

Church Teachings on Family vis-à-vis the Corrosion of Society

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Abstract

The ever-increasing social conflicts have affected society in general and family life in particular over the years resulting in dehumanizing, depersonalization and commoditization of individuals and families. The social occurrences do impact the implementation of the Church's teaching at both the social and familial levels. Faith is no refuge for the fainthearted, but something which enhances our lives. It makes us aware of a magnificent calling, the vocation of love. It assures us that this love is trustworthy and worth embracing, for it is based on God's faithfulness which is stronger than our every weakness. There is an urgent need to develop a non-discriminating attitude, a profound and all-embracing spirituality which looks on all humanity as a manifestation of God's on-going creation and as a human community which unifies all persons and human experiences in Jesus Christ.

Introduction

During over three decades of working in India, Asia, Africa and many countries in the West, with numerous families of different social, economic and religious backgrounds, ranging from grassroots work in rural areas to working with communities in urban settings, I have witnessed the ever-increasing magnitude of social conflicts and tried to understand the nature and impact of these conflicts and the rapidly

emerging new sources of conflict that have affected society in general and family life in particular over the years.

Organizing a two-week seminar in 1999 for Asian Bishops who were Chairpersons of the Communion for Family in Asian countries, and attended also by the Late Cardinal Lopez Trojillo, President of The Pontifical Council for the Family, leading workshops for Bishops during four FABC Assemblies, addressing several meetings on the Family and natural family planning methods at the Vatican and at the United Nations Headquarters in New York and Geneva, organizing international conferences in India and abroad, have all heightened my sensitivity to the overwhelming rapidity of social change, and consistently challenged me to evaluate my work, diversify it, make it more inclusive and relevant in communicating the message of the Church regarding Family. It is in this backdrop that I put pen to this article.

In this paper I intend to offer:

1. An analysis of society, highlighting social trends, their manifestations and sources and
2. Refer to the Church's teachings on family, reflect briefly on them, and the need for these uncompromising teachings in today's global crises.

It needs to be recognized that social occurrences do impact the implementation of the Church's teaching at both the social and familial levels. It also needs to be acknowledged that while the Church is an Ecclesial Institution, it is a social institution and part of the larger social system and framework. There is no blueprint in place for these roles, and thus:

- It is for us to hear/listen, understand and see the challenges from both the Church and society, and understand these realities and their impact on society in general and family in particular.
- It is for us to discover the indispensable role of the Family, both within the Church and within society, to prioritize values and lifestyles and ultimately a view of the world order as we see it from within the institutional Church and within social institutions, and work towards recovery of human life, human dignity, stability of marriage and family life, both from within the Church and within society.

- It is for us to develop a non-discriminating attitude, develop a profound and all-embracing spirituality which looks on all humanity as a manifestation of God's on-going creation and as a human community which unifies all persons and human experiences in Jesus Christ.

There are three parts to this paper:

1. Understanding reality: Contemporary Society and Teachings of the Church with regard to Family.
2. Identifying ambivalence and barriers in our approaches to working with families, both from the Church and Society.
3. Presenting a roadmap for engagement and action within the Church and social institutions for building healthy marriages and stable family lives.

Contemporary Social Reality and the New World Order

One characteristic of this new world order is that it is not a static entity but a dynamic, constantly evolving and diversifying reality with a tentacle-spread of social, technological forces that engulfs every possible domain in human life. It is against this background that some of these changes can be categorized as follows:

Societies across the world face a multitude of ever-changing challenges in an increasing world culture called globalization. This new world order is directly linked with the media, unbridled technological progress, new socio-political and economic systems that favour new openings for trade, free markets, flooding of the world with consumer goods, opening of new avenues for employment and the euphoria of a better lifestyle, all leading to intra-and inter-territorial migration. This has led to a spurt in material goods, resulting not only in an exchange of ideas but also of values and lifestyles. "Such a new world order has created a new ethos that has affected each person and family in ways that are neither benign nor neutral, and have brought about profound paralyzing effects on the health, development, emotional wellbeing and security of all its members, resulting in dehumanizing, depersonalization and commodification of individuals and families" (C, Bernard, *Family - Heart of Humanity*, Cambridge Scholars Press, UK 2013).

While this new world order is an era of unprecedented and unbridled technological, scientific and social progress, characterized by the conquest of space and time, social mobility, instant communication,

liberalization of trade etc., we need to admit that the world has never experienced such unprecedented violence, unrest, a state of continuous war, trafficking of women and children, racial conflicts, nuclear threat, religious fundamentalism, sale of armaments, unabated crime, rampant corruption of unimaginable proportions and social disparities, injustice and usurping of global space. Families and individuals are exploited and their rights violated, especially those of women, children and youth, who are manipulated towards self-centered and profit-making motives.

This contemporary world order is further intensified by new forms of degradation, highly misplaced investments by nations in unethical technological manipulations and morphism, militarization, commoditization and marketization, unsustainable distribution and consumption systems that leave an exploited and degraded environment to future generations. This degradation is being felt now, even by developed societies who are also affected by this divide.

Furthermore, this new world order can be characterized as an era of invasion of personal, social, national and global freedom and the decline of humane and spiritual values, leading to a loss of human warmth, concern, empathy and connectedness, leading to further chaos, combat, defeat and imminent threat of disaster and destruction of all social institutions, including the family.

This systemic weakening of the moral, spiritual, institutional and social fabric of society and tearing of all social safety nets has led to the present day crises being experienced around the world. These crises are manifested in increasing breakdowns in marriage and family relationships, increasing feelings of meaninglessness, alienation, increasing violence, abuse of women and children, increasing incidence of mental illness, addictions, delinquency and increasing rates of suicides, especially among young people. (C, Bernard, *Nurturing Families around the World*, Sage Publications, 2014)

In these crises,

Humanity in the 21st Century is at the crossroads of civilization and needs to work towards a recovery or face the peril of decay and disintegration. The choice is with humanity itself. (C, Bernard, *Family - Heart of Humanity*, Cambridge Scholars Press, U.K. 2013)

Impact of this Contemporary World Order

From the influences of these rapid and intense changing and enlarging exosystems emerges the “mass man”, the orientation to power,

manipulation, acquisition and a trend towards depersonalization and the weakening of moral fibre. People are being mechanized, dehumanized, brutalized and rendered numb to the suffering of others. They no longer seem to care. Whereas fifty years ago the problem was too much conscience, today it is one of not enough conscience.

Specific ways in which this malady affects individuals and family are:

- A state of individual and family anomie, reflected in a lack of consensus on values, disturbance in identity, human and family relations and a pervasive sense of powerlessness.
- Chronic immaturity, an inability to assume effective responsibility and an impaired potential for viable personal and/or family growth.
- Discontinuity and incongruity in the relations between family members, individuals in/and family and society.
- Magnification of the forces of fragmentation and alienation in social and family relationships by the pollution of the social environment and the individual being removed from his /her family due to work pressure.
- A division between husband and wife, parent and child, parent and grandparent, parent and teacher and community leader because of conflicts in the Family.
- Rising complaints of feelings of emptiness, meaninglessness, loneliness, despair and deadness, crippling and disabling the family from carrying out its responsibilities and providing an ambience of security, protection and wellbeing to its members.
- High incidence of delinquency, addiction, mental illness, violence and suicide among alienated persons.
- Increasing wars and conflicts which create cycles of violence, breaking families, creating new refugees, all with untold consequences. These disorders affect relationships within the community and family, leading to a paralysis and dysfunction, dehumanizing and de-personalizing of individuals, families, communities and nations.

The Teachings of the Church on Family

Even in early Christian communities, the 'Family' appeared as the domestic Church. In the apostolic letters of the New Testament, 'Family'

is identified as a place of profound solidarity between husband and wife, between parents and children (cf. Eph 5:21-6:9; Col 3:18-4:1; 1Tim 2:8-15; Titus 2:1-10; 1Pt 2:13-3:7; cf. also the Letter to Philemon). In particular, St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians recognized the nuptial love between man and woman, "the great mystery", making present in the world the love of Christ and the Church (cf. Eph 5:31-32) (Preparatory Document for The Family Synod 2013)

It needs to be noted that over the centuries, more particularly since Vatican II, while treating certain pressing problems, the Council dedicated an entire chapter to the promotion of the dignity of marriage and the family, as seen in the description of their value and contribution to society: "The family, in which the various generations come together and help one another grow wiser and harmonize personal rights with the other requirements of social life, is the very foundation of society" (GS,52). Particularly striking is its appeal for a Christ-centered spirituality in the spouses' life of faith:

Let the spouses themselves, made to the image of the living God and enjoying the authentic dignity of persons, be joined to one another in equal affection, harmony of mind and the work of mutual sanctification. Thus, following Christ who is the principle of life, by the sacrifices and joys of their vocation and through their faithful love, married people can become witnesses of the mystery of love which the Lord revealed to the world by His dying and His rising up to life again (GS.52).

After the Second Vatican Council, this teaching on marriage and family was further enriched. Pope Paul VI, with the Prophetic Enyclical *Humanae vitae*, and a Papal Era that was attacked vehemently because of its stance on birth control and continues to divide opinions and moral standing in the Church, offers us specific principles and guidelines on sensitive issues on marital sexuality and procreation. Subsequently, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul II insisted on proposing the divine plan in the basic truth of married love and the family: "The only place in which this self-giving in its whole truth is made possible is marriage, the covenant of conjugal love freely and consciously chosen, whereby men and women accept the intimate community of life and love willed by God himself." (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 48). "A person's freedom, far from being restricted by this fidelity, is secured against every form of subjectivism or relativism and is made a sharer in creative Wisdom" (FC,11.)

The Catechism of the Catholic Church gathers together the fundamental aspects of this teaching: "The marriage covenant, by which a man and

a woman form with each other an intimate communion of life and love, has been founded and endowed with its own special laws by the Creator. Christ the Lord raised marriage between the baptized to the dignity of a sacrament (cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 48; Code of Canon Law, 1055,1) (CCC 1660).

The recent encyclical of Pope Francis, *Lumen fidei*, speaks of the Family in the context of a reflection on how faith reveals “just how firm the bonds between people can be when God is present in their midst” (LF,50). “The first setting in which faith enlightens the human city is the Family. I think first and foremost of the stable union of man and woman in marriage. This union is born of their love, as a sign and presence of God’s own love, and of the acknowledgement and acceptance of the goodness of sexual differentiation, whereby spouses can become one flesh (cf. Gen 2:24) and are enabled to give birth to a new life, a manifestation of the Creator’s goodness, wisdom and loving plan. Grounded in this love, a man and a woman can promise each other mutual love in a gesture which engages their entire lives and mirror many features of faith. Promising love for ever is possible when we perceive a plan bigger than our own ideas and undertakings, a plan which sustains us and enables us to surrender our future entirely to the one we love” (LF,52). “Faith is no refuge for the fainthearted, but something which enhances our lives. It makes us aware of a magnificent calling, the vocation of love. It assures us that this love is trustworthy and worth embracing, for it is based on God’s faithfulness which is stronger than our every weakness” (LF,53).

Family – Domestic Church (LG No.11) in Contemporary Social Reality

Since Vatican II, the Church’s consciousness of itself has expanded immensely. Rooted in the mystery of God’s all-pervading presence, the Church is expressed in all religious communities but uniquely in Families which it now recognizes as the fundamental unit both in society and in religion. The Church has not said that the Family is like the Church or that it is part of the Church but that Family is the Domestic Church (*Lumen Gentium*, No 11). The Family therefore is a local Church and local Churches are not merely members of the total Church, they are actual realizations of the Church as whole.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes believing families, centers of living and radiant faith, as the reason why they can be understood as a ‘domestic Church.’ It describes the home as the ‘first school of Christian life’. Being a Domestic Church implies that families must have within themselves characteristics and aspects that can be an authentic Ecclesial experience for members. These characteristics are:

1. *Experience of Community:* The Church is not a perfect community and neither is the family; both experience closeness and unity as well as divisions and hostility. However, it must be realized that the Family reflects all that occurs in the Church and in the wider society.
2. *Sacramental Community:* The Church is a sacramental community. The Family is a sacramental community in its own right, in baptism, celebration of Eucharist and reconciliation. The members' lives are immersed, maintained and celebrated in Christ. Every action in the family is a manifestation of the sacramental nature of the relationship.
3. *Servant Community:* Family life demands self-sacrifice, hard work and sensitivity to the needs of others. In many instances, individuals and families bring home to others the realization that being a Church means serving. Thus, family life is the experience of unconditional love among its members. Compassion and forgiveness give a true taste of love, which speaks of the presence of Christ.

Therefore, to be a Domestic Church means that the family must reflect the uniqueness of its way of being a Church in the world. What the members of the family know to be their own experiences of the sacred in marriage, sexual intimacy, procreation, parenting, the building, sustaining and decay of an intimate relationship, the struggles of providing, sheltering, feeding and caring - this experience is authentic and must be part of the knowledge of the gathered Church. The ways that the family senses a call to witness to the Gospel are true vocations and serve the whole. The Family as authentic Church can and must inform the whole Church of the ways it touches God and of the experiences of living the faith.

Given this sublime vocation, the singular role of the Family cannot be dichotomized, diminished or underestimated by any institution, however religious. Rather, all institutions must recognize 'Family' as a sacred institution set apart from other social and religious institutions, which includes committed lifelong relationships, a strong sense of bonding and belongingness among its members, mutual responsibilities and accountability, of caring and concern for one another, identification with family values, a spirituality and a fundamental belief in community.

The Family is thus indispensable in the Church and must be recognized more and more intensely and purposefully in contemporary times. Family therefore should be the central point of reference in all that

concerns the life of the Church. In fact, it should be the prime ministry from which other ministries flow.

The Church's Indispensable Role in Supporting Families:

These being the realities, a) for the family to fulfill its role both in the Church and in contemporary society, it needs a climate wherein its members have a sense of security and stability. This can only result from stable means of livelihood, employment, adequate facilities to meet the needs for food, education, housing and health, adequate leisure and support, emotional and spiritual development of its members and social and religious structures that will ensure equity, equality and justice in the family's relations with the larger society and the Church. These institutions have to meet the needs from the social, cultural, economic, educational, technological, political, psychological, religious and moral milieu in which the family is placed.

b) When changes occur in these areas of life, they have a significant impact and profound influence on families and their capacities to perform their roles satisfactorily. Thus, like any other social or religious structure, families need support in fulfilling their responsibilities to themselves and society. In turn, the Church has an indispensable obligation to build on family strengths and fulfill its prophetic role by preparing and supporting families to fulfill their social and religious roles, which are both one and two at the same time. In other words, the Church must be socially conscious and prophetic enough to strengthen families to a deeper social consciousness using every possible opportunity to influence the building up of the human community, the 'Kingdom of God on Earth'.

Part II. Identifying Areas of Ambivalence/Weaknesses and Barriers

Drawing on the sum total of my experiences over the years I would say that it needs to be realized that every social and Church institution needs to call attention to the foundational structure, role and functions the Family plays in human civilization.

One cannot underestimate the sublime nature and irreplaceable role of the Family in Society. This fact calls on the Universal Catholic Church to recognise and affirm that 'Family is a source of happiness, hope, stability and faith transmission.' Such an affirmation helps understand the need for respecting the family as a self-governing entity and for taking and providing steps to allow the family to thrive in society. Hence, discussions on Family cannot be theological, dogmatic, moral or academic exercises but should be held from a position of understanding

of what it means to be pastoral - pastoral insertion, pastoral engagement and offering a pastoral response.

An understanding and appreciation that Family is a universal and irreplaceable community rooted in human nature is the basis for all societies at all times. The Family is the primary source of personal identity, self-esteem and support for children, and consequently, it is suited to teaching children integrity, character, morals, responsibility, service and wisdom. As a cradle for life and love for each new generation, the family has the indispensable role of being a beacon of hope for humanity.

In brief, we need to be constantly aware that the Family remains a vital means of preserving and transmitting life and cultural values, because the characters of the Church and of the nation begin in the home. It also needs to be noted that:

- a) Despite the well-documented decline of Marriage and Family, the institution of marriage remains central to all of family life and is the inter-generational transmission that integrates and perpetuates the family.
- b) Empirical data consistently indicate that while many factors may influence child development, growing up within the context of a healthy marriage decreases the risk that children will suffer from emotional or behavioral problems, or be victims of abuse or neglect their studies in school.
- c) The family has suffered from a range of social pressures that weaken faith and family relationships, more so in contemporary society where the institution of Marriage is under attack and its utility being questioned in many countries.
- d) In the previous generation, the pressures on family seem to have come from political forces and cultural changes from the West. In the 1980s, cultural voices emerged that have affected the family in every way. Therefore, keeping updated with social trends is important to understand the value of marriage and family life.
- e) The consequences on the health and wellbeing of children, Church and community cannot be underestimated or understated, and data strongly suggest that families around the world need strengthening now, more than ever.
- f) By intruding on the prerogatives of the family or ignoring the decline of the family, thereby not investing in the preparation of

persons currently working with families or in future family life professionals, leading to a lack of trained personnel to work with families in the Church and the State, the very foundation of the Church is weakened.

- g) When family or civil society is weak, citizens and communities feel less connected to others and subject to the whims of authorities and conflicted leaders - a world beyond their control.
- h) The Church and State must aim to strengthen families, for such strength means a higher level of wellbeing for present and future generations.
- i) All families that need assistance, such as single parents, divorced parents, co-habiting parents etc., should be given the assistance they require for fulfilling their responsibilities.
- j) No government or Church programme can replace the two-parent family; the love of father and mother are irreplaceable for children, and therefore the Church and State must leave no stone unturned in supporting marriage and family programs.

Some Barriers to Ministering to Families:

I have noted that there is poor effort to be updated about the very Teachings of the Church, and new developments of human and behavioral sciences. This is essential for effective ministry to families. Such updating is important to keep us abreast of contemporary changes, understanding how it impacts and affects future generations. The newer sciences are Pastoral Counseling, Family Systems and Family Lifecycle Theories, focusing on both the human and religious development of a person from birth to old age, including on their relationship with God. Lack of effort in this regard leads to:

- a) Failure to transmit a sense of shared ministry: The vision may be present, but if it is not transmitted, then the ministry loses its dynamism.
- b) Failure to share the vision of ministry as a faith experience: Unless the family is healthy, it is not free to renew the parish and society, and until parishes address their hunger for spirituality, the vision of the ministry remains stagnant and eventually fades, and the mere performance of rituals takes over.
- c) Lack of understanding of the changing sociology of the family: The 'good' catholic family was once characterized by saying

prayers. Since this is not reflected in most members of the present generation, the type of services we need to offer must also change appropriately. Church members must realize that until and unless we 'listen' to families and really hear what they tell us, we will never know the real needs of the family and be able to work towards helping them.

- d) Failure to promote a vision of interrelatedness of Catechesis and family life and a failure to convince parents that their primary task is fostering faith: The Church must come to realize that marriage preparation, parenting, communication, sexuality education, marriage enrichment and harmonious family life are catechetical in nature, as catechisms, doctrines, moral teachings and classroom teachings, and therefore the primary duty of parents is faith formation.
- e) A need for purposive and realistic marriage preparation to be regularly and meaningfully updated: Adequate time and trained and competent persons who can relate to both society and the teachings of the Church are necessary. An inbuilt follow-up system should be put in place if required.
- f) Reluctance to accept the myriad needs in today's family as areas of authentic ministry: We need to define pastoral care. Counseling is pastoral. House visits are not the same as pastoral care or counseling of the family. The vision of pastoral ministry must be broadened and deepened.
- g) Failure to address uncomfortable issues: Subjects such as birth regulation and contraception, abortion, homosexuality, cohabitation etc., are often avoided because of discomfort and possible controversy. If family ministry is to succeed, it must address the uncomfortable and controversial issues as well as the comfortable ones, with informed advice and with pastoral concern.
- h) Failure to generate a family-to-family style ministry service: Families must learn to become more compassionate, less materialistic, more ministering, and to have more meaningful lifestyles. The minister needs to be knowledgeable. The need to minister calls for caring, supportive ministers who can be of service to their own and other families.
- i) Absence of curricular focus on 'Pastoral Care of Families' in seminaries and houses of formation of nuns: They need to be

updated on current data on natural family planning methods as well as data on medical complications of contraceptives.

- j) Limiting of pastoral care of the family to Theology and Cannon Law: It needs to be integrated as part of or as a completely independent stream of learning.
- k) Failure of Church institutions to allocate any or adequate funds for working with families and/or to incorporate this ministry in their existing institutions/apostolates, and identify it as a completely 'standalone' ministry: In reality it should be the prime ministry from which others flow.

These barriers need to be addressed if the Church is serious and truly engage in family ministry. We need to know the teachings, be educated enough on them and able to interpret their meaning and why they are important for the life of the Church. Teachings of the Church cannot be merely 'applied' or 'taught' or 'told.' They must be embedded so as to influence the trends of society and facilitate human recovery. Thereby, Marriage and Family will stand to gain.

Part III - Practical Implementation of the Teachings of the Church

In contemporary times we talk of relational power - the desire and ability to influence and be influenced. All real power comes from relationships - when relationships change, we are often challenged to give up, take sides or take control.

If we give up the urge to assume power, we can really enter into a relationship with whoever we engage - poor or rich, Christian or non-Christian. In brief, we are empowered to engage with the larger Human Community without minimizing or losing our Catholic identity. We carry with us the Teachings and their influence, and interpret it to humanity without diluting or changing it, always keeping true to the universal message of the importance of stable marriage and family life for future generations, the health and wellbeing of these institutions and the peaceful co-existence of humanity. In this context, the three ways of family ministry are:

- a) *Prophetic*: Taking timely action on contemporary trends and problems.
- b) *Direct*: Offering services to the poor, such as homes for women affected by domestic violence etc., along with efforts to reduce domestic violence etc.

- c) *Developmental*: Developing communities and a family-to-family ministry and thus nurturing the Church and society.

I add a fourth: *Ministry of Empowerment*: This form calls for moving beyond our institutions into the larger human community. This form of Ministry in reality combines all the three ways listed earlier. It is pastoral by content and nature, prophetic in action, offering relief in cases of pain and want, and works towards building the Body of Christ/the Church/Kingdom of God.

This is exemplified in the work of the Service and Research Institute on Family and Children (SERFAC), which serves as a bridge, bringing the Teachings of the Church to social and religious groups and institutions, Governments and the United Nations. SERFAC has been doing this ever since it came into being in 1976, first as SOFID in Tiruchirapalli and later, in 1986, as SERFAC in Chennai. SERFAC has worked relentlessly to spread this message through consultations, workshops, seminars, training programs, and international and global conferences, along with projects in rural areas, research and publications.

Being aware of the tentacles of globalization which began to have worldwide impact in the early 1980s, and being intuitive to trends in society and their consequences, I strongly felt that localized mini projects were inadequate to meet the onslaughts of societal changes and globalization. I felt the need for a broad-based global approach alongside local approaches, as this would provide opportunities to talk on behalf of larger communities, especially the voiceless and the poor. Hence, all efforts of SERFAC have been interdisciplinary, inclusive, multi-pronged and offer a wide range of participation, involving policy makers at different levels, religious leaders, including the Vatican, officials of the United Nations and Government leadership including representatives of the Government of India. SERFAC's aim is to bring to the surface the many ills that affect marriage and family. The organization does not compromise on any of life's issues and keeps its vision alive, its services relevant and updated while ministering to various communities and religious beliefs, upholding the value of human life, dignity of marriage and stability of family life, all of which are integral to the Teachings of the Church despite the crisis in the contemporary and challenging world order.