

# Families

*You are a source of joy and hope!  
Unwrap your gifts for all the world to see!*

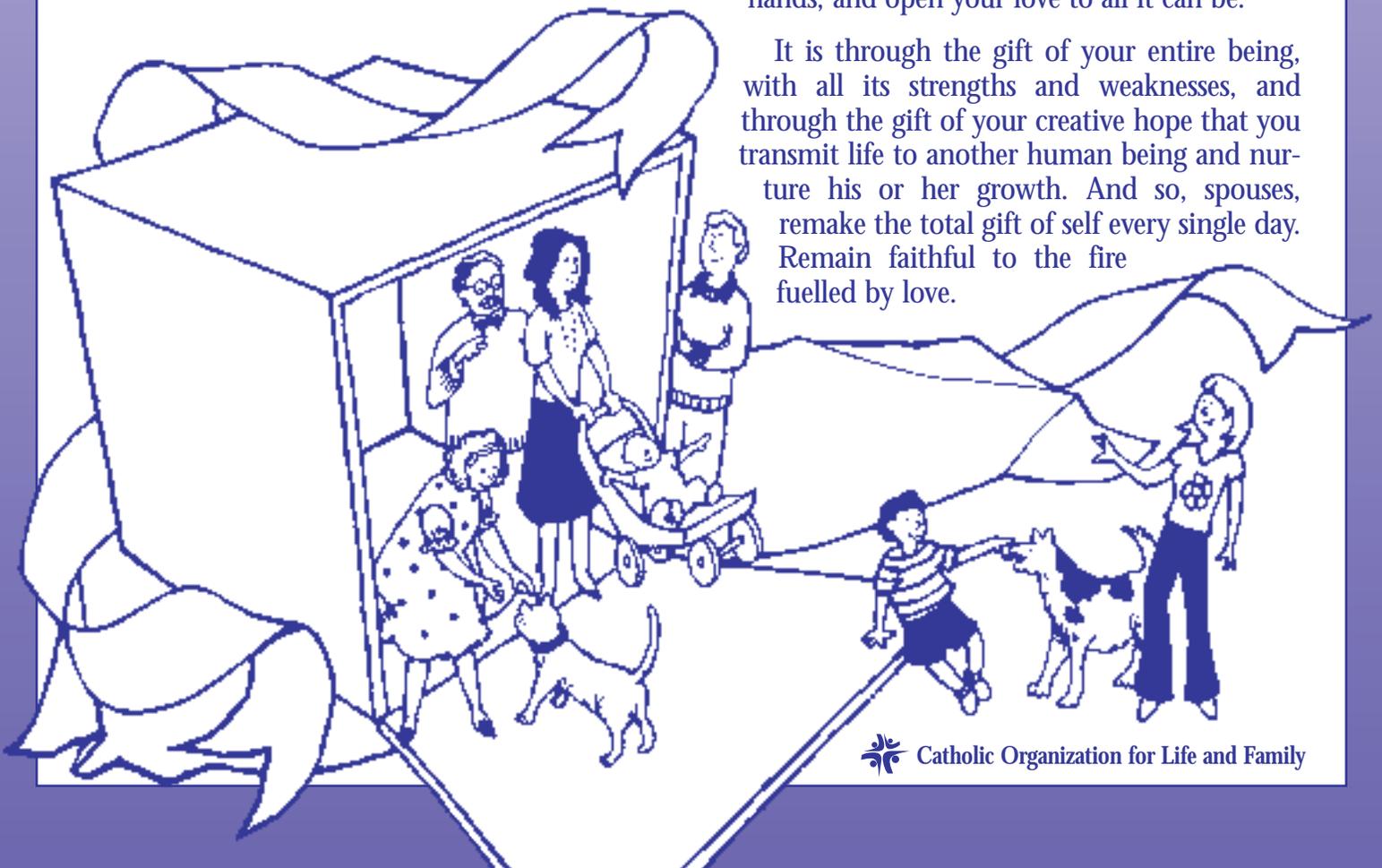
**“The family as gift, commitment, hope for humanity”** was the theme of the Second World Meeting of the Holy Father with Families, which took place in Rio de Janeiro during October, 1997. Inspired by this theme, we would like to celebrate some of the extraordinary gifts of families for their members and for the world. Recent statistics about the difficulties facing families today have also prompted our reflections.

The Family: A Gift to be Shared by Spouses

**It is the love of the couple, rooted in the bonds of marriage, that gives life and nourishment to the family.** Spouses, take the time to build your family with peace and love. Strive to give love, to give of yourself, to understand the other.

Do everything in your power to fulfil your loving commitment to life. Stay attuned with your life companion to the thirst for intimacy that permeates your love. Pray with the strength of the faith that unites you in an indissoluble bond. You know with certainty that the unique love between you comes from God, whose true name is Love, a love that is faithful, fruitful and forgiving, a love that never dies. Grab hold of it with all your might, and learn to open your arms, open your hands, and open your love to all it can be.

It is through the gift of your entire being, with all its strengths and weaknesses, and through the gift of your creative hope that you transmit life to another human being and nurture his or her growth. And so, spouses, remake the total gift of self every single day. Remain faithful to the fire fuelled by love.



If for some reason your relationship is broken, don't give up and don't lose hope. If you were left behind, try to open your heart to forgiveness and continue to love those around you. If you were the one who left, try to remain open to love. Love flows from God, who will never abandon you. Try to be a sower of love and a creator of joy among your friends and family.



Families, you know all too well the energy and patience needed to weather pregnancy, to welcome a newborn into your lives, to nurture a child and raise an adolescent to adulthood while helping this young person to realize his or her human and spiritual potential.

It is not always easy to be a parent. You may feel you are alone in the world, facing an endless stream of problems. There is tension, stress, anger and resentment. Courage is needed to resist the urge to give up. Strength is needed to continue to stand by your principles and speak up when peace could so easily be won by silence.

## The Family: The Gift of Children

**Parents, welcome the arrival of children as a *shared ministry* and as a *joint responsibility* that has been given to you.** In becoming a mother or a father you assume a solemn responsibility to transmit love to your children and to give them renewed life every single day.

The arrival of a child is a gift for the parents and for the entire family. A child embodies *Joy*. Can there be a greater pleasure than to hear a child's first laugh, an affirmation of the life – your life – that you have given? A child embodies *Trust*, the trust of your own flesh and blood in you and in the family. Children trust that their parents will cherish them. A child embodies the love of life.



For couples, the birth of a child means sleepless nights, new financial burdens, and additional demands on their time and energy. A newborn demands a place – a place of his or her own! At the same time society seems intent on reducing the amount of space and time that parents can spend with their children.



Yet we are told that there is a “*family-time famine*.” *Never before, in the sixty years in which statistics have been kept, have children spent so few waking hours in the company of their parents. About 70 percent of families with young children have two wage-earning parents. Of these dual earner couples, almost 70 percent spend a combined total of 60-89 hours every week earning income. In another 20 percent, Mom and Dad's combined income-earning time is more than 90 hours a week!*<sup>2</sup>



Be assured that the enormous efforts required by the demands of modern life are worth it because the care and upbringing of your children is your most beautiful work. Every human being, who may be big or small, weak or strong, healthy or disabled, possesses a mystery of life that you, the family, unceasingly care for and nourish, despite your fatigue.

Families, accept fearlessly and proudly your call to be “a sanctuary of life.”

## Family Life: A Gift of Life that is Reborn Each Day

**Parents, you are the first and foremost architects of life and of family stability.** Day after day, you carefully cultivate, prune, nourish and care for the seeds of joy, safety, respect, peace, friendship and love that you have planted.

Families must be nurtured with the same unhurried patience with which a splendid garden, where each plant has its own beauty and demands, is nurtured. Parents give a part of themselves every day in their words and actions. Children, for their part, provide a wonderful gift to the family with their joy, candour, and enthusiasm. Parents and children together share the same life and daily existence, side by side,



secure in their patient fidelity to mutual respect and help. It is within the centre of the family, with its daily sharing of love, its failures and shortcomings, and its renewal and joyous reaffirmation that the heartbeat of humanity is heard. Your family is built one day at a time, gently and without haste.

By keeping the day-to-day fabric of existence vibrant and alive, families forge an endless chain of solidarity and reciprocity that encompasses and links together the extended family of grandparents, parents and children.

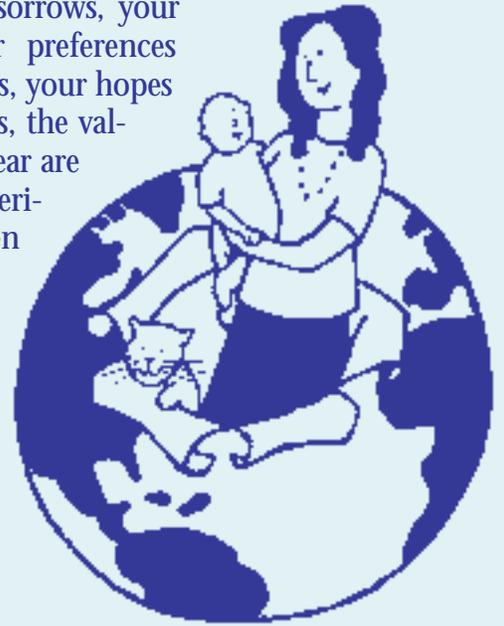
But we must take care, because *Not only are children deprived of family time, but they also often have to deal with parents who are highly stressed by the end of the working day; according to research, 46 percent of fathers and 60 percent of mothers report being highly stressed. Stress can undermine the quality of the interaction between parents and children, as parents have less patience to provide the warmth, interest and playfulness their children need, and, when these needs are not met, the children are more likely to become stubborn and alienated.*<sup>3</sup>

Since family tensions are likely to increase, it is necessary to develop more the capacity of forgiveness and the desire to welcome each member in all of his or her poverty. Can the family be a place where the Lord invites its members to forgive seventy times seven times? Families, be a sanctuary where all are welcome to request, to cry and plead together and to pray together silently.



Accept your family life as something given and received on a daily basis from a God who cares deeply for you. Day by day, through your

joys and your sorrows, your concerns, your preferences and your desires, your hopes and your beliefs, the values you hold dear are passed on, experienced, and given to the world, and happiness is woven bit by bit, piece by piece.



### The Family: A Unique Gift for All of Society

**The family is the irreplaceable heart of society.** It is the place where individual love becomes love of humanity. It is where values such as respect for others in their diversity, mutual assistance and understanding, and self-control are instilled. Healthy families can produce a more humane and harmonious society. Society must support and cooperate with families in order to help children. This is not simply part of the social contract; it is a responsibility that is in the best interests of society as a whole.

As John Paul II put it, *the future of humanity rests with the family.* And the future of the family depends on social choices that promote the growth of the family in an appropriate socio-economic setting – one where family policy is decided on the basis of quality of family life rather than on criteria based on efficiency and performance. Some fundamental systemic changes will be required to create an environment conducive to families, where today's mothers and fathers are able to fulfil both their employment and family responsibilities.

It is disturbing to read that *In spite of their tremendous resilience, today's families are troubled in many ways. It's becoming normal to be*

*overworked, stressed out, worried about money, and disconnected from the support that kin and community once provided. And, with economic changes making many Canadian parents poorer, more and more children are growing up in poverty – one in five in 1995.<sup>4</sup>*

Because of these preoccupations, our society must continue to promote families and to think and act on their behalf. It is essential to draw on and call on the support and expertise of all members of society.

Because of their fundamental and irreplaceable role as the basic social unit, families deserve fair treatment by social policies. Families, push for work schedules that allow you to adapt to the changing rhythms and demands of your family responsibilities. Demand the right to educate your children according to your cherished values.

Families, you are the greatest gift that can be given to society. You deserve respect for your intimacy, uniqueness and diversity. Dare to demand that your special role as teacher of values and interpersonal relationships be respected and protected. Reach for values that are eternal. You are the structure that nurtures the growth of new human beings, the future of society.

Through your hospitality, through your faithfulness and through your generosity towards all of society, you reveal God to the world at large. Families, strive to be a conduit for the forces of good. Foster forgiveness and reconciliation, and promote generosity and respect for life. Open a door to other families. Celebrate your loving life as a couple. Celebrate also the deep sense of communion that pervades your family life by inviting the stranger to come and feast at your table.

**Families – You are a source of joy and hope!**

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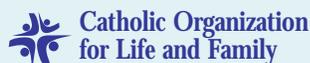
<sup>1</sup> Canadian *marriage rates* fell almost 40 percent between 1971 to 1994 – a spectacular drop. About one million or 13.2 percent of Canadian families are *single-parent* families.

As of 1994, the national *fertility rate* (number of children per woman aged 15-49 years) was 1.66 – far below the rate of 2.1 needed to replace ourselves. Seventy-one percent of families raising children under the age of 18 have just one or two children. *Transition*, The Vanier Institute on the Family, Vol. 27, No. 3, September 1997, pp. 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> “Windows of Opportunity: Raising a Healthy Child Depends on Time – and Timing”, Paul D. Steinhauer, M.D., *Transition*, The Vanier Institute of the Family, Vol. 27, No. 2, June 1997, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Idem*, p. 8

<sup>4</sup> “Of Wings and Roots: Canada’s Families – An Update”, Alan Mirabelli and Robert Glossop, *Transition*, The Vanier Institute of the Family, Vol. 27, No. 3, September 1997, p. 9.



**Catholic Organization  
for Life and Family**

This text has been produced by the Catholic Organization for Life and Family (COLF) on the occasion of the International Day of the Family, which is celebrated on May 15 each year. Copies may be obtained from the COLF offices, 90 Parent Avenue, Ottawa, ON K1N 7B1; Phone: (613) 241-9461 ext. 230, Fax: (613) 241-8117, E-mail: [ocvfcolf@cccb.ca](mailto:ocvfcolf@cccb.ca)

COLF is a joint project of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Knights of Columbus. It promotes respect for human life and human dignity and the essential role of the family.

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