



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of October 9, 2019,
Feast of Saint John Leonardi

Dear Friends,

ONE of the most serious problems facing contemporary society is the crisis of the family, constantly put under radical reconsideration and frequently played up by the media: the stability of the home is threatened by permissive laws which favor divorce; the mission of the homemaking mother is not appreciated as it should be; large families do not receive the support they deserve; chastity and marital fidelity are often ridiculed; a "culture of death" ceaselessly encourages abortion and contraception; in many places, the child undergoes attempts to perversion (blasphemous and pornographic advertisement, drugs, prostitution, etc.); new models are put forth: free union, single parent family, homosexual couples, etc.

Sign of contradiction

Society destroys itself in destroying the family, which is, according to the will of the Creator, its basic unit. "The well-being of the individual person and of society is closely bound up with the healthy state of conjugal and family life" (Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, no. 47). Won't the children of today be tomorrow's citizens? Indeed, it is in the bosom of the family that the child first experiences societal life, where he acquires the sense of authority, of responsibility, of selfless service... Opposed to this, what examples of love, of fidelity, of pardon can children find in models based on individualism and instability?

Today, the Catholic Church is violently criticized because of its teaching on the family. It is accused of not being "up to date," of putting up obstacles because it "forbids" progress for nations and individuals. These attacks should neither surprise nor discourage us: Didn't JESUS CHRIST, Our Lord, warn His disciples: *If the world hates you, know ye, that it hath hated Me before you. If you had been of the world, the world would love its own. In the world you shall have distress: but have confidence, I have overcome the world (John 15:18-19; 16:33)*? Following in the footsteps of the Saviour, the Church warns us: "Do not be conformed to this world" (John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor*, August 6, 1993, chap. 2), and, in His image, it does not fear being a "sign of contradiction."

By this action brought against the Church, her adversaries, in spite of themselves, highlight her sanctity;



Blessed Elisabetta Canori Mora

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they admit that she effectively opposes the unfettered worship of pleasure-seeking and the eternal loss of souls. By defending human life, the sanctuary of which is the family, the Church shows that it is faithful to Christ, who came into this world not to put an unbearable weight on man, but on the contrary to deliver him from slavery to sin. In addition, by recalling "the necessary conformity of civil law with the moral law" (John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, March 25, 1995, no. 72), that is, with the natural law clearly expressed in the Commandments of God, the Church makes itself the advocate of the true values of the human person and defends the principles which alone can make societal life just and peaceful. The Church thus places the foundations of a harmonious reconstruction of the social fabric, and contributes by its teaching and even more so by the example of the saints to this authentic progress of humanity.

The latter, by their lives, illustrate the doctrine of the Church and give it an incomparable force and attraction. In addition, they show that it is possible, with divine grace, to live in perfect accord with Church teaching. On the occasion of the Year of the Family, Pope John Paul II beatified Elisabetta Canori Mora. This wife and mother of a family "in the midst of numerous marital difficulties, showed total fidelity to the commitment undertaken by the Sacrament of Marriage and to the responsibilities that flow from it" (Homily of April 24, 1994). The teaching of the Church on the family, read

in the light of this example of the Christian life, will guide us on the way that Christ outlined for us, and which leads to the blessed life of Heaven.

An important preparation

It was on November 21, 1774, that Elisabetta came into the world. Her parents owned property near Rome (Italy). She was the thirteenth in a family of fourteen children, six of whom had already perished at a young age. It was in the bosom of this large family that she received her initial education. "The family is the first school, the fundamental school of the social life; as a community of love it finds in the gift of self the law that guides it and makes it grow. The gift of self that animates the husband and wife towards one another presents itself as the model and the norm of that which should be realized in relations between brothers and sisters, and between the different generations which share the family life" (John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, FC, no. 37).

In this profoundly Christian home, attentive to the education of the children, Elisabetta was happy and found a perfect balance. In 1796, she married a young lawyer, Cristoforo Mora, the son of a rich and highly regarded doctor. Elisabetta prepared herself with care for this commitment and for it she followed a spiritual retreat. "These days, the preparation of the young for marriage and for family life is more necessary than ever. Many negative phenomena that we deplore today in family life come from the fact that, in new situations, the young have lost view of the correct priorities of values and that, not having any more secure criteria for behavior, they no longer know how to confront and resolve new difficulties. Experience teaches however that young people well prepared for family life succeed better than others" (FC, no. 66).

Elisabetta wished to start with her husband a truly Christian family. She knew that by the solemn oath taken before God and the Church, that both of them were promising to "remain faithful through good times and bad, in sickness and in health, to love and respect one another all the days of their lives" (cf. Ritual). In order to make clear the essential elements which constitute the common good of the married couple (love, respect, faithfulness until death), the Church asks them in the course of the ceremony if they are well disposed to welcome and raise in a Christian manner any children that God deems to give them. "According to the plan of God, marriage is the foundation of this larger community which is the family, since the institution of marriage itself and conjugal love are destined for the procreation and education of children in which they find their crowning achievement" (FC, no. 14). Normally, the union of the spouses is reinforced and

consolidated thanks to the birth and raising of children, which are the most beautiful fruits of their conjugal love.

Wounded love

At first the marriage was happy. But soon life together was compromised by the psychological fragility of Cristoforo. It started with inexplicable fits of jealousy; then the young lawyer became infatuated with another woman and was unfaithful to his wife. Her love deeply wounded, Elisabetta nevertheless did not reproach her husband. She continued to show tenderness toward him, hoping to win him over again. This trial was all the more difficult because she had lost two children in quick succession, both dying shortly after birth.

At the end of the year 1799, she brought into the world Marianna, a little girl full of life. Unfortunately, home life was deteriorating: the lawyer was not interested in his studies and gave into thoughtless speculations that soon led to financial ruin. Elisabetta did not hesitate: she sold all of her jewels to pay her husband's debts, although she could not cover all of them, since they were so large. Far from being grateful, Cristoforo, humiliated by his failures, became rude and touchy. Francesco and Agatha Mora, his parents, suggested to him that, for economic reasons, they should move out of their fancy apartment where they had lived since the marriage, and go to live with them. This move was a new trial for Elisabetta, since she lost the intimacy of her married and family life. Nevertheless, the young woman willingly accepted this sacrifice for the conversion of her unfaithful husband.

The sin of adultery is a grave disorder. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* recalls it in these terms: "Adultery refers to marital infidelity. Adultery is an injustice. He who commits adultery fails in his commitment. He does injury to the sign of the covenant which the marriage bond is, transgresses the rights of the other spouse, and undermines the institution of marriage by breaking the contract on which it is based. He compromises the good of human generation and the welfare of children who need their parents' stable union" (CCC, nos. 2380-2381). Elisabetta knew above all that he who is guilty of the sin of adultery *shall not possess the kingdom of God* (cf. *1 Cor. 6:9; Matt. 19:18*). Her love for Cristoforo, based on supernatural faith and charity, made her fear for her husband's eternal salvation. Thus, she multiplied her sacrifices and prayers. Her confidence in God and her perseverance in prayer would not be disappointed.

In July, 1801, a fourth pregnancy came to sweeten the difficult life of this admirable woman. But shortly after giving birth, sickness attacked the mother and

brought her to death's door. In human terms, Elisabetta was condemned. Nevertheless, a miraculous cure, which she herself bore witness to, brought her back to health. This illness was the occasion of an important spiritual progress. Her life in union with God and her religious practice intensified; frequent confession and communion became the two poles of her spiritual life. In 1804, inspired by God, she made three resolutions: 1° Practice meekness and patience, and never become angry; 2° Do the will of God in all things; 3° Exercise the virtues of mortification and penance.

In this intense spiritual life, she would find the strength to cope with her difficult family situation, for terrible humiliations continued to rain down upon her. Her sisters-in-law, who should have shown her affection and support, made her responsible for Cristoforo's financial failures, and reproached her for being the cause of his adultery: "With another woman," they said, "Cristoforo would be different!" Following the example of JESUS, Elisabetta answered everything with kindness, patience and forgiveness. But the most difficult trial came from the physical and psychological pressures of her husband and in-laws to obtain an inadmissible consent from her: "This furious lion (Cristoforo had threatened her with a knife) wanted, at all costs, written permission to frequent his girlfriend," we read in her diary. "It is good for me to have spent two hours in prayer! God gave me so much strength that I was ready to give my life rather than to offend my Lord."

For life

Elisabetta could not, without serious sin, consent to Cristoforo's adultery, even to improve the situation and be reconciled with him. *It is never permitted to do evil, even to obtain some good* (cf. Rom. 3:8). The matrimonial bond is established by God Himself, such that marriage which is contracted and consummated between baptized persons can never be dissolved.

Pope John Paul II has recalled the Church's teaching on this essential point: "Marital communion is not only characterized by its unity, but also by its indissolubility. The definitive character of this marital love finds its basis and force in JESUS CHRIST. Rooted in the full and personal gift of the spouses and required for the good of the children, the indissolubility of marriage finds its definitive truth in the plan that God has shown in His Revelation: it is He who wills and gives the indissolubility of marriage as a fruit, sign and requirement of the absolutely faithful love that God has for man and that the Lord JESUS showed with respect to His Church.

"The gift of the sacrament is a vocation—and also a commandment—for Christian spouses to remain faithful forever, beyond trials and difficulties, in generous

obedience to the will of the Lord: *What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder* (Matt. 19:6). In our day, witnessing to the inestimable worth of the indissolubility of marriage and conjugal fidelity is, for Christian spouses, one of the most important and pressing duties" (FC, no. 20).

Strengthened by her faith in the Gospel, Elisabetta thus courageously resisted the threats made against her. Besides, she was convinced that if she were to be reconciled with her husband one day, it would be the fruit of her fidelity to divine law.

Irreplaceable witness

With the death of Doctor Francesco Mora, in 1812, Elisabetta lost her last support. Her sisters-in-law made it understood that, with her two daughters, she was a weight on the family. She had to get an apartment in Rome. With this move, a more peaceful period began for her, despite the extreme poverty. She took advantage of it to pay more close attention to raising her daughters, which she had always considered as one of her principal tasks. Her first concern was to give them a serious spiritual formation. Her little house became a happy "domestic church," where the Lord was loved and welcomed. "From the youngest age, children must learn to discover God and honor Him as well as love their neighbor. The concrete example of parents is a basic and irreplaceable witness to education in prayer: only through praying with their children can they deeply penetrate into the hearts of their children, leaving traces there which none of the vicissitudes of life will be able to erase. Let us listen to what Pope Paul VI said to parents: 'Moms, are you teaching Christian prayers to your little ones? Are you preparing them, with the help of priests, for their first sacraments: confession, communion, confirmation? If they are ill, are you getting them used to thinking of the sufferings of Christ, to call on the Blessed Virgin and the saints for help? And you, Dads, do you know how to pray with your children?... By doing that you will bring peace among the members of your household.'

"In addition to morning and evening prayers, you should specifically recommend reading and meditation on the Word of God, devotion and consecration to the Heart of JESUS, different forms of piety towards the Virgin MARY, prayers before and after meals, practices of popular devotion" (FC, nos. 60-61). The recitation of the Rosary as a family is highly recommended: "There is no doubt that the Rosary of the Virgin MARY should be considered as one of the most excellent and efficacious 'prayers in common' that the Christian family is invited to recite" (*ibid.*).

“You will come back to God”

Forgetting about herself, radiating more and more the love of the Most Holy Trinity to whom she had consecrated herself by entering into the Trinitarian Third Order, Elisabetta made her home the meeting place of all of those who were seeking material or spiritual relief, reserving a particular attention to families in difficulty. Her soul, purified by trials, was ripe for Heaven. During Christmas, 1824, an edema, which had struck her some months earlier, returned. Elisabetta told her daughters that this would be her final illness. She had the joy of seeing her husband return to his position in the household and spend long hours at her bedside. The sick woman did not reproach him concerning the sad past that had made her suffer so much. On the contrary, as a loving spouse, she encouraged him and foretold his return to God: “You will come back to God after my death; you will come back to God to give Him glory.”

On the evening of February 5, 1825, Elisabetta, surrounded by her daughters, calmly passed on with the joyous expression of someone who is leaving to be reunited with a loved one. Cristoforo, as was his habit, returned at dawn. Surprised to find the door open, he rushed to his wife’s room and found her lying lifeless. In the presence of this woman who had remained faithful to him right to the end, he was overcome by violent remorse for a life full of neglect, ingratitude and infidelity, and his tears flowed freely. These purifying tears were the prelude to the conversion that Elisabetta had foretold. In 1834, he entered into the Friars Minor Conventual and would even be ordained a priest. He died a holy death on September 8, 1845, the day of the

Nativity of Our Lady, a feast that was particularly dear to his spouse.

The example of Elisabetta is a powerful encouragement to households in difficulty. It recalls that “one must never despair of God’s mercy” (*Rule of Saint Benedict*, chap. 4), and witnesses to the faithfulness of the Lord, “Author and Guardian of marriage” who, in the most difficult situations, gives the graces of which one has need. As for families that are living in harmony, they are invited to give thanks to God for the gift of peace (one of the fruits of devotion to the Sacred Heart). This gift, precious among all, requires mutual forgiveness and prayer to survive and grow. Patience above all, which is the expression and mainstay of love, is at the heart of all lasting human relations. Saint Paul assures us: *Charity is patient* (1 Cor. 13: 4).

At the end of his Apostolic Exhortation on the Family, Pope John Paul II invites households to put themselves under the protection of the Holy Family, “the model of all families”: “Let us look to this Family, unique in all the world, which glorified God in an incomparably pure and elevated manner. It cannot fail to help all of the families of the world, in fidelity to their daily duties, in the way of putting up with the worries and tribulations of life, in being generously open to the needs of others, in the accomplishment of God’s plan concerning them.” The Blessed Virgin MARY and Saint Joseph, who were united in a true marriage and went through difficulties and trials, will sustain and encourage those who call on them with confidence.

It is to the Holy Family that we confide you as well as all those who are dear to you, living and deceased.

Dom Barthélemy - Marie O.S.B.

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ABBAYE SAINT-JOSEPH DE CLAIRVAL – 21150 FLAVIGNY-SUR-OZERAIN – FRANCE

email : abbey@clairval.com – website: <http://www.clairval.com/>