



Opening address by H. E. Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič, Permanent Representative of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva, at the Conference on
**“Interreligious Cooperation for Peace and Human Development –
Creating an Environment for Thriving Families”**
organized by the World Council of Churches on the occasion of the
United Nations International Day of Families
Geneva, 14 May 2019

Distinguished guests and friends,

It is an honor for me to take part in today's conference, which has a particular focus on the family. In particular, I wish to express my appreciation to the organizers of this conference and the World Council of Churches for coordinating the event on such a timely and important topic.

The family remains always the cell of society, and the primary place of education. It is the community of love and of life in which every person learns to relate to others and with the world. By way of the human qualities developed and acquired in the family, the person is able to project himself in society, to frequent positively other formative environments, such as the school, the parish and the community. Due to rapid socio-economic and demographic transformations that have affected society and culture in recent years, the family and its fundamental role for a peaceful civilization finds itself increasingly challenged. In spite of today's social difficulties, however, many families continue to remarkably witness to those values that constitute the foundation of the institution of the family. They are the balm of true fraternity that is so much needed in today's world.

Our daily experience on the other hand shows that families may also encounter harsh difficulties and be tempted by discouragement. In the wake of the financial and economic crisis, for example, many families were left empty and are now struggling to overcome poverty and to provide adequately for the younger and older family members in order to maintain the intergenerational bonds that sustained them in the past. It is, though, in these situations of adversity, that family values appear even more critical. The lack of family ties and solidarity nourished by altruism and forgiveness may bring to dramatic situations. As family ties break down, millions of children and youth are left without the proper and necessary guidance and are increasingly exposed to risks such as dropping out of school, forced labor, and sexual exploitation.

Additionally, in recent years, the family has also been the object of numerous forces that seek in some way to deform it, following a “secular view of reality which entails a faulty notion of freedom,” considered “as an autonomous power of self-affirmation, often against others, for one’s own selfish well-being.”¹

In light of these challenges, the Synod on the Family, convened by Pope Francis in 2014 and 2015, sent a clear message on the centrality of the institution of the family. The family, in fact, is truly the “school of humanity” which is much needed today. In a family, “a person learns endurance, the joy of work, fraternal love, and generosity in forgiving others and, above all, the offering of one’s life at the service of the others.”² In spite of the many signs of crisis in the family as an institution in various areas of the “global village”, the Working Document of the Synod states that the desire to marry and form a family still “remains vibrant, ... and serves as the basis of the Church’s need to proclaim untiringly and with profound conviction the Gospel of the Family.”³ This natural impulse needs to be strengthened in order for the family to face the manifold challenges to which it is exposed, and so as it may rediscover its fundamental role for society. This is the call that the Synod on the family addressed to the innumerable Christian families in today’s world so that they strive to recover fully the character of their vocation and mission.⁴

The right of the family to live as an integral whole is acknowledged and protected by a variety of international instruments, whether under international human rights law or international humanitarian law.⁵ In accordance with the latter, States have the obligation to provide the widest possible support and protection for the family as the natural and fundamental unit of society and allow it to assume fully its role in the community and provide a conducive environment for the growth and well-being of its members.⁶ Several internationally agreed documents reaffirm the central and vital significance of the family in society, underlining its key role in fostering social development, its strong force for social cohesion and integration, and underscore its primary responsibility for the nurturing, guidance, and protection of children.⁷ Examples of these international Treaties and Conventions are: the Universal Declaration of Human

¹ Atkinson, Joseph, “A Family Manifesto - How to Read *Familiaris Consortio*”, 2011

<http://www.catholicity.com/commentary/atkinson/08771.html>

² “*Relatio Synodi*” of the III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: “*Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization*”, 2014, available at:

<http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2014/10/18/0770/03044.html>

³ *Relatio Synodi*

⁴ “*La famiglia cristiana e la recezione del Concilio Vaticano II*”

⁵ Jastram, Kate and Newland, Kathleen, “*Family Unity and Refugee Protection*”, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1559469>

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[http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B9C2E/\(httpNewsByYear_en\)/F24B8D65AC1AD15EC1257D5400397500?OpenDocument](http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B9C2E/(httpNewsByYear_en)/F24B8D65AC1AD15EC1257D5400397500?OpenDocument)

⁷ For example, the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, 1981, (Art.18.1), the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, 1950 (Art. 8), the European Social Charter (Art. 16), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Art.10.1), the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (Art. 44.1) all protect the right of the family to social, legal and economic protection. For further information: <http://www.humanrights.ch/en/standards/legal-sources/protection-family>

Rights, 1948 (Art. 16.3)⁸, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966 (Art. 23.1)⁹, the American Convention on Human Rights, 1969 (Art 17)¹⁰, the Preambles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child¹¹ and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities¹² all state that: *“The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.”*

The year 2019 marks two important anniversaries: the 30th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by the UN General Assembly on November 20, 1989 with the famous Resolution 44/25, as well as the 25th anniversary of the International Year of the Family celebrated in 1994 (as proclaimed by UN General Assembly, Resolution 44/82 of 9 December 1989). These two landmarks offer a useful opportunity to draw further attention to increasing cooperation at all levels on family issues and on undertaking concerted actions to strengthen family-centered policies and programs.

The changing patterns of fertility, mortality, labor, and migration of recent years, are profoundly affecting people’s lives. The family, which remains the fundamental and basic unit of all societies, may adapt to such new challenges and opportunities to cope with new realities, as long as it is animated by fundamental values. The emergence of large numbers of young being prepared to enter into a rapidly changing social world and a growing number of women and men reaching older ages - is a special distinguishing feature of this time and to a large extent the prospects of both groups depend on the strength, adaptability and foresight of families.

Today, too little attention is given to the importance and to the potential of fruitful interchange between generations and to family values. Creeping individualism appears at odds with the family as a community of persons, and as the initial social unit. For this reason, in the Catholic tradition its defense needs to be sustained for the common good of our world community.¹³ The family after all is, in many ways, the first school of how to be human and at the same time the family is the center and the heart of what Paul VI called “the civilization of love”.¹⁴

Thank you for your attention.

⁸ <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

⁹ <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>

¹⁰ http://www.oas.org/dil/treaties_B-32_American_Convention_on_Human_Rights.htm

¹¹ <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

¹² <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>

¹³ *Synod conclusions.*

¹⁴ Pope Paul VI, *“Dogmatic Constitution on the Church - Lumen Gentium.”* (1965). Available at: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html