



Address to the Working Group on ‘Breast-feeding: Science and Society’

The Pope observes that breast-feeding has both immunological and nutritional effects and can ‘create a bond of love and security between mother and child’. This whole question is bound up with the sanctity of the family. John Paul II concludes by observing that this issue brings out the urgent need for a ‘radical re-examination of many aspects of prevailing socio-economic patterns of work, economic competitiveness and lack of attention to the needs of the family’.

Your Eminences,

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. As always, it is a great pleasure to meet the distinguished participants in the study sessions organised by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, and I thank Bishop James McHugh for his kind words of introduction. Today I am especially happy to extend my appreciation to the the Royal Society, which has co-sponsored this significant meeting.

True to its purpose and statutes, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences addresses itself to a wide range of scientific, social and ethical issues which have a bearing on the Church’s service to the human family, a service which springs from the fundamental Gospel commandment of love. The Academy plays a resourceful role in helping the Church, in particular the Holy See, to fulfill this task of service with the benefit of the most expert scientific knowledge and insights. Your studies and enquiries contribute to the Church’s supreme effort to journey hand in hand with humanity on its path through temporal realities towards man’s great and inexorable transcendent destiny.

2. On this occasion you have been invited to share your expertise on the specific subject of: *breast-feeding: science and society*, as a part of the overall study which the Academy has been pursuing since 1990 on population and resources. As scientists you direct your enquiry towards a better understanding of the advantages of breast-feeding for the infant and for the mother. As your working group can confirm, in normal circumstances these include two major benefits to the child: protection against disease and proper nourishment. Moreover, in addition to these immunological and nutritional effects, this natural way of feeding can create a bond of love and security between mother and child, and enable the child to assert its *presence as a person* through interaction with the mother.

All of this is obviously a matter of immediate concern to countless women and children, and something which clearly has general importance for every society, rich or poor. One hopes that

your studies will serve to *heighten public awareness of how much this natural activity benefits the child and helps to create the closeness and maternal bonding* so necessary for healthy child development. So human and natural is this bond that the Psalms use the image of the infant at its mother's breast as a picture of God's care for man.¹ So vital is this interaction between mother and child that my predecessor Pope Pius XII urged Catholic mothers, if at all possible, to nourish their children themselves.² From various perspectives therefore the subject is of interest to the Church, called as she is to concern herself with the sanctity of life and of the family.

3. Worldwide surveys indicate that *two-thirds of mothers still breast-feed*, at least to some extent. But statistics also show that there has been a fall in the number of women who nourish their infants in this way, not only in developed countries where the practice almost has to be reinstated, but also increasingly in developing countries. This decline is traced to a combination of social factors such as urbanisation and the increasing demands placed on women, to healthcare policies and practices, and to marketing strategies for alternate forms of nourishment. Yet the overwhelming body of research is in favour of natural feeding rather than its substitutes. Responsible international agencies are calling on governments to ensure that women are enabled to breast-feed their children for four to six months from birth and to continue this practice, supplemented by other appropriate foods, up to the second year of life or beyond.³ Your meeting therefore intends to illustrate the scientific bases for encouraging social policies and employment conditions which allow mothers to do this.

In practical terms, what we are saying is that *mothers need time, information and support*. So much is expected of women in many societies that time to devote to breast-feeding and early care is not always available. Unlike other modes of feeding, no one can substitute for the mother in this natural activity. Likewise, women have a right to be informed truthfully about the advantages of this practice, as also about the difficulties involved in some cases. Healthcare professionals too should be encouraged and properly trained to help women in these matters.

4. In the recent Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* I wrote that: '*A family policy must be the basis and driving force of all social policies ... It is also necessary to rethink labour, urban, residential and social service policies so as to harmonise working schedules with time available for the family, so that it becomes effectively possible to take care of children and the elderly*'.⁴

Is this a vague utopia, or is it the obligatory path to the genuine well-being of society? Even this brief reflection on the very individual and private act of a mother feeding her infant can lead us to a deep and far-ranging critical rethinking of certain social and economic presuppositions, the negative human and moral consequences of which are becoming more and more difficult to ignore. Certainly, *a radical re-examination of many aspects of prevailing socio-economic patterns of work, economic competitiveness and lack of attention to the needs of the family is urgently necessary*.

5. I am therefore very grateful to all of you for offering your time and co-operation to this meeting co-sponsored by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and the Royal Society. I look forward to the

synthesis and report of your findings so that this information may be widely circulated to our Church agencies and interested institutions throughout the world. I pray for the success of your research and for your own personal well-being. May God's blessings of strength, joy and peace be with each one of you and the members of your families.

1 Cf. *Ps 22:9*.

2 Cf. *Allocution to Mothers* (26 October 1941).

3 Cf. UNICEF, *Children and Development in the 1990s*, on the occasion of the World Summit for Children, New York (29-30 September 1990).

4 N. 90.