

Statement by World Religious Leaders
on the occasion of the
Tenth Anniversary of the International Year of the Family

On December 6, 2004, the United Nations General Assembly will observe the tenth anniversary of the International Year of the Family, proclaimed to raise awareness and promote policies that improve the well-being of the family.

As religious and traditional leaders from across the globe, we celebrate and support the family in its various forms. In recognition of the International Year of the Family, we call on the world's leaders to support the human rights of all members of the human family.

We recall the 2003 Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on preparations for and observance of the tenth anniversary of the International Year of the Family. We recognize and affirm that relevant UN human rights instruments as well as global plans and programs of action call for the widest possible protection and assistance for families. We embrace the notion that in different cultural, political and social systems, there exist families of various structures and appearances. We assert that equality between women and men and respect for the human rights of all is essential to the well-being of the family and of society at large.

As we address the importance of the family in the world, we celebrate the important and fundamental functions of families in societies: Families care for children, the elderly and the sick. Families can provide security and stability. At their best, families can provide a safe place for just, intimate, healthy and holy relationships and a space to experience the blessing of mutual assistance. Families make and keep promises, and families nurture core values of charity and forgiveness. Families are fundamental to the creation of communities, where members care for and support one another. Families, be they nuclear or extended, headed by mothers and fathers, same-sex couples or single-parents, consisting of couples without children or those overflowing with children, contribute qualities of enormous value to the communities they live in. All families, both orthodox and heterodox, must be protected and supported by governments, non-governmental organizations and traditional and religious leaders.

As our understanding of family and the human person has evolved over time, it has been enhanced by modern human rights theory which recognizes individual human rights for all persons, particularly women and children. We recognize individual civil and legal rights as a fundamental staple in the promotion of healthy families. The recognition of individual rights has contributed to respect for each member of the family regardless of gender or age and enabled families to structure themselves in creative and dynamic ways that meet their own unique circumstances and needs. These liberties have helped serve the needs and enhance the well-being of children and adolescents, the elderly, the unemployed, the disabled, the sick and infirm, unmarried persons at all stages of life, and individuals and couples who do not have children.

Some members of our diverse religious family consider only one family structure as mandated by God. In this family, men are in charge and women and children subject to his commands. Many of those who embrace this model do so in ways that are loving and respectful for all family members. However, neither that structure, nor any other, guarantees justice within the family. During this tenth anniversary of the International Year of the Family, we want to recognize and celebrate that this is not the only valid or moral structure and composition of family—nor should it be promoted as such.

As we enter this tenth anniversary, we also recall that many influential leaders of the world's religions lived in different family structures than those advocated by many contemporary religious leaders: Abraham had a concubine; Prince Siddhartha (who became the Buddha) left his family to follow his spiritual path; Jesus chose not to marry; Lao-tzu, the founder of Taoism, had no children; and Muhammad had more than one wife. Many families today reflect more closely the families of these heroic religious leaders than the male-led model of family that is more rooted in a late-Victorian, Anglo-Saxon vision than any religious tradition. As people of faith and compassion, we are called not to inflate or degrade the notion and importance of family, but to embrace the diversity and complexity of our most intimate relationships with mercy, gratitude and justice.

We applaud social movements that assist families such as liberation theologies, human rights, communitarian, feminist and social justice. We thank those whose efforts have

contributed to changing society's attitudes for the betterment of the family, as well as for the enhancement of the roles of women, men and children, by advancing equal rights for women and promoting rights for children and adolescents. In moving beyond a model in which men operate in the public sphere and women in the family, we have freed both men and women to be themselves. The work of such movements towards the elimination of discrimination and violence against women and the promotion of equitable laws that permit women as well as men to take parental leave, has strengthened the family. We value the contribution of such movements that uphold the role of men as peaceful, nurturing partners with an equal responsibility for sharing in the work of child rearing and the instilling of children's values.

As we celebrate the diversity of families and their fundamental functions, we also remain concerned about the lack of protection and support for today's families and their members. Extended family members, friends, communities and religious and traditional leaders are all potential sources of moral guidance for children and adolescents. Particularly where parental authority is absent or abusive, our networks of support, aided by governments and civil society, must ensure that children and adolescents receive guidance and care as they too deserve a "family" structure in which to develop as healthy, informed, and ethical persons.

Therefore,

- We call on governments to develop policies and laws that better support the family, taking into account the plurality of forms and the growing number of single-parent households;
- we call for debt relief for impoverished countries so that economic and social development can be sustained and families can receive support from governments;
- we call for the end of wars of aggression and environmental degradation because they harm families;
- we call for the elimination of all forms of violence against women and men and girls and boys, child marriages and female genital mutilation;
- we call for gender equality for women and girls and for access to a wide range of reproductive and sexual health information and services for all;

- we call on our fellow religious leaders of all faiths and persuasions to recognize and offer moral support for families in their diversity of composition, structure and roles.

In conclusion we advocate the universal and continued recognition, affirmation and protection of the basic human rights of all members of the family in their individual and collective identities, we applaud the efforts of caring adults to create diverse family structures that serve to honor and protect especially vulnerable children, we affirm equal rights for women, men, young persons and children, as essential for peace and human rights, democracy, sustainable economic development and overall human progress.

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