New roles for the current day family

The family founded on marriage represents a world patrimony. This has become clear in the paths to development of all the different peoples, and this allows us to draw a basic outline of it.

The family is the first natural society and, as such, a holder of own and original rights. It lies at the centre of social life and of all the problem society faces. It is at the service of “human ecology”. It is this ambit that a human being receives his/her first crucial practical and intellectual notions, learns what being loved means and, therefore, concretely, to be a person. The obligations and the values that are lived out in it are not defined by a contract but derive from the essence of the family itself, founded on the stable conjugal pact and structured by the relationships deriving from it following the generation of children.

Family relationships are the archetype of every other community relationship because in it the person is always the main focus of attention as an end and not as a means. The good of persons and the good functioning of society are, therefore, closely linked.

Its social subjectivity, which is original and essential, precedes and founds the civil community and the state. Every social model that intends to serve the good of men and women cannot disregard the central role and social responsibility of the family.

The family in the European Union

If we wish to take into consideration the situation of the family through the data of one of the many areas of the planet, we observe a reality which is undergoing a specific evolution today: the European Union. All the reports, statistics, considerations concerning the family insistently speak of a crisis. Here are some data:
- decrease of the birth-rate and consequent ageing of the population: over the past 25 years the European youth population (under 14 years of age) has decreased by 21.6% and represents only 16.4% of the population.
- marriages: in the years 1980 to 2004, in the 25 member States of the European Union, they have fallen by 663,600 units despite the increase of the population by 31.1 million.
- Divorces: form 1990 to 2004, in 15 Countries of the EU, more than 10 million marriages have failed, involving more than 16 million children.

Despite these figures, it is a general conviction that the family is close to the heart of many people. There is a desire and a need for family everywhere in the world, and this is stated especially in surveys carried out among young people. The problem is rather to be able to bring about the family that one would want, or that one sees necessary.

Continuing our observation of the European situation, we note that the family is not included in the “sectors” of activity of the European Union: it is left to the choice of individual Countries. In these years of life of the Community, a strong repercussion of political and economic decisions of the Union has in fact been seen on families; and there has been an even greater awareness

---

1 Data of the Institute for Family policies, February 2006.
of how the lack of family policies or the implementation of general policies where the family dimension is neglected have exacerbated various forms of social unease.

The EU conferences of Dublin (June 2004) and Vienna (February 2006) have given signs of a new attention to the family.

Proposal for the present day family

The family reveals itself today as a social subject who is able to hold a dialogue, opening up to the most topical themes that society surrounding it is going through. Due to various dynamics (educational, economic, etc.) that substantiate the daily nature of its life, it is able to express choices that involve the institutions and politics. In a word, it can nowadays play the role of a real social resource.

Pruned from what is not essential to it, the family shows itself as a small test bed that makes a person able to respond to the great questions of our time: man-woman relationships and inter-generational ones; relationships among cultures, races, religions; the problems of marginalization, etc. As an example, in an economic field, one of the fundamental articulations of community life, the family carries out some fundamental functions: it is the subject of consumption and of saving, the place where lifestyles are developed; it is the supplier, through children, of human capital; it strengthens the sense of belonging to the community through the practice of gratuitousness and giving.

Considering all these values, here mentioned briefly, we propose that a change of perspective is applied to the development programmes which are being considered at various levels by several institutional sites – job market, environment, school, services, transport and all the other fields where the family is automatically involved: in order that the family may not only be considered a recipient of services, but an active part in the search for ways and tools for a global “wellness” of all society, by being involved in the study and implementation of these projects.