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**Indian Theological Association (ITA)
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**MARRIAGE AND FAMILY TODAY — AN
INDIAN THEOLOGICAL SEARCH**

1. We, the members of the Indian Theological Association (ITA) assembled at ANUGRAHA Renewal Centre, Vazhoor, Kottayam, on the occasion of the 38th Annual Meeting cum Conference, from 30 April to 3 May 2015, to reflect and deliberate on the theme “Marriage and Family Today – An Indian Theological Search” and propose new pastoral approaches to meet the contemporary challenges. We express our conviction that the whole Church in India needs to revisit the current theology of marriage and family and create a new praxis of pastoral care in the light of a liberative reading of the Word of God, the signs of the times and in the context of the Synod of Bishops on Family.

I. CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES

2. We affirm the beauty and goodness of marriage and family. Families experience love, joy, peace and companionship when there is genuine communion among the members. Family is the nursery where the Gospel values of love, sharing, equality, truthfulness; caring, self-sacrifice, forgiveness and justice are nurtured. In families today, there is more awareness of the need for personal freedom and greater attention to the demands of interpersonal relationships that encompass gender equality, partnerships of mutual self-giving and reciprocal spiritual and material assistance, responsible parenthood and respect for the rights and education of children. There is also a rediscovery of the ecclesial mission proper to the family, and its responsibility for the building up of a more just society.

3. Family is the sacred space where the flame of life is transmitted. That is where every person is given love and care, nurture and

support, discipline and maturation that one needs to develop into the full human person as God wants him/her to be and to become. The family is a temple dedicated to the God of life, as Pope John Paul II has called it in the *Evangelium Vitae*, and naturally ordered to serve humanity in which every birth declares: Life is good news! (EV 1, 92). Further, in India, among the people of other religions too, marriage is seen as a sacred, life-giving union, and most marriages are solemnised according to religious rites. They bring together not only two individuals but also their families.

4. The life of the Church and the life of the nation rely upon healthy families as the source of well-adjusted, civic-minded, energetic, and enlightened persons. This being the case, both the Church and the State must work together to promote healthy marriages and loving families.

5. The majority of families in India are affected by situations of poverty and deprivation. They do not have access to basic health care, education, and employment skills, or necessary capital to start small trades. Large-scale hunger, malnutrition and starvation deaths despite the country holding massive food stocks, do not stir the consciences of those in power and also the general public. Farmer suicides and loss of life and property due to natural calamities are frequently reported. Tribals and Dalits, especially the elderly, women, youth and children among them, are vulnerable victims of acute exploitation, victimisation and oppression.

6. Among the poor, women are the worst off, and their falling sex ratio is an alarming sign of their second class status. One of the major reasons for the problems in the families in our country is the attitude toward women. Human-trafficking, especially girls and brides in some states affected by a skewed sex ratio, is a growing phenomenon that commodifies women.

7. Struggling to survive in a world that is marked with poverty, exploitation and diminished personhood, marriage for many Indian women is a burden and being born female a curse. Girls are still married off before the age of sixteen, and repeated pregnancies are often fatal for both mother and child. Gender equality and upholding the dignity of women is still a bitter cry falling on the deaf ears of the entire society. The present theology and pastoral practices of the church fall far short of these challenges.

II. AN ANALYSIS OF THE SITUATION

8. Families are in crisis today due to the erosion of the fundamental values such as loving fidelity and permanence of marriage. Hence, the number of divorces, separated couples, one-parent families, children without parents, and live-in relationships without commitment are on the increase. Lack of respect for parents on the one hand and the rejection of children on the other, are giving rise to dysfunctional families. The neglect of vulnerable family members, particularly children with special needs, the sick, single women/men and senior citizens, is also part of this crisis.

9. Disparity of cult (inter-faith) and mixed (inter-denominational) marriages are on the increase given the Indian context of constant interaction among people of various religions and cultures and the positive attitude of the church that promotes inter-religious and ecumenical dialogue. There is a dire need to recognize inter-faith and inter-denominational families as signs of the times, and value their daily, intimate, inter-religious dialogue, as well as the bonds they forge with their extended families.

10. Inter-faith families create situations of 'double belonging' in faith and culture which has a unique impact on the faith formation of the children. The love of these families is at time put to test because of the insistence of Canon 1125 which expects Catholic partners to obtain the assurance (promise) from the other partner for the baptism of their children. The reality of inter-faith and inter-denominational marriages calls for a more inclusive theology of marriage and baptism as well as laws, regulations and marriage liturgies that are respectful of and sensitive to their unique situation.

11. Caste and class differences continue to wreck the sanctity of marital love. The cruel practice of honour killing is on the increase, though not explicitly within the Christian communities. However, there is no evidence of unequivocal and witnessing ecclesial practices to abolish caste atrocities and to foster inter-caste marriages or to stand by the couple who dare to enter into a nuptial union cutting across their caste clutches.

12. Though endogamy is associated with self-preservation, and is practised by many ethnic communities in India and around the world, its practice in certain Christian communities in India does raise theological and pastoral issues. It is indeed scandalous and contrary to Christian love that in the name of rite and tradition

marriages outside their own ethnic group are barred and this is sanctioned by ecclesial authorities.

13. An emerging global neo-liberal culture that propels individualism, selfishness and greed, with lifestyles and mindsets inspired by materialism and utilitarianism, poses a threat to the family. Many families are attracted to a consumerist lifestyle and want to possess the latest clothes, jewellery, phones, cars, etc. This puts them under pressure to spend beyond their means, making them borrow money or take loans which cannot be easily repaid. Frequently families are also under pressure to spend lavishly on weddings and other family functions, leading to the selling of their assets.

14. Drug abuse and alcoholism are common threats to healthy family life. Both are on the increase. Many become alcoholics especially among the poor, due to the policies of the State governments which promote alcoholism to maximize liquor sales to collect revenue. Almost in all the instances, alcoholism leads to violence – physical, verbal and psychological – in the home.

15. Migration is another serious phenomenon of the present times that has a strong impact on marriage and family life. Globalization, unjust land acquisition, lack of employment and unsustainable agriculture, wars and conflicts contribute to the growing displacement and migration. This situation leads to single-parent families, the weakening of husband-wife relationships and results in dysfunctional families. Migrants often have no roof over their heads and are forced to live on pavements and slums in inhuman conditions, forever under the threat of eviction. Because they are poor they do not have the means to improve their condition.

16. A new threat to the family is the all pervasive cyberspace. Families today have become porous to the influence of cyberspace and social media that often propagate values that are not in keeping with the values of the Gospel. Virtual relationships have substituted real ones based on human contact with its inherent verbal and non-verbal communication. Unlimited access to social networking without adequate guidance leads the youth to believe that the number of virtual friends defines a person's worth. As a result, they develop superficial relationships and are frequently unable to meet the demands of loving relationships in marriage.

17. The obsession with the Internet also causes islands of isolation within the family, eating into the already limited family time

available to working family members. It brings pornography into the family space resulting in further deterioration of mutual trust in the family, which leads to psychological problems. Unhealthy sexual conduct spreads sexually transmitted diseases which are a further threat to healthy family life.

18. The Church is also facing other challenges like same-sex unions which have received legal recognition in many countries and seem to be gaining more public acceptance in India. Legislation supporting same-sex marriages and long-term live-in relationships in many countries is challenging the Christian understanding of marriage.

19. A critique is necessary of the new forms of family advocated by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) individuals and their supporting groups with the claim for social and civil rights. There is absence of clarity even among scientists, psychologists and religionists regarding the various aspects of the question of sexual orientations. As a result the formulation of a theology that can adequately address the issue is not an easy task. However the situation demands a compassionate pastoral approach.

20. The youth today are exposed to various views on sexuality, marriage and family which are at variance with the understanding of the church and which often are detrimental to the good of family and society. Once they begin college studies, the urban youth find no time and space for recreation, sports and games, and this may lead to sexual problems and negative habits. They are attracted to a neoliberal culture which promotes greed and individualism and are hostile to institutions including the "institutional" church.

21. Women are taking up leadership roles and careers, bringing home money and opening up new perspectives to family life. This has brought in some changes in gender equations in the family. The male members of the family do not have the same dominant positions as before. However, feminist movements have shown the subtle ways in which patriarchy continues to exercise control over women and family life. Financial independence does not ensure that women get to participate equally in decision-making in the family.

22. Whether women work outside the domestic unit or assist in traditional work, the maintenance of their household is their primary responsibility. Whether in lower, middle, or upper-class homes, woman's work always includes personal service (the work of maids, butlers, cooks, personal secretaries), sexual service (including provision for man's sexual needs and bearing the children, also

including “being nice,” “being attractive” for him), and ego service (encouragement, support, praise, attention).

23. Gender discrimination in the household is often rooted in the patriarchal attitude that values the social status of men over women. Patriarchal ideology exaggerates biological differences between men and women, making certain that men always have the dominant or the so called masculine roles and women always have the subordinate or the so called ‘feminine roles’. A strikingly high proportion of men in the country believe that wives should submit to their husband’s authority on household decisions. A man’s name, his line, his honour is to be preserved even at the expense of a woman’s body, her resources, her rights and her very life. Often, even religion is used to justify and reinforce women’s subordination to men.

24. In India patriarchy is not just a matter of male supremacy and male centeredness, it is a social system of control and domination. Caste oppression, preference for sons, female foeticide, infanticide, bride burning, domestic violence, sexual abuse, rape, etc. are the result of domination and control through violence. Patriarchy perpetuates and justifies violence against women. The most prominent victims of violence are wives and children. It is indeed disheartening to hear that seventy per cent of Indian women are victims of domestic violence.

25. The joint family system is slowly being replaced by the emergent nuclear family. The elderly are often left to fend for themselves or end up in homes for the aged. When grandparents are part of the family, often they are reduced to being just caretakers of the grandchildren. There is no respect or gratitude shown towards them and they find it hard to adapt to this. Once they are unable to do this, they become unwanted.

26. With millions of families living in single-room tenements, there is no space for conjugal privacy and intimacy, resulting in frustration and alienation between husband and wife. Young couples who work for mostly multi-national companies and huge concerns have no time for each other as one works at night while the other during day time. Their conjugal love is in perpetual postponement. Some couples get separated even before coming to know each other.

27. In spite of these immense pressures on peace and unity in family life, there seems to be a general apathy and incompetence among Church communities in promoting Family Apostolate though a few dioceses have taken right steps in this direction. Marriage preparation

courses today seem to be grossly inadequate and family catechesis seems to be limited to teaching people to recite prayers and take part in devotions. The pastoral approach to divorced and remarried Catholics appear to be judgmental while there is ignorance about Canon Law and Civil Law pertaining to marriage, divorce, separation, annulment, etc. Besides there is a lack of effective and adequate family counselling centres to address the needs of the families.

III. BIBLICAL & THEOLOGICO-PASTORAL PERSPECTIVES

28. God is the author of marriage. In the Garden of Eden it is God who officiates at the marriage of the first couple (Gen 2: 18-24). God says: "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner (Gen 2: 18). "This partnership of man and woman constitutes the first form of communion between persons" (GS, 12). Thus in God's plan the human family is centred on the union of man and woman where woman is presented as a life partner who is an equal and fitting helper. The creation of the woman from the man's ribs (Gen 2: 21-22) is a symbolic description revealing the intimate relationship between man and woman and their essential unity.

29. In the First Testament God's relationship with Israel is compared to the love between husband and wife as seen through the life of prophet Hosea. Marriage thus expresses and lives the one mystery of the love covenant of God with people.

30. Born of a woman (Gal 4: 4), the incarnation of Jesus takes place concretely in the context of a family. The family of Nazareth as a model, in the present context of poverty and migration, is an area for further reflection (Mt 2:13-23). The Holy Family is not only a challenge to families in crisis but also offers inspiration to reconcile, accept and go forward within the plan of God with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

31. Jesus upholds the primordial vision of marriage according to the plan and will of God where man and woman become one flesh in the union of marriage, sharing the dignity of equal partners

32. Jesus celebrated life and upheld the value of marriage and family when he participated in the wedding at Cana (Jn 2: 1-11). He accepted the warmth and hospitality of families like that of Martha, Mary and Lazarus (Lk 10: 38-42; Jn 12: 1-8). For him families were the place for the revelation of the power, love and salvation of God.

33. In the vision of Jesus both man and woman are equal partners in marriage. In the *Abba* experience of Jesus, God is revealed as Mother and Father and this contradicts the patriarchal notion that subordinates woman in the family. Both the parents need to model themselves on God as creator, redeemer and sanctifier and feel God's presence in their task as life-givers and caretakers.

34. In the context of a predominantly male-dominated Jewish world of his times, Jesus' radical and liberating attitudes, approaches, actions and teachings ushered in a new family in the perspective of God and upheld the dignity and sanctity of marriage. Jesus also envisioned a wider, larger and an ideal family of the Reign of God which transcends the biological family. All the families of the world are to be incorporated into this ideal family.

35. The intimate relation between Christ and Church is offered by Paul as the theological paradigm for the relation between husband and wife. However, this Pauline imagery of Christ-Church relation is historically conditioned and its interpretation should not transfer the aspect of dependence of Christ-Church relationship to the relationship of husband and wife in marriage.

36. The family is a community of love (GS 47). Love is holy and sanctifying. It is mainly in the family, the school of love, that love is lived most spontaneously and generously. Jesus Christ becomes the model of the loving and sacrificing spouse and expresses his saving power within marital union. The life of the disciples is patterned after the self-emptying (*kenosis*) of Jesus Christ. It is in the process of caring for one another in the family that the members primarily learn and live this *kenosis*.

37. Family, according to the Christian perspective, is much more than a mere canonical-juridical or social unit. It is a community of love, modelled after the Trinitarian community. Christian spouses are called to become a sign and instrument of Christ's love in the world. Conjugal love, which flows from the very love of Christ, enables them to witness to a new social consciousness inspired by the Gospel.

38. The family is a nursery of the values of social life. It is the primary space of God experience and for the practice of the values of God's reign such as honesty, truthfulness, transparency, openness, loyalty, hospitality, forgiveness, love and caring. However, a family should not see itself in isolation but in solidarity with other families in the neighbourhood. Families render great service to society by

transmitting ethical, social, cultural, religious, and spiritual values for the integral development of their own members and of society.

39. It is primarily the responsibility of parents to create a proper environment at home in which children can progressively grow into maturity with psychosexual and psycho-spiritual integration. This growing in maturity and integration of children and youth belongs to the 'truth of the family and its vocation'. Moreover, the words of *Gaudium et spes* hold good also in Indian tradition: "By their very nature, the institution of matrimony itself and conjugal love are ordained for the procreation and education of children, and find in them their ultimate crown" (GS 48, also 50 and *Humanae vita* 13). However, the totality, unity and indissolubility characteristics remain even when children, although greatly desired, do not arrive to complete conjugal life. Peace can prevail in many families without children if they realize that the spouses "can give expression to their generosity by adopting abandoned children or performing demanding services for others" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2379).

40. Married couples are the first interpreters of conjugal love. The insights of psychology and sociology can assist in the process of understanding and interpreting married love and in developing a theology of marriage. Theology sees the inseparable secular and sacred dimensions of marriage and married love within the mystery of God's love. A new theology that emphasizes and promotes the dynamic, personal and inter-subjective nature of the man-woman relationship in marriage is required.

IV. PASTORAL RESPONSES TO CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

41. The Family Apostolate aims at strengthening love and togetherness within the family, assisting the process of healing and problem-solving so that the family more fully witnesses to the joy of the Gospel in its daily living. It must also take the common priesthood of the faithful more seriously and enable the married people to exercise their common priesthood in the family, in the local church and in the world.

42. The Reign of God which Jesus proclaimed makes demands on the disciples. But often the priests tend to propagate an 'easy-going Christ' and avoid proclaim the Christ, who challenges our sinful ways and demands a life true to the values of the Reign of God. In many instances people are ready to be Christ-worshippers, but not

Christ-disciples. And we also need a new family spirituality which is centred on Jesus' vision of God's Reign and emphasizes discipleship.

43. Jesus used family categories in order to explain the kinship relations when God reigns. There are no exclusive privileges or titles of honour in the family of God's Reign which is characterized by freedom and fellowship, service and sharing, equality and universality. The individual family by its way of life, including its life of prayer, must foster these values among all its members.

44. The family is the domestic church. It tends to reflect in its life and relationships the positive and negative aspects of the larger church, namely, the parish and the diocese. Therefore, it is important that the negative aspects like the unequal and domineering power relations in the church do not enter into the life of the family. The domestic church as well as the larger church must become a communion of equal disciples. This requires, among other things, that in the family both boys and girls receive equal opportunities for human and spiritual development and they grow up with a sense of equality and co-responsibility.

45. Since Vatican II, the church recognizes the presence of the Divine Spirit in other religions and she understands herself as the pilgrim people of God moving with sisters and brothers of other faiths. Evidently the number of inter-faith marriages has been on the increase in recent times and the church needs to discern in them the signs of the times. It needs to be more open to what the Spirit is saying to it through such marriages.

46. In the context of dialogue of life among religious communities especially in India and growing willingness of the believers to enter into dialogue with other faiths it will be possible for the church to recognize the sacramental value of an inter-faith marriage. The Catholic partner should be helped to realize that he or she is living truly a sacramental life, because marital love is a sacred reality, a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Catholic partner continues to be a full member of the local Christian community.

47. The couples in inter-faith marriage need compassionate pastoral care and spiritual accompaniment in their married life. They need a proper understanding of the symbols, rituals, festivals and values of each other's religion, which enables them to take part in the sacred events of their partners with respect and devotion.

48. It is appropriate to the Christian message that endogamy in any form should be condemned totally. While understanding a

community's need for ethnic identity and preservation of certain inherited cultural and religious traditions, as theologians, we see the need for dialogue with such communities so as to open the way for more tolerance and inclusiveness as demanded by Christian ethics and pastoral demands towards those of their members who marry outside their community and traditions. Moreover, inter-caste marriages should be encouraged not only within the Christian communities but also in the society at large in view of creating an egalitarian society built on the values of the reign of God.

49. Without undermining the gift of children within the marriage union, the Indian Church needs to make married people realise the uniqueness of conjugal love within the sacrament of love, which is the ultimate end of marriage (GS 50c, *Familiaris Consortio* 14). Absence of children should be not considered as a punishment on the female partner nor does an unlimited number of children without responsibility for their future be encouraged. Christian education with the pastoral directives of the church's teaching regarding family planning and contraceptives, equality of gender, role of sexual pleasure within marital union, etc. should be part of the marriage preparation.

50. Medical research has come up with new data, though not uncontested, indicating genetic origins for homosexual orientation in some people. Church is challenged to approach people with homosexual orientation and their unions with openness and compassion. The Christian community needs to be less legalistic and judgmental, acknowledging everyone's need for love and companionship. Even though church cannot accept same-sex union as a valid form of marriage, the Christian community may still consider the possibility of recognizing it as a social institution and provide appropriate pastoral care.

51. The Church often uses the language of complementarity between the sexes as a part of human development and family harmony. This in itself may be acceptable. However, the concept of complementarity is often based on cultural stereotypes in which maleness is seen in terms of rationality, strength and power and femaleness in terms of emotionality, vulnerability and dependence subtly justifying dominance of one over the other. Therefore it is better to avoid such discriminatory expressions in theological and pastoral articulations.

52. The marriage rituals and catechesis reflect the values of equality and partnership. However, they are often found to reinforce

patriarchal notions which consider the wife subordinate and subservient to the husband. The wedding homilies often reflect the naïveté of the preacher and his ignorance of the right ways of interpreting biblical texts which are historically conditioned and so have their limitations. Seminarians must be sensitized to gender concerns and taught to interpret texts and traditions from the liberative and life-giving perspectives of God's reign. Priests too need to be re-educated in this aspect.

V. SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

53. On the basis of our reflections we felt that the following recommendations will help in promoting the institution of marriage and family which is a common good for the church and the society.

- Train families to discern and follow the movements of the Spirit through prayer, listening to the word of God, attentiveness to the teachings of the Church, sharing in the SCCs (Small Christian Communities) and reading the signs of the times.
- Promote a holistic spirituality of body-mind-soul.
- Train families in different ways of prayer besides the rosary and other usual devotions, for example, praying with the Bible and relating it to their lives, Indian methods of prayer and meditation, praying with nature, etc.
- Establish separate prayer groups for women, men and the youth to reflect over the issues related to them in the context of prayer and articulate their experience of God.
- Promote an adult style of family catechesis through discussions on family and local issues from the Gospel perspective at the SCC and parish levels.
- Rejuvenate the faith formation units like SCCs, Gospel-Sharing-Groups, Family Bible Study Groups, etc. and establish and foster such structures in the places where they do not exist.
- Train seminarians and priests to accompany families with compassion and sensitivity free from all kinds of careerism and self-centeredness which damage pastoral care of families.
- Ensure that the resource teams for the family apostolate consisting of qualified and trained priests, the religious and lay leaders and that their services reach out to all the families.
- Establish Family Counselling Cells and Centres with professionals in every parish and at the diocesan level.

- Create in every parish special family cells with adequate number of women specialised in the field of psychology and psychotherapy who can assist couples facing serious family problems.
- Make special efforts to prepare a sufficient number of married persons, both women and men, with special focus on offering spiritual and psychological help to married people, especially in crisis situations.
- Make use of the expertise of family facilitators, therapists and counsellors with skills in order to train families in parenting techniques, conflict resolution, communication improvement, family prayer, etc. and to help them in dealing with issues like teenage rebellion, child sexual abuse, incest, domestic violence, alcoholism and other addictions.
- Include in marriage assistance teams men and women who can assist married people and family members in deepening their faith and strengthening their life in the Spirit.
- Educate and train couples for practising egalitarian values within their marriage and in their household.
- Create modules for raising awareness among couples on issues like female foeticide, infanticide, preference for male child, violence against women in the family and society.
- Form vigilance and grievance redressal cells in parishes and church institutions to deal with issues of violence and injustice to women in the family and society.
- Set up support groups for victims of domestic violence and work for its prevention. Provide counselling to both the victim and the victimizer.
- Promote and empower family movements like *Couples for Christ*, *Christian Family Movement*, *Marriage Encounter*, *Pro-life Movement*, etc.
- Educate families and all those involved in caring for families about provisions in Canon Law and Civil Law pertaining to marriage, divorce, separation, annulment, etc.
- Strengthen, revive or launch newly campaigns against social evils connected with marriage such as dowry, caste, domestic violence and extravaganza during wedding and also ordination celebrations. Social media could be used for this purpose.

- Encourage couples leading a happy and witnessing married life to share their experiences of daily struggles and how they overcame such struggles.
- Cultivate a culture of listening in the family among the couples and between parents and children.
- Develop and promote marriage liturgies which give centre-stage to the bride and the groom who are the ministers of the sacrament of marriage.
- Celebrate important family events, such as the birth of a child and wedding jubilees, with parish liturgies that highlight the beauty, vocation and success of the Christ-centred family.

CONCLUSION

54. Indian religions accord great value to the institution of marriage and consider it a sacred reality. The family created by marriage is seen as a sanctuary of love where the members are invited to experience joy, contentment and fullness of life. The Christian understanding of marriage as sacrament adds to its dignity and sanctity. Integrated into God's act of creation, marriage and family constitute a cradle of humanization for the spouses as well as for children. Husband and wife are equal partners in the covenant of marriage and their equality is concretized, among other things, in the joint decision-making process in all family matters. The fellowship in the family must expand into the fellowship of the family of God's Reign. Marriage and family constitute a common good for humanity and hence safeguarding the integrity of marriage and nurturing family will be a commendable investment in the right direction. We have reasons to hope that the forthcoming Synod on family will usher in a paradigm shift in the theology of marriage and family which will bring in much clarity and lead to greater vigour in the pastoral care of families both in the church and in the society at large as well. Theologians need to assist in this process through their progressive and continual theological engagement which adequately responds to the burning challenges of our times.

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