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**Report of the XVI Colloquium of Bishops and  
Theologians in India**

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**CHALLENGES TO FAMILY LIFE: A  
THEOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL  
ANALYSIS**

**Introduction:** The XVI Colloquium of the Bishops and Theologians in India held at the NBCLC, Bangalore, from July 7-10, 2014, focussed on the theme: *Challenges to Family Life: A Theological and Pastoral Analysis*. The choice of this specific theme was in view of the forthcoming Extraordinary Synod on the Family convened by Pope Francis to be held in Rome in October 2014. The main purpose of this Colloquium was to deepen awareness of the many complex issues connected with marriage and family life, today, as well as to share views, discuss controversial issues and reexamine the Church's teachings on marriage and family life in the light of God's Word and Catholic Tradition. All the issues were discussed in the setting of the current context of the Indian Church, Universal Church and the World at large.

**Current Indian Context:** Today, families worldwide face innumerable challenges that make it extremely difficult to live authentic and vibrant Christian lives. The global socio-eco-religious-political scene is undergoing sweeping changes that shake the faith foundations of Christian communities and affect their Christian commitment. The present crises in family life are due to an interplay of diverse, interrelated factors, namely, change in familial-societal relationships due to unprecedented economic booms, scientific innovations and the Info Tech revolution that has engendered an alarming individualism, greed, consumerism, manipulation of the human person, devaluation of any permanent commitment and so

on. The Universal Church and local Indian churches—the Body of Christ in history—recognize with growing concern that its members are being seduced and swamped with the enticements of Mammon: new forms of idolatry, selfishness, aggressive claiming for rights and comforts while conveniently forgetting one's roles, duties and responsibilities to Church and Society, at large. Self-emptying love, selfless service, compassion, Christ-like sacrifice, genuine relationships and so on sometimes seem to be forgotten values in a market-driven milieu.

As consequence of the unprecedented—and often unchristian changes—in the world scenario, the following threats seem to challenge the Christian conception of marriage and family life worldwide and in India, as well: live-in relationships, trial marriages, cohabitation, casual sex, same sex marriage, premarital and extramarital sex, dowry, abortion, use of artificial methods of contraception, divorce and remarriage, surrogate motherhood, single parenthood, interreligious marriages, paedophilia, child molestation, domestic violence, rape within marriage, wife battering, incest, various addictions and so on. There is a temptation to brush aside such dangers as being 'not-Indian' or as 'problems of the West'. However, it was noted that many of these evils within marriage and family life go unreported in traditional societies like ours in India that put a premium on status, family honour, family name, etc. While it was noted that there are many negative influences that threaten to destroy families, there are many positive resources and strengths in the Indian systems and structures of marriage and family life. Here, marriage is still considered sacred and the family—often the joint family—stands as firm anchor to marital and familial values ordained by God and treasured by Church.

Keeping the aforementioned global and local contexts—with their positive resources and negative influences—as the backdrop of discussions and deliberations, the Colloquium focussed its attention on the issues that affect marriage and family life in India from biblical-theological, moral-ethical and psycho-spiritual perspectives so as to suggest a few guidelines for further catechetical and pastoral response. What follows are brief points that were highlighted in the presentation of viewpoints and the subsequent discussions and responses.

**Biblical-Theological Foundations of Marriage and Family:** Central to any Christian conception of marriage and family is Covenant. The God of Love creates humankind—man and woman—in God's

“image and likeness” (Gen 1:26-27) and binds the man-and-woman as partners in covenantal love. The two Biblical narratives of Creation (Genesis chs. 1 & 2) stress gender differentiation based on love, equality, respect, sharing, complementarity and companionship. With creation comes the call to holiness: “For you shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:6). Interestingly, the Hebrew word for marriage (*kiddushin*) means ‘holiness or sanctification’. To marry is to embark upon a life of holiness with the assurance of God’s presence abiding by the divine decree: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen 2:24). These Biblical passages establish the fact that marriage was instituted by God at the very beginning: one man is united to one woman in a sacred bond of matrimony, and the two form one new family. “Become one flesh” not only refers to the establishment of one new family but also to the husband and wife’s sexual union leading to the birth of children and perpetuation of the human race. Clearly, we see that marriage and family are part and parcel of God’s primal plans for humankind.

By reiterating that marriage is a divine—not merely human—institution, we assert that human beings are not free to renegotiate or redefine marriage and the family in any way they choose but they are called to preserve and respect what has been divinely instituted (Mt 19:6). For this reason, marriage can never be just a social contract or a legal/juridical arrangement; it is a divinely instituted Covenant. This Covenant is entered into by the husband and the wife before God as Witness. Marriage therefore involves three persons: husband-wife-God. In the image and likeness of the Holy, Triune God, marriage can be viewed as a circle or triangle with God at the top; the closer each partner moves towards God, the closer they move towards each other in selfless, life-promoting love.

Coupled with the central motif of Covenant, the First Testament contains evocative nuptial imagery. For instance, the Israelite nation is Yahweh’s bride and Yahweh is Israel’s Husband (Jer 3:1, 14). Likewise, the Sinaitic covenant is a marital bond between God and Israel. Finally, the new covenant that Yahweh will establish between God and Israel is also like a marital covenant (Jer 31:31-33). Notably, even though Israel often proves to be an unfaithful wife, and even a harlot, God remains ever faithful and true to her in God’s relationship as Husband (Hos 2:2,7,16,19-20). A number of Mosaic laws were intended to safeguard the integrity of family life. Some of these include the Levirate law (Deut 25:5-10), the inheritance law (Deut

21:15-17), the law regarding inheritance to daughters (Num 27:8-9), the regulations for the Sabbatical and Jubilee years (Ex 21:2-6; Lev 25; Deut 15:1-12, etc.).

In the Second Testament, the 'New Covenant' which Jesus makes—with the total giving of his body-and-blood—is one of total fidelity and self-emptying love. Jesus denounces adultery, upholds the dignity and indissolubility of marriage and reiterates the Genesis mandate as being ordained by God. The marital imagery is once again seen in the relationship of Christ with His Bride, the Church. We see the eschatological meaning of the family in association with the relationship between the church and the family. The references to the household (e.g., Eph 2:19; Gal 6:10) testify to its importance in the growth and stability of early Christian communities. Moreover, heavenly bliss is frequently compared to the nuptial banquet of the Lamb that is slaughtered (Rev 19:7; 21:9; 22:17). Paul presents Christian life with nuptial images: the believers here on earth are betrothed to Christ to present them as a pure bride at the Parousia (2 Cor 11:2-3). In sum, the nuptial covenant between Christ and the Church is celebrated in every sacrament of marriage (Eph 5:22-33). Christ the Bridegroom has gained the Church by paying an unbeatable price (*mohar*) for his Bride. This price is his own blood and life (1 Cor 6:20; 7:21; 1 Pet 1:18-19; Heb 10:10, 14).

On the basis of Scripture, we can summarily say that God's plan for the marriage covenant involves at least five vital principles: (1) Marriage is intended to be *permanent* since it was established by God (Mt 19:6; Mk 10:9); (2) Marriage is not merely a human agreement between two consenting individuals but it is a relationship before and under the power of God (Gen 2:22); therefore it is *sacred*; (3) Marriage is the most *intimate* of all human relationships uniting a man and a woman in a "one-flesh" union (Gen 2:23-25); (4) Marriage is a relationship of free self-giving of one human being to another (Eph 5:25-30); the *mutuality of marriage* is expressed by the partners by being concerned about the wellbeing of each other and being committed to each other in steadfast love and devotion; (5) Marriage is *exclusive* as well (Gen 2:22-25; 1 Cor 7: 2-5), meaning, no other human relationship must interfere with the marriage commitment between husband and wife.

**Recent Church Documents:** The Church has drawn up many documents to more fully instruct the faithful in family life. The documents of Vatican Council II and the apostolic exhortations of various popes help us to more deeply understand the roles of family

members and the responsibilities of family life.<sup>1</sup> In creating humans, as men and women, with the gracious gift of the 'image and likeness of God', the vocation of humanity and the role of family in which they live have been made clear. The fact that human family of men and women is installed with the capacity and the responsibility of love and communion among themselves and with God are innate vocation for the whole humanity (cf. GS 12; FC 11). It is this vocation that has been made clear in the biblical history in the calling of Abraham and the promise given to him, "by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (Gen 12:3). The same promise was repeated to Jacob when he was anointed as the father of the people of Israel, "by you and by your descendants shall all the families of the earth bless themselves" (Gen 28:14). From the early Church onwards family has been accepted as "domestic church" (cf. CCC, 1655).

Healthy mutuality among humans is the source of personal and social fulfillment and that is the rule of life in a basic anthropological institution of the family: "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). Nuptial love between man and woman in the family has evolved as 'a great mystery' by which the divine and human engagement which is concretely made visible as the love of Christ and the Church, the people of God (Eph 5:31-32).

Marital relationship is a covenant of conjugal love freely and consciously chosen. This covenantal relationship has to be nurtured and made mature in order to attain the perfection of the intimate community of life and love willed by God himself (GS, 48). There is the need of individual, social, religious and political norms and guidelines—which are healthy and progressive from time to time—for nurturing the covenantal conjugal love and thus attain the goals of marriage. Church, the New People of Israel, has the duty to accompany and maintain the 'domestic church' to attain her goals in view of transforming the whole humanity as a single family. In that process the promises given to Abraham, Jacob and others of the history of salvation would become a reality. In this respect the mystery of the 'already and not yet of the Kingdom of God' is active in the family life. In that covenantal family life through the 'already' factors the 'not yet' realities have to be attained.

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<sup>1</sup>The following abbreviations will be used for Church documents: GS for *Gaudium et Spes* of VC II; FC for *Familiaris Consortio* of St John Paul II; LF for *Lumen Fidei* and EG for *Evangelii Gaudium* of Pope Francis; CCC for 'Catechism of the Catholic Church'

Pope Francis has been persistently insisting on the importance of faithful and loving marital and familial life: “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). Conjugal love is installed by God and thus it is trustworthy and worth embracing. By such trust and love humans share in God’s faithfulness which is stronger and can address all human weaknesses (cf. LF, 53). “Family is the fundamental cell in society, where we learn to live with others despite our differences and to belong to one another; it is also the place where parents pass on the faith to their children” (EG, 66). As a servant, the Church has to promote marriage and family life by selflessly serving at all stages and states of married couples, providing hope and strength with the loving, merciful heart of Jesus Christ.

**Moral-Ethical Perspectives:** In response to the presentations, many pressing moral and pastoral issues were raised. Due to the limited time, they were not discussed in depth. Among the issues that emerged, the following are the more significant ones: (a) The issue of “openness to life”. The Church’s teaching on marriage and family life is not satisfactorily communicated to the faithful. Consequently, couples make up their own minds—often ill-informed—on these matters. (b) It is vital to stress the concept of justice in marriage and familial relationships because often the dignity of the spouses is not respected and their human rights are violated, e.g., cases of domestic abuse and violence especially in a predominantly patriarchal culture. (c) The easy access to pornography is destructive of marital relationships and has a corrupting influence on the children. (d) There is a need to address the growing need for the pastoral care of “disparity of cult” marriages. (e) Issues of human trafficking, prostitution and other gender related matters are not just women’s issues but affect men and families as well. (f) Postmodernism calls into question the traditional values of marriage and the family. Young people especially are drawn to adopt a relativist attitude. (g) There is urgent need to educate the faithful regarding the Gospel of the family and help them to form their consciences so that they may make more enlightened decisions. (h) There is a need to promote a familial spirituality and to create a comprehensive programme for married couples so that they may be equipped to hand on the faith to the next generation. (i) There is a struggle to respond compassionately to couples in canonically irregular unions so that they do not feel excluded from God’s offer of mercy. (j) In difficult pastoral situations, the challenge will always be to combine the

proclamation of the truth of the Gospel with pastoral compassion for those who fail to live up to the ideal.

**Some Guidelines for Future Planning and Action:** Although it was not the aim of the Colloquium to draw up a long list of guidelines and programmes to strengthen the role of family life, a few suggestions came up in this sphere:

1. There is need for greater empowerment of women, in particular, so as to ensure that there is respect, equality and companionship among spouses. There is also need for creating gender sensitivity among men.

2. To respond to current challenges, the Church must sympathetically understand the situation in concrete (not only giving the theoretical and abstract answers).

3. Real faith formation is the need of the hour. Couples must be helped to encounter the third partner in their married life: God in Jesus Christ.

4. The covenantal aspect of marriage needs to be emphasized so that the weakness of one partner becomes an opportunity for the other partner to complement rather than see it as a ground for break up of the relationship.

5. Priests today need to be sensitive to the spirituality of the family rather than simply impart outmoded spirituality irrelevant to present times and current problems.

6. Seminary formation must be geared to accompany the families in living out their family spirituality. For this, the seminary curriculum/syllabus must give importance to the ministry of accompanying the families throughout their faith journey and not only at the time of marriage.

7. The faith formation of families should not be confined only to marriage preparation courses given just before the marriage. But there should be an ongoing formation at every stage of family-life.

8. Indigenous, Indian family spirituality should be fostered in terms of encouraging families to have their own patron saints, pray the family rosary, celebrate local family feasts with local devotions, novenas, pilgrimages, etc.

9. Family rituals, daily spiritual disciplines/prayers and family retreats need to be organized.

10. Parents should take a keen interest in giving proper orientation to sex education for their children. For this, parents themselves need awareness, self confidence and education.