

ASIAN  
HORIZONS

Vol. 17, No 3, September 2023

Pages: 430-436

## NEW SCHOLAR

# THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND PASTORAL COMMUNICATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF FAMILY COMMUNION IN KERALA

**Sr. Haritha CSN<sup>♦</sup>**

**University/Institute:** The Pontifical Pastoral Institute *Redemptor Hominis* at Pontifical Lateran University, Rome.

**Faculty/Department:** Theology/Pastoral Theology

**Director of the Doctoral Dissertation:** Prof. Massimiliano Padula

**Year of Doctoral Defence:** 2022

### Introduction

Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, affirms that “the word of God tells us that the family is entrusted to a man, a woman and their children, so that they may become a communion of persons in the image of the union of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (*AL*, n. 29). Inspired by this magisterial reference, I conducted research that led to the drafting of this thesis whose title is: ‘The role of social media and pastoral communication in the development of family communion in Kerala’. Traditionally, the people of Kerala were homebound families mostly engaged in agricultural activities and

---

<sup>♦</sup> Sr. Haritha is a nun from the Congregation of Sisters of Nazareth in Kerala, India. She holds a licentiate in Theology of Marriage and Family from the Pontifical Theological Institute JOHN PAUL II, Rome and a doctorate in Pastoral Theology from the Pontifical Pastoral Institute *Redemptor Hominis* at Pontifical Lateran University, Rome. Presently, she serves as Aspirants’ mistress in her congregation in Angamaly, Kerala. Email: haritha637@gmail.com

other household chores. Now there is a shift from the traditional way of living to a rampant migration to neighbouring states or different countries for education, employment, and better living. So, the situation of many families in Kerala is that their members are scattered in different parts of the world.

The point of departure for the thesis is “what is a family in the plan of God?” Family, as an institution, is formed in the communion of persons (Cfr. *FC*, n. 15) and marked by self-gift among the family members. In the plan of God, family is communion and inter-relatedness, not isolated individuals. However, what we see taking place within today’s families is something contrary to communion. Technological development, in particular ‘social media’, has led to new opportunities and redefined traditional family roles of husbands and wives, fathers, mothers, and children. In this era of WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc., we live together in a space of fast and intense communication, which was unimaginable some years ago.

Communication tools, especially social media, instead of strengthening the communion of families, have led to adverse moral degradation, loneliness, depression, and crimes in family relationships. Misuse of social media undermines relationships in most Christian families in Kerala. Person-to-person communication suffers a lot; family members find themselves engaged in interacting with the virtual world rather than the real world. As a nun involved in the family apostolate, I wanted to scientifically investigate this new family scenario by asking a couple of questions: “Is this true? Can social media be used to bring communion into the family? and is pastoral communication useful for developing family communion?”

From its very early stages, the Church has played a vital role in the strides of developments and progress that man and society as a whole have accomplished. She has utilised from the very beginning all possible means to reach the gospel to the people. She has always acknowledged and respected technological developments and has always encouraged and promoted evangelization through the medium of technology.

I intend to understand and try to respond to the needs of pastoral care for families through pastoral communication with the help of magisterial documents. Therefore, the precious treasure of the Church's documents remains my point of reference in this study. This thesis is trying to look at social media from a positive perspective and highlight how it can be used effectively to improve human life and

relationships, especially in the family, which is the fundamental institution of any society.

### **Brief Indications on the *Status Quaestionis***

In this thesis, I try to analyse the role of social media and pastoral communication in developing family communion. Church teachings, theology and pastoral practice are the main areas of concern here. The formal object of the thesis is a theological and practical look at Kerala families. The material object is the verification of social media and pastoral communication, which make a difference in family communion.

In the Christian circle there is a lot of material with interesting publications on the themes of social media, family and communion. Furthermore, a substantial amount of literature is available on these topics from both secular and social perspectives. Many Church documents, books, articles, and theses related to this theme have helped me in my research. However, I have not found any dissertations or research that systematically addresses the role of social media in developing family communion. My attempt to connect social media with pastoral communication in the context of Kerala, presents elements of originality.

### **Research Method**

In this research, all the aspects that characterize the analysis of the theme will be taken into consideration through the method of 'pastoral discernment' which is the method proposed by Pastoral Institute *Redemptoris Hominis* of the Lateran, which is seen in the light of three dimensions, namely, *kairological*, *criteriological* and *operative*. These dimensions will guide and describe each phase of research, i.e., analysis-evaluation, decision-design, and the last phase, implementation-verification which is beyond the scope of this research. The process of pastoral discernment follows neither the deductive nor the inductive method but refers to the model of dialectical reciprocity between the normative reference and the contextual side. And in this intertwining between phases and dimensions this work will be characterized, which will analyse and verify the articulations of social media and pastoral communication in the development of family communion. Further analyses and verifications are carried out through an empirical research methodology. After the analysis phase and in the light of the data

collected, some paradigms will be developed as suggestions to strengthen family communion.

### **Research Articulation**

In light of the method indicated above, the present research is divided into four chapters. The first three chapters analyse and verify the theme. The last one is an elaborative phase in which some paradigms are arrived at based on the analysis and evaluation of the first chapters.

In the first chapter, the study is on the magisterial and theological view on the topics of family, the reality of communication, and media. The first point deals with the plan of God for the families followed by the analysis of communication based on Trinitarian Theology. Jesus is the perfect communicator, and the Holy Spirit is the communication of God. Here, Church is said to be God's self-communication. The section concludes by asserting that the goal of every communication is communion. It then goes on to deal with the Church's pastoral communication and social media as one of the ways through which pastoral communication is carried out. The chapter ends with a study of the Church in Kerala and its pastoral communication, a small history, and its functioning today.

The second chapter delves into the impact and challenges of social media on families in Kerala. It contains the following: a sketch of the State of Kerala; historical study on the origin of social media in the world and in the state of Kerala; impact of social media on the families of Kerala, for which the section examines the family structures, especially those of Christian families; huge changes that have swept across the entire society of Kerala, and in particular the changes that took place by social media. The next section proceeds to portray how social media helps to enhance the communion of families and how it impacts families. It is then followed by looking into the role of social media in the pastoral communication of the Church in Kerala. The chapter ends with the identification of some challenges faced in pastoral ministries when social media enters the lives of families in Kerala.

The third chapter is the heart of the analysis phase of the thesis; all that is analysed in the first two chapters is verified by a survey through a quantitative research methodology. It is an effort made to concretely understand the use of social media at the grass-root level. The target groups of the survey are 600 Christian family members and 500 priests

and religious sisters from Kerala. The survey is done through a questionnaire in which the target groups are asked to respond to the queries.

The fourth chapter consists of theological-pastoral views of media and family in Kerala. In the first place, the chapter affirms the fact that social media is an effective tool for pastoral communication. And it is a means for family communion. The chapter also tries to find the role of social media in family communion on the basis of the teachings of the Church. The chapter then continues to deal with the answers to the research findings. Finally, based on the Church's teachings, certain criteria are drawn to increase family communion in families through social media.

### **The Significant Results of the Empirical Research**

To verify and understand concretely the use of social media in general and its use in the pastoral ministry, we have done an empirical study using a quantitative method. The entire survey and its analysis rested on three major hypotheses:

1. Integration of social media in the families of Kerala.
2. Social media helps for the enhancement of communion in families.
3. Social media has a role in the pastoral ministry.

The first hypothesis revealed that social media is integrated into every family, and most people spend an average of 4 hours on social media. According to the second hypothesis, people feel the need for social media, and it helps family communion. According to the third hypothesis, people are open to the use of social media for pastoral ministry although priests and religious leaders were reluctant to use it in the beginning. The unfavourable and challenging situations and events like natural calamities such as floods and the COVID-19 pandemic have compelled them to carry forward the pastoral ministry with the aid of social media. It has been discovered that ignorance about social media and its correct use for pastoral ministry is a limitation as far as priests and religious leaders are concerned. It thus sometimes leads to inappropriate use of social media and when they engage in some pastoral activities with the aid of social media, it results in ineffectiveness. They also give less time to faith-oriented activities on social media than the time spent on other things on social media. In the light of the theological and pastoral data available, we can conclude that in the context of Kerala today, direct communication can be

strengthened through social media. It can also be used as a means for face-to-face communication.

Many expressed as a matter of caution that education on social media and its prudent use are some important matters of consideration. If the Church has to enter into the education of social media, the leaders of the Church, priests and religious in the first place, have to be educated theoretically, practically, and even theologically. It calls for the formation of every child in the family from the very beginning, and social media education is needed as an instrument of family communion. Parents and teachers are to play a greater role in the formation of children. Setting certain criteria and rubrics for the use of social media will help everyone use it in the right manner.

On the part of the Church, there has to be an on-going faith and moral formation, a moral strength has to be induced from childhood not only to know right and wrong but also to avoid evil and to choose the good. This is the gospel that she has to proclaim. To reach that communion with God, the communion of members in the family and safeguarding the family from the torrent current of the world are necessary. For this, more and more studies, research, and assessments are necessitated and are to be undertaken by the Church in the ages to come.

## **Conclusion**

The thesis has made an effort to research, study, and verify a number of essential and fundamental matters that affect the very fabric of a family in the present context of the world. It tried to perceive the relationship between family communion and the gift of social media through the lenses of history, sociology, theology and pastoral practical knowledge. The hindsights were how far social media is convoluted in the families of Kerala, how far social media affects the pastoral ministry of the Church, what its role is in the augmentation of communion in the families, and what more can be done.

During the progress of this thesis, a lot of time was spent reading materials related to my research, and in the same way, much time was spent for discussion, conversation, the exchange of ideas and information, and the sharing of experiences with different kinds of people. Such readings and encounters led to the understanding that the majority prefer a world without social media, though everyone uses it irrespective of age. It indicates how important person to person communication is in the daily lives of people. Although social media

is widely used, what is imprinted in the heart and minds of people regarding social media is its negative side more than its positive side.

Good and evil exist simultaneously in this world; social media has both positive and negative sides. This thesis encourages us to focus on social media's positive sides and not on its negative sides. Man is fundamentally and existentially called to communicate and through it reach communion with others. The ways and means of communication keep changing and, developing in time and space, and one has to accept them as the gift of God and reach for that communion to which one is called.

Against every goodness, there is evil juxtaposed, and so too with social media. However, the church must accompany and form the people of God using social media by enabling them to choose good over evil. The church as a teacher fulfils this through her pastors, religious and animators. They have to be given formation first. Any formation begins right from infancy through the guidance and exemplary model of the parents themselves. Parents become the first formators of children. The proper use of social media is possible only through correct formation by various participants at various stages of life.

Social media is not bad in itself; it is its misuse that creates enormous problems and bitter suffering. The research here opens the way for more reflections and studies on the fundamental call of man and his search for more and more ways to reach that communion of persons in the context of a family.