

FAMILY AS THE FOUNDATION OF FORMATION

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As the family, so the formation. This statement points to the significance of family in the case of ethical formation of persons. For better or worse, family plays an important role in the formation of people and the society. The child begins learning from experience: seeing, listening, tasting, smelling, and touching objects and subjects. In the ambience of family, especially in the initial years of formation, the child begins its formation. Modern research points to the fact that the child begins responding to the stimulus even in the mother's womb. No doubt, the environment has also an important role in shaping one's behaviour. The family ambience shapes the foundational formation of behavioural patterns in human persons.

This does not mean that persons do not learn patterns of behaviour outside the family circle. Otherwise, it amounts to saying that the birth determines the worth of a person. No. It is the free choices one makes that determine the person's future. Attitudes and approaches are developed through the interaction one has in the family and the changing and challenging circumstance of one's experience in the society.

Nevertheless, there is no substitute for family in the foundational formation of a person as far as one's character is concerned. The child

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learns the basics of ethics along with the mother's milk. It is the rapport with the members of the family, starting with the parents, which shapes and reshapes the imagination and motivation of the moral agent, and it is the same experience that inspires people to act in a given situation. The encounter, the experience, and the example a person acquires in the family leave indelible imprints on one's life and actions. Hence, the parents and the members of the family are decisive in the formation of one's ethical horizon. Here lies the wisdom of the ancient adage: "As the parents, so the children." The children share not only the DNA of their parents, but also imbibe the fundamental lessons of character formation.

The meaning of the term *family* is undergoing changes, accommodating all possible ways of life found in the society. The traditional understanding of family which is established through the marriage between woman and man is under attack from different quarters in the contemporary world. According to one author, "Our family, be it immediate, extended, inclusive or whatever title we have established, surround us at all times teaching us life's lessons giving us the tools to make the right decisions or choices and invest in our wellbeing, comfort and love."¹ The term family evokes in us a sense of identity, dignity, and solidarity.

Family is a fundamental building block of society where a bond or relationship between woman and man is entered through marriage in nurturing and fostering the wellbeing of the spouses in a permanent, faithful, and potentially fruitful manner and which caters to the education of the children guaranteeing their flourishing.

Family has traditionally been considered the cradle of virtues and values. The sensorial perception of a child is of great lasting significance. The family serves as the school of visual learning in the initial years in the ethical development of a child. Examples play a greater role than instructions and admonitions in moulding the child's mindset. We are living at a time when great emphasis is being placed on visual learning in education. The principle and primacy of it has been, from time immemorial, operative in the ambience of the family. The family is a nursery, a kindergarten, and a school of visual learning and formation. This does not in any way minimize the importance of the extended environment in moulding one's values

¹<http://www.goodfellow.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123158075> (accessed on 8 May 2013).

and virtues. So, too, in the course of development, the critical and creative questions and reflections undertaken might change the person's vision and consequently his/her actions.

In light of the fundamental concept that the family is the foundation of formation, we shall discuss 1) family as the fountain of ethics; 2) family as the force of ethics; and 3) family as the focus of ethics.

Family as the Fountain of Ethics

Since family is the fundamental building block of society, it is also the fountain of ethics. While ethical imagination, motivation, and action begin at home, their principles and precepts are operative in a community as a whole. Ethical discussions and decisions take place in an environment of people living and interacting together. A code of conduct emerges through dialogue and deliberations, taking into account the reasonability and accountability of a particular act, which does not infringe on the rights and privileges of others. That is, ethics is to support and promote the smooth and efficient management of events and activities of people in a community. The term *dharma*, the Indian equivalent for ethics, literally means 'that which holds together' or 'that which supports' and refers, in practice, to the regulation of *artha* (wealth) and *kama* (sexuality) in order to attain *moksha* (liberation or salvation). It is within the family where ethical precepts and principles regulate the relationship of the members faithfully, freely, and fruitfully. The nuclear family thus becomes the fundamental field of ethical examination and exploration. In this sense, we may say: "As the family, so the society." Whatever is ethically visible, tangible, and credible in a family, will also be found in the society to which it belongs. The societal code of conduct depends on the ethical standard of the family because one mirrors the other. If the society is a macro representation of the ethical standard of a people, the family is the miniature form of it; if the family maintains an ethical standard, the society will reflect it eventually.

Though ethical consciousness is housed in a human person, ethical commitment is realized always in the context of basic human interactions. The bond or relationship governs and guides the code of conduct, which starts with family. Though ethical principles and precepts are abstractions, they depend on real relationships. Hence, there is a better understanding of ethics when we look at the family as the fountain and wellspring of ethics. It is in and through the

family that we carry on the ethical legacy of humanity. While individuals are the agents of ethical discussions, deliberations, and decision making, they exercise all these in the context of community, and the family is the fundamental form of community.

In this next section, taking a lead from the biblical truth of human beings as made in the image of God, who share in the love, life, and light of God, we focus on the family as the foundation of ethics from three fundamental ethical horizons; namely, 1) the ethics of love; 2) the ethics of life; and 3) the ethics of light.

1.1. Ethics of Love

The family is built on love. Woman and man in, for, through love get married and make a family. Love is the foundation of marriage and family. The mutual and unconditional love between husband and wife make a home. This is the pledge they take in the assembly of the faithful. This is the prayer of the community for the couple. The couple are blessed and challenged to show forth the image of God – the image of God’s love – on earth. God’s image in the Sacred Scripture is the image of love; God creates, redeems, and accompanies everybody because of his love. “God so loved this world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16). The *Letter of John* reveals the depth and breadth of this love, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 Jn 4:7-8). The Book of *Genesis* attests great importance to this divine human love, when it recounts, “they shall become one flesh” (Gen 2:24). In fact, woman and man are made one in order to reveal the loving friendship and partnership, permanent accompanying gifting presence, and one flesh union. The decision of Jesus reiterates the original divine design for the husband and wife in his discourse on divorce, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mk 10:9). Love is sacred. The bond of love between wife and husband is sacred and sacramental. Over the years they learn, love, and live the art and craft of love in the context of their family, God’s own creation. The lovers – husband and wife – make their family and their marital family life becomes an epiphany of God’s love in their love for each other and in their love for all that springs from and surrounds their family. Every family is called upon to be a sacrament of God’s abiding and guiding love in the world and

for the world. All things in the family flow from the eternal love of God. This is the reflection of God's love, which is mutual, unconditional, faithful, and eternal. Saint Paul illustrates the love of husband and wife in the imagery of Christ and His Church. In this sense the family manifests the mystery of God's love from creation through new creation.

The children, the fruit of the celebration of the mutual love of their parents, begin to see, listen, touch, taste, and feel the essential and foundational lessons of love. In the ambience of the family everything is relational, personal, and experiential. It is this ethos of love which shapes the ethical horizon of the family. True love – the imaginative sacrificial love of the Lord – supports the members to live their lives meaningfully and joyfully and trains the members in the selfless unconditional faithful sacrificial gift of self to others.

To address the contemporary excessive individualistic and utilitarian trend, the basic lessons of sharing and bearing with the vicissitudes of family life have to be revisited, if we are to counter the objectification of persons and the consequent profiteering business mindset and competitive philosophies of our time. Family, parents, and children should be the concern of our personal and public square discussions and decisions. A return to the spring of love – the values of family – may help restore the lost rhythm and unravelling harmony of our times.

1.2. Ethics of Life

Life emerges in the family. The inseparable and permanent love of the wife and husband leads to the strengthening of their mutual life and gives birth to new life. In the context of family, the couples grow and mature. The unconditional and faithful love for each other helps the couples to build their homes and cultivate an ambience conducive for the ethics of life. Life thrives in the family when and as the husband and wife willingly embrace the path of life, a path that presupposes a process of death. It is the sacrificial love of the wife and husband which projects the culture of life, and thus, they resemble the image of God who is the source, sustainer, and sanctifier of life. Each family is called and blessed to be the image of God on earth, by undertaking the work of God in creating, redeeming and accompanying life. By responsible giving of birth to children and generously supporting and promoting them, the family becomes an epiphany of God. In bringing up the children,

the parents take on numerous burdens and carry their crosses to give them abundant life. The mission of the Good Shepherd – giving life in abundance – is really carried out by the family following the path of the Lord. The family becomes, as it were the missionary of the Lord. This is one of the reasons why the family is called a “domestic church” or “church in miniature form”. As Church is the sacramental sign, so too the family. The family becomes the face and the voice of God, when it is engaged in life-giving, life-saving, life-hallowing ministry in the world. Every family is called to this ministry of God. Unfortunately this is neither recognized nor respected very often. It is the family which makes the love and life of God visible, tangible, and credible.

A world increasingly characterized by a culture of death has an urgent need to recover the dignity of the family, which is the cradle of human life. Unbelievably the agents of life – husband and wife – are often becoming the agents of death. The reluctance of embracing the hardships of family life makes the institution vulnerable and defeats its very purpose. The family alone cannot be blamed for this deplorable condition. The larger society is also responsible for the present plight of families. Many of the policies and projects of state governments are made on the basis of sheer politics, very often in view of political advantage. This jeopardizes the common good of the society, at the root of which lies the common good of the family.

In order to address the increasing culture of death, marked by abortion, euthanasia, wars, and killing, there is the need for reorientation to the ethics of life found and nourished in traditional family life. Life is the fundamental good and it is generated and supported in and through families. All the agencies in the society should ensure that family life is protected, preserved, and promoted. At times some governments spend huge sums in waging war for global power or prestige and ignore the urgent needs of their own citizens, while other nations secure arms and ammunition in view of safeguarding their borders and do not address the basic needs of the people to survive. On the one hand, nations may vigorously protest the violation of human rights but on the other take no notice of the silent and permanent war taking place in their own yards against the voiceless innocent lives of thousands. All our efforts for a better tomorrow will be in vain, if life is not respected and fostered.

1.3. Ethics of Light

A strong family unit is the light of the world and shines as a beacon in a darkened world showing the way of love and life. The parents are the epiphany of God who is light. Their care for each other and their children makes tangible the warmth and nearness of God. Their love enlightens the path of the children. Their life encourages the path of service and sacrifice. As goes the family, so goes humanity.

At one time, parents had a great deal to say in the formation of their children. It seems that today different agencies are replacing their traditional role in the society. In certain cases, the situation is becoming alarmingly dangerous. The parents, who should be in the commanding position, are becoming puppets in the hands of their children who are being brainwashed by different agencies. Yielding to societal pressure is becoming increasingly common in many families. In the past, there was often no freedom for the children to express their ideas or wishes. They were subject to the orders of their parents. Today the parents live in an atmosphere of threat from their children. The light of reason should again prevail in the family. The children should honour and respect their parents and elders. So also the parents should consider and care for the feelings and thoughts of their children.

Besides being the good and inspiring examples in the family, their wisdom and insight will be a lamp for the path of their children. The values of friendship, faithfulness, forgiveness, thankfulness; the sharing of the blessings, bearing the burdens; showing of loving kindness; the learning of the meaning of suffering, of the beauty of company and community; the significance of mutual support and the importance of charity, etc., will flower and bear fruit in a genuine family atmosphere. These are virtues that the children learn in the family, and which will make their life radiant and happy and are the way of dharma and righteousness. In such an atmosphere the children will follow the path of the Lord, who is the light of the world, and eventually they, too, will personalize the challenge of becoming the light of the world.

2. Family as the Force of Ethics

The family is not only the fountain of ethics, but it is also the force of ethics. In the course of time, the family consolidates within itself the emerging values of the place and people. While the family is the epiphany of the ethos of a particular community, it also strengthens

and encourages its members to carry out faithfully the vision and values of the surrounding people. In a certain sense, the family examines and assimilates the values and virtues discovered, debated, and decided upon by the culture. Indeed, it may take time to test them and adopt them into the family circle. But once the family approves these values and adopts them, they are there to stay. Thus the family is the permanent carrier of the perennial and acceptable values to the posterity. Though the process of assimilation of newly discovered values by the family may be slow, it is of great force in the shaping of future generation. This phenomenon generates a certain amount of comfort coupled with caution. Since the family is a great force of ethics, in so far as it moulds the mindset and motivates its members to behave accordingly, any value that finds an inroad into the family can be of great consequence, either positive or negative. This means that if there is no proper procedural discernment prior to the intake of values, it can be devastating in the long run. That is to say, a value that is rooted in the family is not easy to uproot, be it good or evil. Observing the pace with which the contemporary world introduces changes in family values raises serious questions. Taking into account the power and force of the family in inculcating values in the children, extreme care should be taken to ensure that the values in question promote human identity, dignity, and solidarity.

2.1. Basis of Community

As the family, so the society. One mirrors the other. Whatever is in the family will be reflected in the society. So also whatever is in the society will influence the family. The family is the foundational unit of a society. The various families form the society. It is on the solid bedrock of family that a society can be envisaged. This means that the negligence of the family and family values will tell upon the future of the society. On the contrary, if the family and family values are recognized, respected, and responded to, there is a good future for the society.

Seeing the present socio-economic-political scenario of our times, it seems that little attention is being paid to the family: the bond between husband and wife and the rapport of parents with their children. In the name of individual freedom, family values are being sidelined. Individual utilitarian interests are showcased often at the expense of the family values. Recent legislation of some leading democracies are directly in conflict with family values, which is the

basis of community. Such discussions have global repercussions. Knowingly or unknowingly, the family does not occupy the central stage in the political discussions and decision making. Often the leaders forget or conveniently close their eyes to the issues of the family, the very foundation of the nation.

2.1. Bond of Covenant

The family is the force of ethics in so far as it resembles the covenant of God. Indeed, every family is said to be a visible sign of the invisible faithful friendship of God with his people. The love of the husband and wife mirrors the unconditional love of God for humanity. In their mutual commitment and communion, the husband and wife manifest the everlasting loving commitment and communion of God with his people.

Ethics emerges in the context of a community. The covenant imagery is richly endowed with ethical imagination and motivation. Obviously the covenant offers the ethos for the people. The life and activities are to be seen as springing from the covenantal relationships. Whatever one does against the covenantal communion is considered to be evil. And the act of reconciliation means a return to the covenantal communion through sincere commitment. The Lord, the land, and the people constitute the constitutive components of this covenant. The triadic bond is characteristic of the covenant bond. Community is considered to be important in the covenant. While personal relationship is essential in the covenant context, nevertheless, community is the larger and greater reality, and hence, the bond of the covenant is crucial to each person belonging to the community.

The family is built on a covenantal type of bond; it is built upon unconditional faithful and forgiving love, which resembles the covenant of Yahweh. There exists a strong and lasting bond among wife, husband, and children. Evidently the development of this deep rooted relationship takes place through proper care and commitment to the covenant the partners have entered in for ever. Human weakness and vulnerabilities may be roadblocks in their pilgrimage to the full flourishing of their marital covenantal bond. Because of the hardness of the heart of some, the law givers of our times, like Moses, permit people to deviate from the original covenantal commitment. Consequently, mitigation of family values for any or no apparent reason is rampant in our days. As a result the family values are often

eroded and the people are confused. Unless and until the bond of the family covenant is restored in the society, the effort towards the proper formation of children will be futile. In other words, a proper diagnosis of both society's role in the marriage bond and the needs of the couple should be revisited and carefully looked at. Only then could the steps to correct the situation begin.

2.2. Basics of Commitment

The children learn the basics of commitment in the ambience of the family. Often these basics are not taught, but rather, are a caught value. Hence they go deep into the fabric of the formation of the children. It is not only parents, however, who set the scene of learning, but the mutual sharing and bearing with one another of the members within the family add to the appreciation and appropriation of the values of commitment. Surely, this process of assimilation of values is not just limited to the family circle. Anyone in the society can be of great inspiration in imparting the spirit of service and the sense of commitment. Nevertheless, the family members play the most pivotal role in the formation of children, for the family is the environment where commitment is most powerful, for the bond and belongingness of the members of family are deep and strong.

Critiquing the present family scenario where individual interests rank high, the children often miss the natural environment in which to experience emotional and spiritual bonding and belonging. It is unfortunate that the children do not, in many cases, witness the elementary and essential relationships leading to real and lasting commitment. In many families parents are divorced or do not live together, which makes a bad situation worse as far as the formation of the children is concerned. Many times these situations take place in the name of autonomy or development or fulfilment. These may be genuine values in themselves, seen in the larger context of integral and integrating development of persons, many of the fundamental family values, like selfless service and commitment are at stake. Certainly, the absence of these values will have disastrous consequence for the future.

The family begins with the unconditional permanent mutual commitment of the partners. As they grow in their commitment to each other in love, the couples are open to the principle of life. Naturally, the partners are totally committed to the well-being and upbringing of their children, as are the grandparents and the other

members of the family. Along with the welfare of the family, the members work for the common good of the society, which also should set an example for the children growing up in the family. Thus, the children imbibe the basic lessons of commitment from home and society seeing the members involved in various activities. Truly, the children who grow up seeing examples of selfless commitment will be motivated to do the same when circumstances so demand. As you see, so you act.

3. Family as the Focus of Ethics

The family is not only the fount and force of ethics, it is also the focus of ethics. The ethical imagination reaches full circle and culmination with the family, because the fullness of life is in the union and communion of persons, both human and divine union and communion. Eternal life is communion in the life of God. And the symbol of the ultimate communion is marital union and family life. The mystery of the mystical union is also illustrated in terms of marital union, where the identity, dignity, and integrity of persons are recognized, respected, and responded to. In other words, community or family is envisaged as the goal of life. In this sense, the Trinitarian community or the covenantal community or family is the archetype of future reality. As the family, so the future of humanity. The focus of ethics is to help form, reform, and restore the sense and spirit of community or family. We are, knowingly or unknowingly, members of a larger community. It is a matter of consciousness; some people understand it early and others later. We are not islands. We are not in isolation, but in relation. And relations build community. Without community, there is no life. It is in and through community that life takes its form and flourishes, and the family is the nucleus of this community on earth. The structure and character of the family depend on the vision one possesses.

3.1. World as a Family –*vasudaivakundumbakam*

The imagery of the world as a family is very significant. The Indian dream for *vasudhaiva kudumbakam* is typical of this discussion. Though the origin of the couplets are not established beyond doubt, it is found in *Hitopadesha* 1.3.71. *Ayam bandhurayam nēti gaṇanā laghucētasām, udāracaritānām tu vasudhaiva kuṣumbakam* ("This is my own and that a stranger" — is the calculation of the narrow-minded; For the

magnanimous-hearts however, the entire earth is but a family).² It is a great ideal that the sages of India have set before us to live in harmony. This is a stage going beyond the boundaries and owning all things in the world as related to oneself. There is no discrimination of any kind. All belonging to me; Me belonging to all. All for one, One for all. The verse is emphatic on all, including all on the earth, "The entire earth is but one family." It is not mere human beings. Instead, everyone is related to everything and vice versa. This is the key to harmony. Everything is related to me; I am related to everything. Though distinction is maintained, there is no real separation. In fact, all exist as long as they are in relation. The family is the realization of this kind of blood relation, which is so deep and inseparable.

The end of ethics is to support and promote the life of the family on earth, the essence of which is being-in-relationship-with-everybody (meaning all things that have a body, animate or inanimate). Ethics, hence, is to lead people to a world of mysticism, where one sees everybody in the One and the One in everybody. When all come to the realization of being-in-bond-with-everyone else, there is the dawn of family. This is the challenge of being mystics. Ethics, therefore, focuses on the inherent family bond in the world and supports people to live as members of a single family on earth. The end of ethics is to help people celebrate their interrelatedness on earth as a family so that they can live in liberty, fraternity, and solidarity.

If this dream is to be attained, it is necessary to recover, restore, and revive the truth, goodness, and beauty of the family, the foundation and focus of the society.

3. 2. People as Covenant Community

The Bible attests great importance to the formation of a people. People gather and enter into a covenant with Yahweh, the Lord of all creation. Truly the covenant is the apex of community. Yahweh's covenant with the people makes them special and covenantal, with the commission to become a nation, while following the promises and precepts of the covenant. They had to become Israel by walking blamelessly before Yahweh. Israel is God's first-born (Ex 4:22), his chosen servant (Isa 44:1), his bride (Hos 2; Jer 2: 1-2; 3: 6-15; Isa 54: 4-

²<http://bharatendu.com/tag/vasudhaiva-kutumbakam/> (accessed on 23 May 2013).

8) whose mission is to be his witness (Isa 43:9-10; 44:6-8).³ Israel is the possession of Yahweh. The bond between the people and Yahweh implies a necessary bond with the land. And obviously the covenantal code paints a picture that is holistic having ramifications of human relationship with God and creation. Reading from this perspective, the Ten Commandments of the covenant touch all human relationships. In this sense, Israel stands for a dynamic reality, a reality in the process of becoming a people pleasing to God. One of the imageries used in the Bible to illustrate the relationship between Yahweh and Israel is that of a husband and wife, depicting the future of humanity or of the world.

The Church is the Christian rendering of the covenant community. The English word *church* derives from the Greek adjective *kuriakos*, meaning “belonging to the Lord.” The Greek word, *ekklesia*, is derived from the verb *ekkaleo*, meaning “to summon” or “to call out” or “an assembly”. This corresponds to the Hebrew word, *qahal*, meaning “a convoked assembly.”⁴ Therefore, primarily “church” refers to a people belonging to the Lord or a people called by the Lord and gathered in the Lord. This indicates that it is an endearing relationship with the Lord. St Paul depicts the Church as the Bride of Christ, and Christ as the Bridegroom (Eph 5: 22-32). Underlining the mutual love and service between the partners, St Paul draws the roadmap for the bride and bridegroom in family life. Paul depicts the image of the bride and bridegroom, the fundamental image of family, as a mystery – a bond between bride-bridegroom or Church-Christ. Ethics’ role is to help people live their life as a mystical union of Church and Christ, which is unfolded in the union of the partners.

Another imagery Paul uses is the Church as the Body of Christ: “We, though many, are one body in Christ” (Rom 12:5). The image of the Body of Christ directs our imagination to intimacy and integrity. “Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it” (1 Cor 12:27). The imagery of the body of Christ is more intimate than the family bond. Here the ethical challenge is to support people to understand the mystical union of Christ and Christians, which symbolizes intimacy, identity, and integrity. This kind of a relationship – one body and different members – takes us to another

³Joseph A. Komonchak, et al, *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1987, 530-31.

⁴Joseph A. Komonchak, et al, *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 185-86.

plane of community consciousness. It urges us to think, talk, and walk intimately as members of one body moving towards perfect communion and community.

3. 3. God as the Parents of Family

We have already seen the earth as a family and the people as the members of a covenant community. Having examined the land and people, we will now reflect on God. The image of God is one of family. God is considered Father or Mother or both Father and Mother. This means the image of God is one of family.

The “Our Father” taught by Jesus gives us further food to strengthen our bonding with heaven and earth and other people. According to the prayer, we are all members of one and the same family, with God as our father and all humanity as our sisters and brothers. It is a beautiful prayer of remembrance of our family relationships and a celebration of reconciliation with each other through the graciousness of God. The prayer gives us the framework in which we can love and live our family relationships.

Jesus our Lord was born into a family. He grew in wisdom and age in a family setting. Jesus was a family person, blessing the marriage at Cana, loving the children, defending the permanence of marriage, stressing God’s command to honour parents and condemning religious excuses for neglecting family. He discussed with the Samaritan woman her marital relationship, attended to the requests of family persons, went to families to heal the sick, entrusted his mother to the care of his disciple, and had many more familial interactions. All these demonstrate the care and concern Jesus had for the family. When we read the priestly prayer of Jesus in the Johannine account, we get an even clearer picture of how totally dedicated he was to family life. His conversations with God his Father were often for his disciples who formed his new family on earth.

Conclusion

Ordinarily, as we have seen, the family is the foundation of ethical or the character formation of a person. As the family, so the person. The experience in the family draws the roadmap for the entire span of formation. Whatever is received in the family lasts forever. It is on this bedrock one builds the ethical edifice for an entire life. Faith, too, fashions the horizon of the family. As the faith, so the family and the

formation. Many of the contemporary ethical issues – for example, bio-social-sexual ethics – may be traced back to the lack of character formation in families. In a world where truth of and faith in family are conveniently marginalized, it is urgently important to revive the truth of and faith in the family. This awakened consciousness and sensibility may unfold in due season if the young are nurtured and fostered in the family. The rediscovery of the truth of ethics and of faith in family life will help recover the beauty and glory of the world, its people and of God. Then there will truly be one family, experiencing the joy of being the members of the earthly family being united with people and God.