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**THE VOCATION, MISSION AND  
SPIRITUALITY OF THE CHRISTIAN  
FAMILY IN THE LIGHT OF THE CHURCH  
FAMILY OF GOD ECCLESIOLOGY**

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**Abstract**

The human family, basic cell of the society, composed of father, mother and children, is universally founded on marriage whose laws and customs vary. Through sacramental bond such family becomes the Domestic Church, the miniature church in the house. Though, this paper focuses on the vocation and mission of the nuclear family, the complex network of relationship and solidarity that exists among families across generations cannot be excluded. The paper underlines and draws attention to human deficiencies and aberrations within the family in order to appreciate the Christian understanding of marriage and family institutions according to the mind of the Creator. It treats the nature and the vocation of Christian family; its foundation on the Trinity and spells out some aspects of its mission and spirituality. Briefly, it is a theological reflection on the revealed knowledge about Marriage and family life in the light of the theology of the Church Family of God.

**Keywords:** Christian Family, Domestic Church, *Ecclesia domestica*, *familia Dei*, Miniature Church, *theologia crucis*, Trinitarian Family

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## 1. The Christian Family: Its Nature and Vocation in the Light of Family of God Ecclesiology

Today the family changes,<sup>1</sup> it transforms and is being transformed; it experiences some tensions internally and externally; it is being deformed and attacked by some philosophical ideologies (GS, 47). There are many new and emerging questions, provocations which are very challenging to the Christian family and to the church at large. In the face of all these challenges, Christian families and for the matter all Christian couples are called upon to present to the world a true and unique family model, making sense of their union within the context of their common faith as a divine plan of God. That is, to make not only religious but more importantly Christian meaning of their marriage and family life.

In this perspective the Second Vatican Council, expressing a renewed esteem for the family, declared:

Christians, making full use of the times in which we live and carefully distinguishing the everlasting from the changeable should actively strive to promote the values of marriage and the family; it can be done by the witness of their own lives and by consecrated action along with all men of good will; in this way they will overcome obstacles and make provision for the requirements and the advantage of family life arising at the present day (GS, 52).

Considering the character of the human vocation in the plan of God, the same Council underlines again that God has willed that all men constitute one human family (GS, 6), which will find fulfilment in *the family of the sons of God* (GS, 6). It is important to note here that every element of the human family has in itself and in the best traditions some elements of the spiritual treasure given by God to humanity, even though many ignore its origin (GS, 6). In fact, in taking on the human nature, or better through the mystery of incarnation, the son of God, Jesus Christ, united himself by a supernatural solidarity to the whole humanity and made of it *one family*.<sup>2</sup> The term family is not strictly linked to a place or time or even to a blood relationship, as it is the case in some societies in Africa. Whatever be its internal structure, the family is acknowledged universally as basic social unity that is not only fundamental but equally foundational bedrock of society.

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<sup>1</sup>Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 6. (hereafter, GS).

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 8. (Hereafter AA).

However, the Christian family is in a strict sense, a human family founded on the sacrament of marriage and baptism, based on Christian faith. Since the family in the human sense is the first cell of every society, the Christian family is “the first cell of the small Christian community which finds its spiritual vitality and model from the holy family of Nazareth. Such a Christian family is regarded as a “domestic church”<sup>3</sup> due to its vital and intrinsic link with *the Church as Family of God*. As “the sanctuary of the Church at home,”<sup>4</sup> by its unity and fidelity, the Christian family is equally and most importantly a sign of the living presence of the Saviour and of the nature of the Church in the world.

In this perspective, the Second Vatican Council can affirm that, the Christian family springs from marriage, which is an image and a sharing in the partnership of love between Christ and the Church; it shows forth to all men, Christ’s living presence in the world and the authentic nature of the Church by the love and generous fruitfulness of the spouses, by their unity and fidelity, and by the loving way in which all members of the family cooperate with each other (GS, 48).

Expanding the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the vocation and mission of the Christian family, Pope Paul VI, in 1976, during a general audience employed the title “domestic church” to designate the Christian family:

It is another domestic church. It is a wonderful unity bearing the reflection of the one that exists between Christ and the Church. The Christian family represents and constitutes a small Church, an element of the building of the unique and universal Church which is the entire mystical body of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

On his part, Pope John Paul II goes further to simply and purely assimilate the *ecclesia domestica* with the Christian family. He does not hesitate to affirm that the Christian family can and must proclaim itself “domestic church” because it is a specific revelation and realization of the ecclesial communion.<sup>6</sup> During the Synod of Bishops in 1980 on the family, again, the same Pope, in his homily, highlighted that “the small Church,” the domestic Church, manifests the family living in the spirit of the commandment of

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<sup>3</sup>Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 11.

<sup>4</sup>AA, 11: tamquam domesticum sanctuarium Ecclesiae – as a sanctuary of the Church at home.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. *Documentation Catholique*, # 1704 (1976) 754-755.

<sup>6</sup>John Paul II, *Lettre aux familles*, Paris Éditions de l’Emmanuel, 1994, nn. 2 et 3, 34-37.

love: its inward truth, its daily effort, its spiritual beauty and its strength.”<sup>7</sup> He affirms explicitly in the homily that, “The Church feels itself today particularly not only as people of God but also a true divine family.”<sup>8</sup>

However and more concretely, the expression “*ecclesia domestica*” does not connote the same reality as the Church *familia Dei* even though they express some salient points of convergence for critical mutual understanding and appreciation of each other. Whilst *familia Dei* invites Christians to live in the Church as in a family, “*ecclesia domestica*” invites the married Christians to live in their homes as a Church. Effectively, the family consecrated by grace and living effectively in matrimonial love, is inhabited by Christ and his Spirit. It is a *small church*, a *miniature church*, a *church of the house*. It is, at the same time the *locus* and the sign of the presence of God-Love. We can confirm from Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians 5:32-34 that the family is the living image of the Church, Spouse of Christ. The expression *ecclesia domestica* designates neither the gathering of Christians nor the community of believers but the family as a subject and object of evangelization, and in which as if the entire Church, the family of God is on pilgrimage through history.

God calls man and woman to live not only as subsisting persons, as free and autonomous subjects but to a subsisting relationship. There resides the whole difficulty of the living together and of the matrimonial life. It is also an ideal relationship that the spouses set for themselves. It is in this type of relationship that are expressed their differences, their equality, their fidelity and their intimacy. It is far beyond the simple fact of complementarity. Man and woman are by nature image of God, “*imago Dei*.” The family is called to be image of the Trinitarian family, when the couple avail themselves to the Spirit of God. Such an understanding is of great fecundity for the ecclesial mystery of the Church family of God. It emphasizes the fact that the faith of the Christian is not only a subjective affirmation, a private relationship between God and a man or a woman. It is the commitment of a human being living in the state of a son or a daughter in the unique Son, Christ Jesus and confessing the faith within a community, a family: the Church.

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<sup>7</sup>John Paul II, “La voie de l’homme vers l’humanité est uniquement à travers la famille,” in *Synode des Evêques de 1980: La famille*, Paris: Cerf, 1980, 190.

<sup>8</sup>John Paul II, “La voie de l’homme vers l’humanité est uniquement à travers la famille,” 187.

Theologically, the family is in the plan of God as well as what it must become in the process of divinisation of humanity. The subsisting relations of communion and of love within the triune God, found in the divine processions are all familial relations. The family is thus in God. To say that there are three persons in him is to perceive the divinity as a family. It is from God that all Christian families are called together to constitute His family, the Church, through the reception of the grace of sanctification and vivification. It is only understandable and possible to find this fullness of the marital vocation in the Holy Spirit. The constitutive act of marriage is reciprocal self-giving, making a gift of one's own body (which in biblical language means of one's whole self) to the spouse. In being the sacrament of the gift, marriage is, by its nature, a sacrament that is open to the action of the Holy Spirit, who is the Gift par excellence, or better, the reciprocal self-giving of the Father and the Son. It is the sanctifying presence of the Spirit that makes marriage not only a celebrated sacrament, but a lived sacrament. The secret to getting access to these splendours of Christian love is to give Christ space within the life of the couple. The Spirit of Christ that makes all things new is Love which is a function between man, woman and God.

Consequently, we can appreciate the indissolubility of marriage as a gift to husband and wife and not as a yoke (Mt 19:6-9). The *Instrumentum Laboris* of the 2015 synod of Bishops on *The Vocation and Mission of the Family* clearly stipulates that,

The testimony of couples who fully live a Christian marriage highlights the value of the indissoluble bond of marriage and demonstrates always new ways of witnessing to marital fidelity. Indissolubility represents a personal response to the profound desire for mutual and enduring love: a "never-ending" love which becomes a choice and a gift of one's self, a gift made by each spouse to the other, sealing the couple's relation to God himself and all that God entrusts to them.<sup>9</sup>

Such a mutual self-giving in the sacrament of marriage is grounded in the grace of Baptism, which establishes the foundational covenant of every person with Christ in the Church. Married couples are then seen as the "heart of the entire family"<sup>10</sup> and consequently the family becomes a place of personal and gratuitous relations.<sup>11</sup> The prophet

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<sup>9</sup>Synod of Bishops, XIV Ordinary General Assembly, *The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and the Contemporary World, Instrumentum Laboris*, Vatican City, 2015, 42.

<sup>10</sup>*Instrumentum Laboris*, 54.

<sup>11</sup>*Instrumentum Laboris*, 55.

Malachi admonished his people against any rupture of marriage bond as he reprimands: "The Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant, has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his... So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth" (Mal 2:14-15). The indissolubility of marriage, confirms also the apostle Paul, is part of divine gift to couples: "To the married I give this ruling, and this is not mine but the Lord's: a wife must not be separated from her husband or if she has already left him, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband and a husband must not divorce his wife" (1 Cor 7:10-11).

## **2. Trinity, Prototype of Family**

From a dogmatic perspective, the very first family, prototype and source of every family, is the family of the three divine persons. There exists in this Trinitarian family a perfect unity between the Father and the Son in the same Spirit: "Everything the Father has is mine" (Jn 16:15; 17:10), declares Jesus Christ. In the same way, Christ loves the Father with an unconditional love. The love of the Father is the law of his teaching and of his mission as well as his sacrifice. This intimacy of life is expressed in John in the formulas as mutual immanence: "The Father is in me as I am in the Father" (Jn 10:38; See also Jn 10:30: "I and the Father are one"). The Spirit is the effusion of the common and mutual love between the Father and the Son.

Through Christ therefore, God has willed to introduce man and woman into this Trinitarian family of love. He has willed that his children scattered, torn and divided by hatred and iniquity, be gathered and united among themselves in love, as the Trinitarian family: "May they be one as we are one" (Jn 17:11). In effect, the criterion of unity among men and women is still the same love by which the Father gives to his Son all that he possesses and, in the same way, the Son submits all this will to the Father. The passage from humanity, from the state of dispersion and of hatred to the gathering and to the unity of love, is consecutive to the death of Jesus. Christ died in order to gather together in the unity of one family, the scattered children of God (Jn 11:52).

To the Church-family of God, Christ has given love, the aspect of unity and of expansion, the Spirit who unites the Father and the Son in a life of intimacy. We can, therefore, understand that the family of God, the Church, animated by such a principle, transcends the limits

of time and space as well as every human particularism. Here, it is not about a superficial and non-discernible unity but about the unity in diversity. Belonging to the family of God, the Church, produces a deep integration of the personalities. It reaches the profundity of the human conscience and establishes solidarity in creating social and ecclesial links; it gives a meaning to the communion of all the members.

The principle of unity in the family of God, on which is founded the witness of all the faithful and in particular the Christian family, is Christ and his Spirit. The Church thus transcends all biological community and defeats all the strong bonds of the human family, of the clan and of the nation, of the cultural and political community. It is built as the family of the children of God in and by Christ, a family whereby all the members are children of the same Father. This Church-family penetrates therefore all the human structures without allowing itself to be absorbed by them.

It is from such a perspective that we can see the Christian family which springs from marriage and baptism as a covenant, manifesting to all men the Saviour's living presence in the world through covenantal matrimony. God, in order to show the profundity of his love by visible deeds made covenants which are true landmarks in the history of salvation. Frequently, in the Old Testament, the God-people relationship is to be understood by way of matrimonial comparison.<sup>12</sup> Conjugal life of Christian couples enables a better understanding of God's love for his people and, in turn, the great Covenant illuminates and gives a profound new meaning to marriage and family life through the full light from Christ-Church Relationship.

The communion of baptized couples is a project undertaken in common. The consent, by which one accepts the other, is the seal by which they say Yes to God's choice for their vocation. Knowing that Christ is the Yes to the Father, the consent of the spouses is also a definite Yes, given to God in Christ. Therefore the Christian marriage is, by nature and grace, indissoluble and irrevocable. God is the principal actor in the sacramental life of the Church as well as in Christian marriage and no man can change God's intentions.

This may be very hard for many, in view of so many current ideologies against this divine project for humanity, and so many disputed marriages. Indeed! The human side is fragile, but the

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<sup>12</sup>Cf, Hos 2:20-25; Jer 2:2; 3:1-13; Is 54:4-8, etc. This new covenant is also illumined by nuptial comparison (cf. Mt 9:15; Jn 3:29-30; Mt 22:2-14; Rev 19:7-9; Eph 5:22-23).

Christian family cannot disown its vocation and fidelity as a domestic church.

In the Christian life, the reception of Baptism brings the believer into the Church through the domestic church, namely, the family; thus beginning “a dynamic process [which] develops, one which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God,”<sup>13</sup> in an ongoing conversion to a love that saves us from sin and gives us fullness of life.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. Christian Family and the Church Family of God

The Christian family is like a small Church: it is the Church “inserted in my house.”<sup>15</sup> What are some of the theological implications of the Family of God ecclesiology towards building a solid Christian family? First of all, the matrimonial grace, which is a sacramental grace received through the Church by the Christian couples, is a deepening and penetrating baptismal grace which had already constituted them as members of God’s family. With the sacramental grace of baptism, is established a mysterious real presence of God in each Christian: God lives in the soul of each baptized person and grants a participation in the divine nature; God communicates and shares Himself. And since the Grace of God divinizes, the grace of Christian matrimony confirms this actuality which already exists since baptism, orienting it to be lived in company, as couple, in communion of two lives.

The Christian family, even though is a human and natural institution, it is equally and more importantly a divine institution. God instituted it. In the Christian family the admirable union of God with man is constantly realized as well as the union of men and women among themselves, out of the love of God. In effect, the vocation of the Church Family of God is a call to a definitive and full union with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, in the joy of heaven. The Christian family has this same vocation: it reaches its total realization only when its members can participate in the eternal joy of the beatific vision and love of the Triune God.

The ecclesiology of the Church, family of God, is rich in harmonious diversity of relationship: paternity, maternity, fraternity, sorority, filiation, etc. To it belong men and women of all places, all classes, and of all professions. “The category of fraternity introduces the idea of

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<sup>13</sup>John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 9.

<sup>14</sup>*Instrumentum Laboris*, 39.

<sup>15</sup>Luis Alessio & Hector Munoz, O.P., *Marriage and Family: The Domestic Church*, New York: Society of St Paul, 1982, 31.



unity as a very essential constituent of the Church family of God. It is interesting to note that it is not based on the principle of homogeneity, so much as an integration — at times difficult — of diversity.”<sup>16</sup>

Is this diversity harmful to the unity and internal cohesion of the Church and the Christian Family? The Church does not lose its unity in its diversity, but rather is enriched, for, in it all peoples from different origins and places participate in the one faith and in the one baptism, and all are bound by the same fraternal and filial relationship, having the same father, God.

It is, thus explicitly clear that the Christian family cannot be thought of as withdrawn within itself. It must leave the walls of its house open to all and receive others. Consequently that Christian family will be contributing to the edification of a better world in bond of true fraternity, paternity and maternity which are sublime functions not only in the natural order but importantly in the spiritual.

The impulse which encourages the Christian family to be united is a bearer of life and that enables God to procure children for His family, the Church. Luis and Hector argue rightly that converted into father and mother, the spouses discover with amazement, in the baptismal fonts, that their very child is, from then on, not only a child of God<sup>17</sup> but a brother or a sister in Christ. The reception of divine life in Christ through the Holy Spirit brings about such a transformation which is primarily a personal “rebirth from on high,” becoming sons and daughters of God; likewise they shape human relations in the context of love and of an actual brotherhood, which distinctively finds expression and realization in the sharing of material goods and spiritual values as couples.<sup>18</sup>

The Christian family exceeds the bonds of blood corresponding to father, mother, brothers and sisters, extending itself to all relatives of whatever grade, but in expanding itself, it forms circles each time more ample, in an intent to express the mystery of fraternity of the entire Church. Therefore, what is the most important about a family is not the blood relationship but the fact that it is a community of people sharing their values. The ability to give and receive love is what makes a full, complete human being in the eyes of the

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<sup>16</sup>Sandra Mazzolini, “The Church Family of God: An Ecclesiological Perspective,” in Thomas Knieps-Port Le Roi et al., ed., *The Household of God and the Local Households: Revisiting the Domestic Church*, Leuven, Peeters, 2013, 59.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Luis Alessio & Hector Munoz, *Marriage and Family*, 48.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Sandra Mazzolini, “The Church Family of God,” 57.

Christian. The ability to love is what makes a person capable of eternal life.

The Church is the great fraternity of believers, because it has *prior paternity*. Fraternity has its demand. Brothers and sisters should know that one and the same blood flowing within their arteries has a full symbolism: that is one and the same Spirit which, like the soul of the Christ and like a motor of the “domestic family-Church,” vivifies us, constituting us into one unique Family of God with Christ the first born of multitude of brothers (cf. Acts 11:1; 15:7; 21:17; Rom 1:13).

However, Christian fraternity and filiation, which is the constitutive element in the ecclesiology of the Church Family of God and every relationship in a Christian family, are always conditioned by God’s will and may arise, not from human will but from the Word of God: “Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me” (Mt 10:37).

The family is a domestic church with two vocations: personal and social. Among the tasks that apply to the family are, to guard, reveal and communicate love; to serve life (that is both nurturing children and bringing life to the world); to be open to other families and to pray, ritualize, to serve the broader community. If the sacramental being of the Church is to show and realize the inner union with God and unity of all of humanity, then the unifying love between man and woman in marriage expresses and realizes this sacramentality.<sup>19</sup>

In approaching the Christian family from the theology of family of God perspective, we need to avoid a romanticized description of the family, a description that fails to pay sufficient attention to the imperfect, weak, and sinful character that can exist in a family. If the Church, despite its lofty origins, is not only one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, but also divided, the family is not just a *locus sanctorum*, haven for saints.<sup>20</sup> The sinfulness and imperfections of the family offer an opportunity for the exercise of forgiveness and reconciliation. “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom 5:20). Among the Twelve Apostles in the New Testament there were arguments, tensions, betrayals, laziness, and ignorance, so too in the family. Some families suffer from estrangements, separation or divorce, male chauvinism, sexual abuse, sexual infidelities, etc. Dare

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<sup>19</sup>Sandra Mazzolini, “The Church Family of God,” 107.

<sup>20</sup>Michael A. Fahey, “Fine-Tuning the Notion of ‘Domestic Church,’” in Thomas Knieps-Port Le Roi et al., ed., *The Household of God and the Local Households: Revisiting the Domestic Church*, Leuven, Peeters, 2013, 108.

we reserve the title “domestic church” only for the untainted “holy” family? Not all the biblical couples were trouble-free: consider Hosea and Gomer, David and Bathsheba, etc. When considering the “domestic church” we must apply not only a *theologia gloriae* but also a realistic *theologia crucis* to the family, *familia semper reformanda*.<sup>21</sup>

Whether the household as domestic church is grounded in marriage or baptism, its ecclesial character demands that it engages with the larger society in Christian mission. This theme was first explored in the decree on the Apostolate of the Laity in the consideration of the Christian family: “The mission of being the primary vital cell of the society has been given to the family by God. This mission will be accomplished if the family, by the mutual affection of its members, and by family prayer, presents itself as a domestic sanctuary of the church... (AA, 11).

The Second Vatican Council referred to the Christian family as “a school for richer humanity.” As an ecclesial reality the Christian household exists in mission and moves outward to a critical yet dialogical engagement with modern society. The Christian understanding of marriage and family, from the perspective of ecclesiological metaphor, family of God, is that it is oriented towards fulfilment in Christ in whom we are sons and daughters in the Son, sharing the very life of God. This is the heart of salvation and the core elements of the Church Family of God. The Christian Family is not an end in itself, but the means by which humanity participates in the unity of God. It is when the family is connected to the Church that it can become the Church of home. When it is Christ centred, the family is honoured as a pathway toward union with God. Such union, which accomplished in the person of Christ, must be fulfilled in our persons by the Holy Spirit and in freedom.<sup>22</sup>

In the church of home, each family member is not only brother or sister in Christ, not only neighbour, but importantly, an icon of Christ (Cf. Mt 25:45; Acts 9:4). Love of one’s neighbour is the sign of having acquired the true love of God. The vocation of family life is lived with an attitude of Christ towards the other.

Living as church, family of God at home implies that “in and through the relationship in our homes, the Christian family is caught

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<sup>21</sup>Michael A. Fahey, “Fine-Tuning the Notion of the Domestic Church,” 108.

<sup>22</sup>Sandra Mazzolini, “The Church Family of God,” 149.

up in the divine."<sup>23</sup> To live out our vocation as families is to participate with the divine in our salvation in and through the hundreds of daily interactions we have in the home. In their varied family relationships, the faithful need a Church that based on the sacrament of baptism, acknowledges their individual divine callings, supports them and integrates them structurally and theologically within the self-understanding of the Church family of God.

### **Conclusion**

The family and home communities need a church that recognizes the home as a *locus* of life of faith and recognizes families as places and communities where the Church carries out its fundamental practices of *diakonia*, *liturgia* and *martyria*. The Christian home, like Christian marriage cannot be considered a private affair or an individual matter. It is an ecclesial event. It is the entrance of the couple into the gathered church, to share its life and values, forming all personal and familial life in the direction of the Kingdom of God. We can finally stipulate that the *good functioning* of a Christian family will not come about as a result of the capability of living together, or of the good education of the spouses, but on the condition and recognition that Christ be present, really present in the feelings, thoughts and actions of the home.

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<sup>23</sup>M. Ouellet, *Divine Likeness: Towards a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006, 106.