.

We know that up to forty percent of American Catholics are Latinos, but that number is not keeping pace with the total percentage of Latinos in the United States, and the risk of their falling away as they enter a new culture is significant. My Brother Bishops, as you welcome these new sisters and brothers in Christ, remember that only the joy of the Gospel, the Gospel of the Family, will protect the Catholicism of this vital part of the Church in America.

I also want our Meeting to include, with their leaders, Eastern Catholic and Orthodox families, and all communities of Christians—Evangelical, Protestant and Unaffiliated—as well as families from the world's other religions, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and nonreligious families of good will. My brother bishops, please make that happen!

The moment is ripe, not because the joy of the Gospel comes easy, but because the Gospel is always the only answer to the crying need, all over the world, for love. The Gospel of Jesus, and of the Family, must overcome the loneliness that excludes real love and that is suffocating humanity today. Please believe, and preach to your flocks, that it is most surely in the family that we see that our destiny is not loneliness but rather love, mutually sustaining and fruitful; growth, hopeful and wise, and joy, earthly and eternal.

In that context, my hope for Philadelphia Two Thousand Fifteen is that the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia will ring out a new spring for families, and I hope also that in nearby New York the United Nations will hear that sound and realize that lasting peace will be found only if nations believe that all peoples of the world truly are one human family.

In closing, my dear brother bishops, my friends, our task ahead will not be simple, but with great confidence let us together entrust the Synod, the Philadelphia Meeting, and all families, to the loving care and protection of the Holy Family of Nazareth and our two newest saints Saint John XXIII and Saint John Paul II.

Thank you very much.