

ASIAN
HORIZONS
Vol. 15, No. 1, March 2021
Pages: 174-193

THE FAMILY AS MODEL FOR A LAY- CENTERED CHURCH

Rebecca G. Cacho ♦

De La Salle University, Manila

Abstract

How could a lay-centred church come about in our time? With the challenges of the pandemic caused by Covid-19, people were confined to their homes to stop the stemming of the virus. This situation prevented the people of God to attend in person the services in places of worship. Most, if not all, resorted to watching online Masses live streamed or uploaded in different platforms while others began to pray as a family. Indeed, the central role of family in shaping and sustaining the church has been highlighted in this context. The early form of being a church, namely, "household of God," which was totally lay in composition, is worth retrieving and revitalizing. The potential of empowering families as potent force for the church to move forward in its mission is reconsidered. Now, more than ever, the bond of love that permeates every good family, must inspire the same fellowship among the members of the institutional church. Afterall, is this not what Jesus reminded his followers to exemplify?

Keywords: Domestic Church; Family; Household of God; Lay-Centred Church; Lay Ministries; Mission

*But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting
to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness*

♦**Rebecca G. Cacho** earned her M.A. in Religious Studies at Maryhill School of Theology and a Doctorate in Education major in Religious Education at De La Salle University, Manila. She is currently a professor at the Department of Theology and Religious Education of De La Salle University, Manila. She was part of the Young theologians' group of the World Council of Churches. She had post-doctoral fellowships as visiting scholar in Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium and in Chinese University of Hong Kong. She has published articles locally and internationally, and has authored textbooks for K-12 students on Religious Education and theology books for college students. Email: reb1968@gmail.com

*to children's children, to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments
(Ps 103:17-18).*

*Home should be an anchor, a port in a storm, a refuge,
a happy place in which to dwell,
a place where we are loved and where we can love
(Marvin J. Ashton).*

Introduction

Are the popular models of the church still relevant and meaningful to the contemporary church? While the images such as the Body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12:27), People of God (cf. LG, chap. 2), Community of disciples (PCP II, #143), or Servant (cf. GS 3) have guided the church in its mission and charism to the world, the current contexts of many local churches, such as the Philippines, beckons us to re-think and retrieve the most basic way of following Jesus in mission (cf. PCP II, 102-105). Among the cultural values and symbols that are given premium in most societies across time and history would be the family. This basic cell of society has become the foundation of every human community or society. A community of laity where the fundamental marks of church in communion and mission could be realized in the family setting.

With a church that comprises mainly the laity, the clergy oriented set up may not have the effective impact it used to enjoy among the faithful. To date, Pope Francis' call for synodal initiatives invites us to reflect on how best we could exemplify a church that listens to the voices of those who may have been silent and subservient to the hierarchy.

The Need for a Lay-Centred Church in the Contemporary Time

After centuries of relegating the lay members of the church to a lesser or inferior status in the church, the equal dignity and common vocation to holiness of all Christians are highlighted and retrieved in Vatican II (1962-1965). Of the 16 documents of Vatican II, it was *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (AA) (The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity), that highlighted the important role of the laity in the realization of the Church's mission of evangelization. Considering the contemporary issues, concerns and problems in the world, the lay members of the Church are the most fitting agents in proclaiming the Gospel because of their active engagements in the different sectors of society (PCP II, #423). The laity fulfils this mission of the Church in the world especially by conforming their lives to their faith so that they become the light of the world as well as by practising honesty in all their dealings so that they attract all to the love of the true and the

good and finally, to the Church and to Christ (cf. AA 13). Instead of seeing the world as a hindrance to experiencing the divine mystery or the transcendent God, the earth and all of creation have become the sacraments of God's indwelling presence or Shekinah in Hebrew.¹ Experiences of God could be possible only in the life we live day by day in this world.

In the document, *On the Vocation and the mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church in the Modern World*, Pope St John Paul II expressed his positive regard to the laity and summoned them to proclaim the Gospel and permeate the world with its values. The lay faithful which comprise most of the population of Christian Churches are being sent to be heralds of Good News and "workers in the vineyard" of God. This implies that they are being acknowledged in their crucial role in the transformation of society and the betterment of life in the world which is a great sign of God's kingdom in our midst. "The lay faithful have an essential and irreplaceable role in this announcement and in this testimony: through them the Church of Christ is made present in the various sectors of the world, as a sign and source of hope and of love" (*Christifideles laici*, 7).

Confronted with the changes rapidly occurring and affecting the church, a re-reading of and re-appropriation of what it means to be a church is one that we need to seriously undertake. What model of the church may be faithful to our Judeo-Christian Tradition (JCT) and relevant to the present context of Christians? In the Philippines where the family has always been prioritized and highly prized, we will attempt to use this as our model of being church and explore its potential to redefine who we are as community of disciples of Jesus. By using models in our theological reflection, we can focus "our attention on aspects of a reality which, until now, we had overlooked or neglected" and enable us "to explain and discover the meaning of a complex and elusive reality."² This does not mean disregarding the classical models or images of the church but an openness to the possibility of understanding the nature of our faith community in a more meaningful or timely perspective which could revitalize our faith witness.

The current set up in most churches still reflects the distinction between the clergy and the laity. This could be perceived as a *deviation from the Way of Jesus* when he formed the community of

¹Jose de Mesa and Rebecca Cacho, *Becoming Church, Being Sacrament*, Quezon City: C&E Publishing Inc., 2017, 68.

²R. Michiels, "The Self-Understanding of the Church after Vatican II," *Louvain Studies* 14 (1989) 87-88.

disciples and warned them strongly against “lording it over” one another (cf. Mt 20:25; Mk 10:42). Notice that all those he called and chose to take part in his mission were lay people. Jesus himself was not a priest in the strict sense of the word. Note that the Council documents retrieved the models of churches that emphasized equality, communion and discipleship among the members of the church in order to depart from this laity-clergy divide. One radical shift was the recognition of the common call to holiness (cf. *Lumen Gentium* [LG], 40), and the equal dignity of all the baptized which both the laity and the clergy share (cf. LG 31). Instead of maintaining the *status quo*, the church enjoined the laity to take active part in its mission and use the resources of the world to evangelize people wherever they are.

Proposing to use the family as model in becoming a lay-centred church may have the potential to illustrate a 21st century church which responds to Vatican II’s thrust of retrieving the active participation of the laity in the community of disciples (cf. LG 31). Among the paths chosen by people to respond to the call of God which is fundamentally lay-centred is marriage and family life. Through this model, the original intent of Jesus to gather all people in one communion and be bound in love for one another as his followers will be underscored (cf. Jn 13:35). Because of the centrality of family in most cultures and societies, this model may be better understood and appreciated for its connection to the daily life struggles of the members of the church.

Emerging Understanding of Family

The traditional understanding that the family as the *most basic unit of society* has become passé among many people across cultures and generations. It seems that the impact of globalization, migration and single parenthood affected this perception through the years. In retrospect, browsing through the meanings or connotations of family across cultures, one will notice that oneness, solidarity, connection, or togetherness is often the primary reason for indicating that a group of people may be identified as a family. Blood relationship remains the focal point of being joined together to be considered a family. The traditional set up of having a mother, a father and children living together as a household to complete what supposedly is a family remains the acceptable form in most societies.

The most recent church document on family, *Amoris Laetitia* (AL), however, underscores love as the essence of being family. It enjoins those who make up the household to a life of charity that inspires “fidelity and mutual self-giving” (AL 89). There are also emerging

variations on being a family such as those of single parents and their children; grandparents or aunts and uncles who took over the responsibility of caring for the children of their relatives who are working abroad to sustain the financial needs of their children. Despite the changes in the manner of being and becoming a family, Pope Francis urged the church to minister to the needs of families just as Jesus demonstrated self-giving love that sustains us “to face together the storms of life at every stage” (AL 290). In other words, one needs to look beyond the traditional set up of being a family so that the present experiences may be used as *locus theologicus* (source of theological reflections) in understanding the church.

Taking the same direction as Vatican II, the family as a lens for our theological reflections and pastoral initiatives has gained significant role in understanding the church because it could serve as a potential model and focus of ministry with all the pastoral concerns that originate therein. Through the family we experience acceptance, affirmation, sharing, forgiveness, comfort, love and care. The first among the institutions which leaves permanent mark in the life of a person is the family. The Church in the home is how it is referred to by the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCPII, 1991) in order to reiterate its serious mission of evangelizing the next generation of disciples. Four specific tasks have been identified with the Christian family’s role of *communicating God’s love*, namely, 1) to form community of persons; 2) to serve life through procreation and education of children; 3) to participate in society’s development; and 4) to share in the mission of the Church (cf. PCP II, 419-438).

Forming Community of Persons

Loving and being loved is essential to happy family life. While it is true that we could not choose our families, we are given the opportunity to love the members of our family. Being committed to the well-being of each other requires sacrifice, selfless concern, and generous sharing even when it may mean prioritizing their needs over ours. Many stories and studies have already proven that love in the family affects the emotional well-being of a person not just immediately but in the future when the person reaches adulthood. It was found out that “warmer relationships with parents in childhood predict greater security of attachment to intimate partners in late life.”³ This highlights the extensive influence of childhood environment on

³Robert J. Waldinger, and Marc S. Schulz, “The Long Reach of Nurturing Family Environments: Links with Midlife Emotion-Regulatory Styles and Late-Life Security in Intimate Relationships,” (2016), retrieved at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0956797616661556>

our well-being as an adult who is expected to start and nurture one's own family in the future.

With love in the home, families will truly become a haven of peace, security and intimacy which every person would need in order to grow in confidence and strength to withstand whatever adversities may come in life. "Families are the compass that guides us. They are the inspiration to reach great heights, and our comfort when we occasionally falter."⁴ This underscores the family's influence on us because it affects our whole being and provides us the direction and vision of life. It was said that the members of a family may be likened to branches in a tree who may grow in diverse ways but share the same roots. Besides the blood ties that bind them as one community, the family is made strong because of love that permeates their relationship.

In Filipino families, being closely knit comes from supportive relationships proven through thick or thin. Without a good family relationship, Filipinos may have difficulty in finding joy and contentment in life. Despite great achievements, some may not find meaning or direction precisely because their efforts are exerted for the sake of their family. When asked about the importance of one's family, majority would claim that everything they do and what they have become is largely because of their family. Indeed, our family does not only hand on to us our genetic make-up (physical composition), it also provides for us the environment to grow and develop into the best person we could ever be.

Love is the most powerful and dynamic connection of a family because through it, every person is treated with dignity and accepted for who he/she is. As the letter of John indicates, "there is no fear in love..." (1 Jn 4:18) and everything is made perfect when we love one another. It is in the family that loving and being loved finds its expression more concretely and its life-giving orientation experienced more intensely. Without love all human efforts of forging meaningful relationships would be futile. St Paul beautifully enunciated this in one of his letters when he said:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing (1 Cor 13:1-3).

Central to family life is the commitment to pursue the good of all its members where everyone's well-being is seriously considered

⁴Brad Henry, Retrieved from <https://www.shutterfly.com/ideas/family-quotes/>

without counting the cost of one's efforts. In a sense we could claim that love in the family teaches us to live in the spirit of gratitude, generosity and solidarity despite differences in personality or preferences. Love overcomes hostility and reinforces forgiving attitudes in times of failures or wrongful actions that hurt us. Without it, the family with all its limitations and weaknesses may succumb to despair and broken relationships. Love helps us solidify the family bond, but our human condition may sometimes hinder us from experiencing the unconditional love and care we expect from our own kin. While this is not the ideal, one could not deny that through the family we learn to love because we have been loved (cf. 1 Jn 4:10).

In a sense we learn how to be human through the process of socialization in the family; immersing us in a set of values, beliefs and system of living together as community; handing on to us the collective feelings, thoughts and behaviours that bind us together. Being one as a family calls for the establishment of ties not just of blood but more importantly of genuine love and concern for one another. "Without love the family is not a community of persons and, in the same way, without love the family cannot live, grow and perfect itself as a community of persons" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 18). Despite differences in gifts and roles, the family is a perfect example of unity in diversity where the unbreakable bond of filial love prevails. Family communion could be sustained by sacrifice, generous sharing, openness and understanding. In contrast, selfishness, discord, jealousy and rivalry divide the family and hurt their communion established initially by the love of the married couple for each other.

Paul reiterates this unitive element of love in order to sustain the church just like a family because he believes that, "for just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Rom 12:4-5). Whatever our role or gifts may be, they are all given to us to be in communion with one another. Being church is being one family sustained by love and nurtured by humble service for the good of all. To be "one" is an important mark of the church. This means unity despite diversity; harmony in spite our differences. In the early church, this was called "koinonia" or fellowship among the believers where they shared everything in common and devoted themselves to many acts of love which were pleasing to God and to all those who witnessed such wonderful communion among the first disciples (cf. Acts 2:42-47).

Serving Life

Gifted with the privilege of co-creating life with God, parents have the responsibility of bringing forth children whom they could nurture and educate. These children are the fruits of conjugal love where the complete and mutual self-giving between husband and wife is reflected. However, the fruitfulness of conjugal love is not limited to the procreation of children, it must extend to and be enhanced by Christian instruction so that children are empowered to become responsible members of the church and society. The family “ought to be a place where the Gospel is transmitted and from which the Gospel radiates.”⁵ There is ripple effect in being evangelized because one can teach or share with others the good news experienced in the family through one’s witness of a well lived life. Thus, any form of violence, abuse or degradation of human life and dignity erodes the beauty of life made possible in the family. Amidst pessimistic attitudes and the proliferation of anti-life perspectives, the Church maintains its high regard for all life forms as gifts of God’s love to the world which all families must protect and celebrate.

Life is considered a divine gift made possible through the union of married couples who were endowed with the capacity to bring forth human life in this world. Besides being born to a family, people are nurtured to grow and develop into the kind of persons they were meant to be. Among Filipinos, a new-born baby is a bundle of joy and a source of delight. Everyone takes part in the rearing of the child including some extended family members such as grandparents, aunts and uncles. It is often noted that “Filipinos are typically highly indulgent of their children”⁶ and would have the tendency to pamper them with affection and material gifts.

Besides affection and loving care, discipline is an important ingredient to a happy family relationship. It was said that “healthy families have rules that provide clear boundaries, exhibit a hierarchical organization that puts parents in charge of leadership functions, and allow for flexibility.”⁷ Children who were raised up by parents who have not inculcated respect for authority, rights and dignity of others may most likely have difficulty in accepting social responsibility and concern for the common good. In the bible, this important ingredient of becoming a better person was reiterated in these words, “train up a child in the way he should go; even when he

⁵Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, #71. Retrieved June 8, 2022 at www.vatican.va

⁶http://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Philippines/sub5_6c/entry-3877.html

⁷Karin Hadfield, “Structural Family Therapy Approach to Counselling Families,” (2000), Retrieved from <https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/s4/f2/dsk2/ftp01/MQ53097.pdf>

is old, he will not depart from it" (Prov 22:6). Healthy rules can help families avoid conflicts or solve problems because roles are defined, and boundaries are set for the members to be accountable for one another. As such there is greater possibility of cohesion or bonds of unity which these rules engender.

It is typical for Filipinos to have *salu-salu* (literally, eating together) which is the counterpart of a party in English usage. Traditionally, the whole household takes part in the preparation of a festive gathering. Family meals are treasured moments because it is around the table that everyone gathers and bond together. Stories are shared, problems are talked about, successes are commended, and failures are forgiven. Besides physical nurturance, inspiration to be better and strength to cope with hard realities of life are made available because of "*salu-salu*" in families. "In Filipino culture, eating is basically a social activity where members of the family and invited friends or relatives take part in a meal, usually where a big variety of foods is served."⁸ Most celebrated among family events are birthdays which are considered joyous occasions to express appreciation for the gift of life which a member of the family is graced with.

"Festivals are so intricately woven into the cultural ethos of the Philippines that every month of the year witnesses some kind of festival in this country."⁹ This statement from a travel blog testifies to the joyful disposition of every Filipino. Despite crisis or difficulties in life, children are raised up in an environment where humour and fun lighten the load which otherwise would be burdensome if cheerful disposition and resilient attitude may not have been part of the training received from one's family. Even when catastrophes strike, one may witness how Filipino families could find a reason to crack a joke or smile for the camera. No wonder, they can bounce back and continue with life amidst setbacks and misfortunes.

To provide for the needs of the family and sustain a quality life for all, most parents work hard and even accept jobs overseas. They sacrifice being away from their family if this will ensure more comfortable life for their children. Enduring loneliness or homesickness is typical among overseas Filipino workers whose primary goal for working abroad is to secure a better life for their families and send their children to good schools. No wonder "homecoming" (Filipino, *balikbayan*) is always a celebration of

⁸ Retrieved from http://www.seasite.niu.edu/SEABusiness/Tagalog_Business_Materials/businessvocabs/Business_Cultural_Scenarios/everyday_traditions.htm

⁹Anupama Rai Zutshi, "12 Popular Festivals in the Philippines," Retrieved from <https://traveltriangle.com/blog/festivals-in-philippines/>

welcoming back home a beloved family member. In contrast, leaving for work overseas has been a painful separation for families but is always acknowledged as a worthy sacrifice for parents who provide quality life for their children.

Participating in Society's Development

As a vital cell of society, "it is from the family that citizens come to birth and it is the first school of the social virtues that are the animating principles of the existence and development of society itself."¹⁰ Through the family, the cultural legacy of a country and the realization of justice, peace and genuine concern for the marginalized sectors of society are passed on to the next generation in order to make them active participants in nation building. The Christian family is being challenged to become a living witness of generous service and commitment to solving social issues, through a "preferential option" for the poor and the disadvantaged members of the human family. This calls for all Christian families to prioritize the needs of the poor, especially the starving millions in the world, the sick, the orphans, the old, the victims of drugs and human trafficking, the abandoned and those who have no family.

As "cradle of life and love," our family nurtures us with moral values and orients us about social responsibility. Without the family the spiritual and cultural heritage of societies may not be preserved and protected from extinction. For example, the value of solidarity is first learned in the home. From the simplest act of helping one another in completing household chores to sitting together to create possible solutions to a serious problem faced by the family, we are trained how to work with and for our family's well-being which could be used in one's engagements in societal concerns.

Our experience of "*bayanihan*" (solidarity) reminds us that we are not alone or meant to live alone. As the old adage indicates, "no human is an island" because we are born of, grow through, and lived with others. Though we belong to the same family, we realize that every member is unique and as such would require us to adjust to the different personalities and responsibilities we assume as part of this community. This does not deter us from achieving harmony, unity and collegiality because despite diversity, solidarity is possible. One symbol we could refer to would be an orchestra where different musical instruments are played simultaneously but one beautiful music is produced harmoniously.

¹⁰ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio* (The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World), November 22, 1981, n. 42.

Our involvement and participation in this most basic of human communities lead us into accepting a general perspective about reality, initiate us into adopting a set of patterned feelings and values that become for us criteria in making judgments, and train us in following customary ways of behavior.¹¹

We have been enculturated (shaped by our culture) and cultured (educated through our culture) to be human in a specific and concrete manner through the family. This ensures that our cultural heritage is preserved, enhanced, transformed or even replaced when necessary. Because of this intimate connection and continuous interaction with the family, the values we assimilated are largely reflected in our social relationships outside the home. If one hopes to make the society and the church better, one needs to focus on the family since it holds the greatest power of moulding the persons into better citizens of a nation or faithful members of faith communities or churches.

Advocating significant changes in our society may be possible when families respond to the call for conversion. There is a tremendous potential for social transformation if Filipino families seriously consider change from within themselves. While it is appreciated that Filipinos are family-oriented, the social milieu that brought this phenomenon may not have engendered the real essence of hospitality and solidarity needed to build up a nation. Culled from experiences of insecurity due to long history of colonization, corruption and lack of support from the government, families naturally turn to the members of their family, clan, or kinship group for support. Lack of available options to have quality life virtually forced them to “see to its own (and only its own) security.”¹² This is made more pronounced because of unjust social structures like poverty and the proliferation of economic control of the oligarchs. With this unbalanced, oppressive and exploitative environment, most Filipino families became overconcerned for their own security to the neglect of the larger community. Attitudes of “*kanya-kanya*” (to each his/her own) or “*tayo-tayo lamang* (just us) have prevailed thus, a kind of anarchy of families has emerged and genuine concern for the good of the nation became the least of their worries.

This is the reason why the Christian Filipino family is beckoned to conversion where primary allegiance must be accorded to God within a covenantal relationship instead of one’s family. To live in

¹¹J. de Mesa, *Jose M. de Mesa: A Theological Reader*, Manila: De La salle University Publishing House, 2016, 240.

¹²J. de Mesa, *Marriage is discipleship*. Quezon City: East Asian Pastoral Institute, 1995, 137.

accord with the covenant leads us to inclusive attitudes such as solidarity and hospitality which are necessary elements to rectify the fragmentations or divisions within the Philippine society. Families are enjoined to see themselves as part of a bigger family which does not only look after its own clan but works with other families to provide security for everyone and to make sure no one is left behind. Love for one's family should kindle social responsibility and genuine concern for disinherited families in society.

Sharing in the Mission of the Church

"The Christian family, which springs from marriage as a reflection of the loving covenant uniting Christ with the Church, and as a participation in that covenant will manifest to all people the Savior's living presence in the world, and the genuine nature of the Church."¹³ Being a miniature church, the family as a communion of life and love is a model community where the divine intent to make us one is realized (cf. Jn 17:21). Through the faith of the couple, their children are formed into disciples of Christ and baptized in the same faith which St Paul reiterated, "There is one body and one Spirit; just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:4-6).

The family is not just an object but also a subject of evangelization because "it is in the family where the Kingdom of God is most immediately experienced and witnessed to, and where the inclusiveness of God's saving presence can be exercised through the practice of dialogue and hospitality."¹⁴ There is no better agent than a family if the mission of the church in proclaiming the kingdom of God must be fulfilled or realized in the contemporary times. In fact, the family is "the first school of discipleship" (PCP II, #576), since through our life together we can live by the values of the Gospel and become leaven in the world. As our first faith community, the family introduces us to the divine being who treats us like a loving parent to his/her children (cf. 2 Cor 6:18). Did we not first learn that we have a Father-God or Papa Jesus who looks after our welfare and summons us to be good children?

Our family is the most potent force in nurturing our faith and witnessing to it in the way we live. Despite the busy schedule of working parents or the change in lifestyles in today's world, the home

¹³M. Lawler & M. Roberts, ed., 1996. *Christian Marriage and Family*. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996, 61.

¹⁴J. de Mesa, "Re-rooting Mission in the Family," *Mission Studies* 1-2 (19 January 2002) 137-152.

should remain a place where we learn the beauty of praying together, serving our neighbour in need, and experiencing how faith in God provides meaning, direction and stability to life. Without faith, we may not have the strength to weather the “storms in life” or cope with stressful situations we encounter as a family. The reality of dysfunctional family life does not discount the fact that it remains “the forming center of faith, the heart of spiritual formation, and the place where the unconditional love of God is mirrored, albeit imperfectly.”¹⁵

The new evangelization advocated in the 21st century places the family at the heart of its mission and ministries, “since it is where the faith is first encountered, passed down, lived, and sustained.”¹⁶ Parents who are the heralds of the Word of God could instruct their children by word and example about what it means to be a disciple of Christ or member of the Church. The daily life and family encounters children experience afford them a first-hand understanding of being church where the unconditional love of God is encountered in caring for one another, generous sharing and selfless sacrifice among the members.

Contemporary Challenges to Families

Just like any other communities, the family is not spared from difficulties, failures or challenges that test its vitality and stability. Families across the globe experience financial difficulties, suffer lack of communication, face parental absence, encounter clash in values and go through the negative impact of technology on the young generation. Most specifically, Filipino families encounter challenges posed by migration, poverty, irregular relationships and violence or hostile environment. During the synod of bishops on the family in 2014-2015¹⁷ spearheaded by Pope Francis, these concerns were examined in terms of their effects on family relationships.

First, *families are ‘forced’ to separate due to migration* such as when parents seek employment abroad to provide better economic condition for their children. They bear the pain of separating from their family with the hope that their future will be more comfortable and secured financially. But there are also those who do not leave for

¹⁵Lawler & Roberts, *Christian Marriage and Family*, 67.

¹⁶United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Marriage and Family: Home of the New Evangelization,” in New Evangelization Tool Kit. Retrieved on January 5, 2020 at <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/new-evangelization/toolkit/marriage-family-home-new-evangelization.cfm>.

¹⁷United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “2014-2015 Synods of Bishops on the Family,” in Marriage and Family Ministries, <https://www.usccb.org/topics/marriage-and-family-life-ministries/2014-2015-synods-bishops-family>

money alone but are so conditioned to migrate to Western countries which are idealized as land of promise especially among Filipinos. It was noted that, “this peculiarity of the national social psyche is threatening for it can only mean that not even the family is powerful enough a factor to keep Filipinos home.”¹⁸ This only shows how colonial mentality has seeped in the consciousness of Filipino families that though colonizers have left our country, the sub-consciousness of Filipinos have been subjugated and their culture stigmatized. Instead of pride for their country, shame and inferiority complex still thrive and continue to threaten national pride.

Second, *poverty affects families the most* as could be witnessed in their subhuman living conditions when they resort to stay in makeshift homes, shanties, or in improvised shelter like wooden carts which they can bring along while they roam around streets looking for scraps of food. According to the 2014 survey of Social Weather Station (SWS), there are approximately 52% Filipino families who are affected by poverty and this is growing every day since 2006.¹⁹ This indicates that the most basic needs like food, clothing, shelter and education have not been met. It is no wonder why many families live in slums and their children are often malnourished, uneducated, and exposed to dangers in streets while they sell cigarettes, *sampaguita* (a variety of local jasmine flowers), or other items to get by and augment the meagre income of the family. Majority could not even complete their elementary education such that gainful employment in the future could not be ensured. It is no wonder why crime rate has escalated tremendously in poverty-stricken areas in the country.

Third, *irregular situations*, like the growing number of couples who resort to live-in arrangements or annulment procedures to resolve their marital problems have become prevalent. While the Catholic Church maintains its stand against divorce, it does not condemn couples who end up separating or dissolving their marriage for very serious causes. Abuse of women continue to proliferate within and among families where children witness first-hand the violence hurled on their mothers. A hostile environment exposes the children to values that are contrary to being and becoming human. Instead of raising them up to become productive citizens and upright members

¹⁸A statement of Bishop Villegas quoted by David Lozada, “#PopeFrancisPH: 4 Challenges Facing Filipino Families,” in *Rappler*. Retrieved on June 8, 2020 at <https://www.rappler.com/specials/pope-francis-ph/80148-pope-francis-filipino-family>

¹⁹Angela Casauy, “Over half of Filipino Families Consider themselves Poor-SWS,” in *Rappler*. Retrieved on March 5, 2020 at <https://www.rappler.com/nation/79313-sws-survey-poverty-2014>.

of the community, they might assume behaviour unbecoming of one's personhood. Due to divorce or separation, single parenthood has put so much stress and pressure on families where a parent must play different roles and juggle with different jobs just to provide for the needs of children left to her/his care. Likewise, those who remarried after their first marriage seem to become separated from the Church due to shame or guilt from a failed marriage and cohabitation engaged in. Pastoral care to guide and restore communion among the estranged members of the Church is an indispensable ministry that the present Pope advocates especially for families affected by irregular situations.²⁰

The fourth challenge is *the impact of popular culture and technology on children*. According to studies done, "children's absorption in technology, from texting to playing video games limit their availability to communicate with their parents."²¹ As digital natives, children have become more adept with the use of technology while their parents are less competent in the area. Parents seem to find it difficult to assert their authority when their own children who find autonomy and personal space through the cyber environment refuse to acknowledge it. There are less talks and sharing because both have succumbed to the power of technology. Instead of the traditional communication around the table, working together and exchange of stories, "children and parents are instant messaging constantly, checking their social media, listening to music, surfing their favorite web sites, and watching television or movies."²² The real kind of connection, intimacy and closeness which could sustain lasting and stronger relationships among the members have been missing to the detriment of the family as a basic unit of society. Likewise, parents could not offer proper supervision and support and are unable to model a healthy behaviour or share positive values which children need to grow well because of their limitations due to the demands of work or career.

With the many crises being faced by families, *constant communication, committed love, discipline and solidarity among its members* have often been enunciated as the best remedies to reckon with across cultures. Many problems often stem from lack of

²⁰ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, Quezon City Philippines: Claretians Communications Foundation, Inc., 2016, 297-299.

²¹Jim Taylor, "Is Technology Creating a Family Divide?" *Psychology Today* (March 13, 2013), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-power-prime/201303/is-technology-creating-family-divide>

²²Taylor, "Is Technology Creating a Family Divide?"

communication among the members of the family. The need to understand the language of each one is not an easy task. This is even exacerbated by the individualistic orientation of modern technology which is the primary medium of communication in the contemporary time. It should not however, deter the family from establishing open communication lines which could help them understand each other and sort out ways to remedy any crisis caused by lack of communication among them.

According to studies done, “effective communication does not develop instantly and get turned on and off like a light switch. Instead, it is continuous, developing with time and experience.”²³ Sometimes it is a hit and miss thing or a trial, and error effort which could be perfected in time. What matters most is the untiring endeavour to establish trust, openness, and mutual respect among the members of the family.

The Family in Judeo-Christian Tradition

Although our initial discussion on the family cuts across cultures and focuses on its role in shaping individuals to becoming better members of the church and society, it is inevitable that we look back at the Judeo-Christian Tradition as rich resource in understanding the significance of family life as a lens in being a Church in our time. Majority of the stories in the bible revolve around the family with all the blessings and curses included therein. We look at some families which could model for us the essence of living together as a close-knit community of kin.

Faithful Love Overcomes all Tribulations

The family begins through the love of the couple who committed to live together no matter what. This entails trust and sincerity where both will stay faithful to each other. Despite difficulties, both are expected to keep the bond they forged at the very start of their relationship. Falling in love is easy but staying in love is a choice made from one’s volition and freedom. One beautiful story of love that endured despite hardships was that of Jacob and Rachel’s (cf. Gen 29). Jacob was said to have fallen in love with Rachel, such that when he was initially thwarted in his desire to marry her after seven years of work without pay, he continued to work in servitude for another seven years in order to take her as his wife. It seems to imply that no matter how difficult the circumstance, those who genuinely

²³Jerry D. Lehman, *Understanding Marriage, Family, and Intimate Relationships*, New York: Charles C. Thomas, 2005.

love each other could weather whatever storms there might be in order to have each other. “The intensity of Jacob’s love for the beautiful Rachel is emphasized three times (Gen 29:18, 20, 30).”²⁴ This is quite surprising because of the discreet way the stories in the Bible were usually articulated. The strong emotions Jacob felt for Rachel was equated with love such that the long years of labour swiftly passed for someone who was patient to wait.

Indeed, many a sacrifice could be done because of love just like in the story of Tobias and Sara (cf. Tobit 7-8). At first glance, the narrative is like a fairy tale but upon closer scrutiny, the powerful images reflected in the characters, manifested how enormous their moral strength was in order to overcome the “evils” that prevent them from celebrating love. Bringing more shame to the family if her marriage will not work again, Sara was almost resigned to a life of loneliness, until Tobias came to change her fate. A strong faith in the power of God (who is love) made them victorious over any evil that threatened to destroy their family. Despite challenges along the way, with their faithful love nurtured by deep faith in God’s providence, they were able to hurdle everything together. Their story reminds us that true love overcomes tribulations and testifies to the possibility of love relationship for a happy family life.

Forgiveness Heals Wounds and Bridges Gaps

There are many family stories where rivalry, unresolved conflicts, favouritism and jealousy among siblings and parents could be found in the bible. In the book of Genesis, the story of the 12 sons of Jacob undoubtedly dramatized this reality in family life (cf. Gen 37-50). Because Joseph was loved more and favoured greatly by his father, his brothers’ envy blinded them from acknowledging him as their own kin thereby “selling” him as a slave to merchants. When catastrophe struck the land of his family, his brothers turned to him for help without realizing he was the younger brother they sold many years ago. Joseph could have turned them down and used his power for retribution but as they say, “blood is thicker than water.” Being a man after the heart of a humble son, he forgave his brothers and took them in when famine left them without any provisions to get by. By releasing his brothers from their “debts” he paved the way for their reconciliation and the restoration of family bond severed by rivalry and favouritism. If jealousy could destroy a family tie, forgiveness can help put the broken pieces together.

²⁴Ester Menn, “Commentary on Genesis 29:15-28,” *Working Preacher* (July 27, 2014), at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2150

No wonder Jesus strongly urged his friends to forgive from the heart (cf. Mt 18:35) and do not count the times you forgive (cf. Mt 18:21–22) because we have been treated with unconditional mercy by our Father in heaven who hopes that we do the same for our brother and sister who offend us (cf. Mt 6:14). It is truism that forgiveness frees us to love again and move towards a better family life. Until we are liberated from the pain or hurts caused by our sins against each other, harmony and peace would not abide in our homes. Pride often closes the door to forgiveness and prevents us from nurturing intimacy among the family members. It takes a lot of courage and humility to give each other second chances. Like the very popular story of the Father of the lost son (cf. Lk 15:11–32), we are enjoined to assume the same compassion for a “lost” family member. Beyond the serious mistakes of our kin is the invitation to bring back to life those whose past choices led them to death.

Respect Family Legacy and Stay Righteous amid Temptations

It is said that the best expression of gratitude is to keep the legacy of the person alive in one’s own life and person. Among Filipinos for example, to be considered as *walang utang na loob* (English, ungrateful person or a person without any sense of gratitude) is an insult which could hurt deeply. Children have been inculcated with a deep sense of gratitude and appreciation for the efforts and favours given to them by the elders in the family. Grateful acceptance of kindness is perceived as an act of humility which should be strengthened by constant practice. The story of a mother and her seven sons, though seemingly violent because of being tortured before being killed, teaches us how edifying it is to witness how a family is kept intact by their strong faith which no amount of suffering could sway them from violating their ancestral tradition (cf. 2 Macc 7). Through the firm instruction they received from their mother, the seven sons courageously faced their death as their last act of righteousness and a witness to the wisdom they learned from their parent.

With the onset of globalization where borderless existence is promoted, there are greater possibilities of forgetting and abandoning our own cultural heritage. The family is greatly affected because the impact of this phenomenon compromised some of the indigenous family traditions. Slowly but surely, the more dominant cultures have replaced the local customs, values and practices of people. This is made worse among young people whose ideals are strongly influenced by “foreign or international celebrities” who are considered idols. The stigma of belonging to an inferior culture remains part of the psychological outlook of many Filipinos. It is a

challenging task for parents nowadays to instruct their children according to the cultural heritage of the country, but this should not dissuade them from fulfilling an important role in preserving and promoting the legacy of our race. One reminder we can derive from the bible is found in Deuteronomy 6:6-7 which states: "These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up." After Israel was delivered from slavery, their ancestors continued to teach and pass on to their children the tradition of experiences of God that guided them in their lives and made them one family.

Marriage and Family are Sacred and Ordained by God

Despite the current trends on marriage and family as a contract casually entered and ended at will by people, the bible maintains that this is of divine origin and a manifestation of holiness ascribed to creation by God (Gen 2:21-25). The divine intent to fill the earth and subdue it (Gen 1:27-28) alongside human cooperation would ensure a better life for all because families will work together and look after the earth as their own home which God gave them (Gen 2:15). This covenantal relationship initiated by God with humans is properly incarnated in the sacred bond of marriage and family. Both the Old and New Testament made use of the same imagery in depicting how God relates to people (cf. Gen 17:7; Ezek 36:28; 2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:27). It is not a simple social convention but a solemn pledge of oneness where two flesh become one (Gen 2:24; Mt 19:5; Mk 10:8). United in love, the couple builds a family where children are considered blessings from God because they would bring delight and continuity to their lineage (Ps 127:3-4; Jas 1:17-18; Ps 139:13-16).

From the Old Testament, the story in Genesis 2:18-24 highlights this belief that it is God's design for humanity to be united in love and be partners in building the family. While some may read and use the said narrative to present the creation story, the original intention of the authors was to bring to attention the sanctity of marriage and family life. In fact, in the official liturgy for weddings, the Church has listed it among those readings to be considered. Since ancient Israel, the Jewish people passed on this firm belief that all relationships and especially that of marriage have been part of God's intent for humanity. The same could be claimed in the Christian Tradition where St Paul in his letter to Ephesians 5:22-33 made use of this metaphor to explain the way God relates to us in Jesus. Most often, the passage is misunderstood or even used to emphasize the

subordinate role of the women in marriage. One needs to retrieve the historical-cultural milieu by which Paul wrote the passage so as not to be misled because the point of the letter is to present marriage as based on love. It does not promote control or domination of man over the woman, instead, Paul suggested ways on how a love-relationship could thrive between married couples with Jesus' way of relating to the Church as the norm or example of nurturing such relationship. This means that the love of a couple to each other should be *sacrificial, purifying, caring and unbreakable* just like the love of Jesus for the Church.

Conclusion

Retrieving the family as model of being church in the 21st century directs us to the most fundamental form of being a community of disciples which is more sensitive to the present context of churches. While there are limitations to this model, there are more aspects of being church, such as, fellowship of love (*koinonia*), educating the children to the faith and sharing in the proclamation of the gospel (*kerygma*), mutual self-giving and selfless service to one another (*diakonia*) thereby celebrating with awe and wonder God's gift of life (*leitourgia*). This vibrant spirituality is located in the family where the members belong to the lay members of the institutional church. If through reviving the "household church" (family in our time) of the New Testament or the early church communities' set up could highlight what is wanting in local churches (i.e., communion, solidarity, familiarity, filial love, intimacy, etc.), then the initiative would be worth it. As part of the church, we are challenged to discover and bring to the fore, models of being church which speak to the heart of many lay women and men who have become lukewarm in their participation and witness of the Christian faith. By acknowledging the indispensable role of each baptized in the mission of the Church, families made up of lay people may be inspired to renew their commitment to become domestic churches or *churches in the home* which exemplify the Holy Family and creatively respond to challenges towards becoming a family after the heart of our motherly God, in Jesus, through the Spirit.