

THE SPIRITUALITY OF MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

Jossy Maria CMC

Abstract: Family is a treasure, which must be always protected and defended. It is a God-given place to members to grow in love, sanctity and human virtues and find self-fulfilment, where one ensures one's salvation. Chavara calls for a family-centred spirituality, of which marital and family spirituality is part. Marital spirituality is the spirituality of the bond, in which divine love dwells. *Atmanuthapam* is strewn with expressions of mothering experiences as motherhood involves a special communion with the mystery of life, as it develops in the woman's womb. Sacredness of human sexuality is based on the fact that God himself created sexuality, which is a marvellous gift to his creatures. Hence, the celebration of love in conjugal love is the greatest form of friendship. Feminine style of holiness for the church would stem from the genius of woman and mother's role in upbringing children in mutual respect and equality in the family. The reflection comes to a conclusion with a thought on the challenges to families.

Keywords: Holy Family, values, society, spirituality, family, marriage, Chavara, generosity, commitment, fidelity, patience, children, *Chavarul*, salvation, prayer, virtues, parents, Eucharist, Church, couples, women, mother, saint, *Atmanuthapam*, literature, Christmas, motherhood, femininity, holiness, love, sexuality, catechism, convent, school, equality, religious, homosexuality, evangelization, mission.

1. Introduction

"The family is a treasure: it must always be protected and defended. May the Holy Family of Nazareth protect you and illuminate your path always." This was the instruction Pope Francis gave to the people gathered at Saint Peter's Square on 30 December 2018. No country or culture is spared from the impact of the global upheaval that has affected family life. Many are experiencing the heat and pressure of the massive changes and the swift erosion of traditional values and ethos, which have held the social, cultural and even religious fabric of

the society together. It is in this context that we reflect on the spirituality of marriage and the family that we see in St. Chavara's writings and two recent Apostolic Exhortations of Pope Francis, namely, *Amoris Laetitia* (AL) and *Gaudete et Exsultate* (GE). These documents come as an invitation to Christian families to value the gifts of marriage and the family, and to preserve those values in love strengthened by the virtues of generosity, commitment, fidelity and patience (AL 5).

Some people say: "Father and Mother I Love You" is what the term 'family' stands for. This is generally the experience or expression of the children in the family. In order to build and maintain this atmosphere of free expression and experience of love, joy, acceptance and belongingness, according to Saint Chavara, several aspects of the families should be taken care of. Hence he notes in *Chavarul*: "Praying for God's light and peace, I have framed this rule of conduct for families."¹ 150 years ago, he noted down his conviction: "The only sweet consolation for a person experiencing trials and difficulties in this valley of tears is the membership and life in a family where love, order and peace reign." He was aware of the opposite possibility as well: "It is most distressing to live in a family where there is no order or peace and where the members are unconcerned about the service of God and their own salvation." These convictions prompted him to meditate on the joys and sorrows of the families.

2. Family-Centred Spirituality

In the *Chavarul*, what St. Chavara propounded was a spirituality that is to be fostered in one's family. He instructs: Children must gather at home at the Angelus bell in the evening (gather not in the parish church); parents and children join together to pray in the family. The children kiss the hands of the parents and greet them, which is an experience and expression of bonding and parental relationship. He has given great importance to evening prayer (*sandhya namaskaram*) and has made the 'participation in the Holy Mass' part of the 'Daily Routine' of the family. He emphasised the parents' responsibility to teach their children prayers and train them in Christian virtues.² He

¹Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *The Testament of a Loving Father*, The Rule for Families written on 13 February 1868, addressing the parishioners of Kainakary. It has two parts, namely, the Rules for Family and Upbringing of Children.

²*Chavarul*, II: 2.

instructed the parents: "Parents should frequently commend their children to the protection of the Holy Family and pray for them. God will listen to mother's petitions as that of the child."³ One must learn and practice mutual love, respect, forgiveness, sharing with the poor and needy and such other virtues in the family.

He understood that the family prayer is a special way of expressing and strengthening the faith journey of the members. Regularity in prayer can do immense good to family life. The various expressions of popular piety are a treasure of spirituality for many families. Family prayer culminates in the Eucharist and there is a close bond between married life and the Eucharist. Both are communion of love and self-giving for the enrichment of the other. "For the food of the Eucharist offers the spouses the strength and incentive to live the marriage covenant each day as a "domestic church" (AL 318). Family is "a vital cell for transforming the world" (AL 324).

3. Chavarul's Definition of Family

A good family is the image of heaven, where persons live together, by the bond of blood and affection, duly respecting and obeying their parents and walking peacefully before the Lord and people, which ensure their salvation, according to each one's state of life. According to Chavara, family is a God-given place to members to grow in love and compassion, and it is also a place to grow in sanctity and human virtues and find self-fulfilment and actualization. Therefore, life in one's family ensures salvation.

4. Marital and Family Spirituality

In spite of its importance and relevance, marital spirituality is seldom talked about. According to *Amoris Laetitia*, marital spirituality is the spirituality of the bond, in which divine love dwells (AL 315). The couples have to strive for this spirituality in the midst of all their daily household activities, troubles and struggles, joys and hopes. The Pope says: "The spirituality of family love is made up of thousands of small but real gestures" (AL 315). It is not accomplished so much by doing extraordinary things, but by paying attention to small and seemingly insignificant things with love. Such actions of love are the ingredients of true marital spiritual life. God dwells deep within the marital love that gives him glory. If a family is centred on Christ, he will unify and illumine its entire life (AL 248). Jesus knocks on the door of families, to

³Chavarul, II: 1.

share with them the Eucharistic supper (AL 249). Spirituality of marriage is to be conscious of its communion with the Trinity, Christ, its sacramental character, living according to the Biblical narrative on marriage and living according to this faith both in the family and out in the world.

In Chavara's writings one could notice the festivity of family love or more specifically celebration of 'mothering experiences.' He records the life-cycle of women. Conception, pregnancy, child birth, joy and ecstasy of first kiss given to the baby, the embracing of the new born baby, joy and ecstasy of the mother in breast feeding, child rearing, and such other 'maternal concerns' are favourite topics in some of the literature from Chavara. The discovery of the spirituality of caring and nurturing is part of being created in the image and likeness of God who is a caring and protecting mother. This discovery becomes God-experience for a mother and living these experiences she becomes a saint.

By choosing to dwell in a human family Jesus shows the world that the ideal setting for God's love to abide with us is the heart of a home. For Chavara, the holy family of Nazareth became the meeting place of heaven and earth, where God reached out to humans in an act of bonding. Ever after, relationship within every human family assumes a divine dimension. However, we cannot assume that the family of Nazareth was something of a heaven on earth. Jesus, Mary and Joseph had to face many difficulties and troubles. But the love that reigned supreme in the holy family could tide over any sort of trials and crises. That is the example Jesus has set for us to imitate.

The third canto of *Atmanuthapam*, Chavara's autobiographical poem, offers contemplation on the deep mystery of Incarnation, which is a favourite theme for Chavara. He might have written this canto during the liturgical season of Annunciation or Christmas: Maybe because the Church, like Mary, is always awaiting the arrival of the Lord singing 'come Lord Jesus, come.' In the advent, in a very special way, "she is awaiting a birth." The virgin "sensed within herself, in body, and in soul," that the birth of her child was near. And surely in her heart she said to the baby she was carrying in her womb: come, I want to see your face, for they have told me you will be great!" Chavara accompanied Our Lady in this journey of waiting, giving birth to Jesus and all the experiences and we too wish to hasten the Lord's birth. Like Mother Mary he repeated hundreds of times, 'I long to see'.

For example, in *Atmanuthapam* Chavara contemplates deeply on the experience of the parents in embracing the new born baby:

പെറ്റൊരു മാതൃ തന്റെ പുത്രനെ കൈയ്യിൽ വാങ്ങി
കൊറ്റവർക്കധിപനാം പുത്രനെ വന്ദിച്ചമ്മ,
അന്നേരം കുഞ്ഞിപ്പെരുതൽ നയനം തുറന്നു തൻ
സുന്ദരമുഖിയായ അമ്മയെ തൃക്കണ്ഠപാർത്തു.

(*Atmanuthapam*, V/ 74/78)

Loving kisses: Seeing the new born baby for the first time the mother venerates and worships him. Then she kissed each part of his body; first his feet, hands, cheeks and the whole body. The poet contemplates the gestures of the mother and gives meaning to each kiss. Like the parents of Jesus, the poet too experienced joy and ecstasy of the first kiss of the new born baby. Chavara did not merely give us a sketchy account of the scene, but as a contemplative and keen observer of human behaviour, he gives the interesting details very meditatively:

അപ്പൊഴുതമ്മ തന്റെ സുഷ്ടിതാവെന്നുറച്ചു
തൃപ്പാദേ മുത്തി ഭക്ത്യാൽ. (*Atmanuthapam*, V/83-84)

എത്രയുമിച്ഛിച്ചുള്ള തനുജൻ പ്രിയ സുതൻ
ചിത്ര കൗതുകത്തോടെ മുത്തി തൻ കവിളിൽ.

(*Atmanuthapam*, V/87-88)

On the mother embracing the new-born baby he meditates:

The Babe on hearing His mother's voice
Stretched forth his lovely arms
The virgin holding Him closer still
Fondled him with her soft hands. (*Atmanuthapam*, V/97-98)

On the delight and ecstasy of the mother as she breast-feeds the he writes:

The mother fondly feeding her child
With milk at her breast I long to see
The holy awe, the mother enjoyed
While feeding him, I long to see. (*Atmanuthapam*, III/37-40)

In breast feeding, while accepting and enjoying the life-blood of the mother, there develops in the baby an intimate and strong bond of communion between the mother and child.

Chavara pictures the delight of St. Joseph in the presence of the new-born baby and sees the angels sing praises to the couple. The poet, with sincere feelings of love, describes the scene of St. Joseph fondling the child Jesus in his arms. With a soul-enthalling description of the Infant Jesus, Chavara concludes this section.

The poet describes the mother handing the baby Jesus to St. Joseph, her husband:

Accept, kiss him as you will,
 Welcome woe as well as joy!
 His foster-parent clasped him tight.
 With devotion he kissed His feet,
 His lovely baby hands. (*Atmanuthapam*, V/120-130)
 The limitless joy, Joseph felt
 While watching them both, I long to see.

(*Atmanuthapam*, III/41-42)

The poet pictured that seeing the mutual love and respect of the parents the baby Jesus smiled at them and blessed them. The birth of every child is a holy and joyful event and it unites the couples and the family members. The sleepless nights, nursing the children at their sick bed, postponing of so many activities, career sacrifices and so on are some of the self-sacrifices the parents make. The prize of parenting comes at a price. Pope Francis says: "I like to contemplate the holiness present in the patience of God's people: in those parents who raise their children with immense love and sacrifices..." (GE 7). Such expressions of 'mothering experiences' are not very familiar to male poets. However, in the Malayalam literature, it is commonly seen in the poems of Madhavikkutty, Balamani Amma, Sugathakumari and other poetesses.

Women should consider themselves as privileged co-creators with God in bringing forth human life. This perspective should enhance the way in which women see themselves. Women have very deep and intense experiences during pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding. Those are experiences that have sustained women through all the pain and discomfort of the bodily processes. These experiences are women's God experience and should be cherished, appreciated and valued as such. These experiences give women their dignity as women. Women, who are not able to or have chosen to conceive and give birth, experience God through nurturing others, especially children, the sick, the old and the infirm. Our bodies are created to love and bring forth in love. Loving and nurturing gives us the dignity derived from being created in the very image and likeness of God. In these presentations, Chavara is seen as a champion restoring dignity to women's body and their mothering experiences.

Contemplating on the dignity of women, Saint John Paul II notes in *Mulieris Dignitatem*:

Motherhood involves a special communion with the mystery of life, as it develops in the woman's womb. The mother is filled with wonder at this mystery of life, and 'understands' with unique intuition what is happening inside her. In the light of the 'beginning', the mother accepts and loves as a person the child she is carrying in her womb. This unique contact with the new human being developing within her gives rise to an attitude towards human beings – not only towards her own child, but every human being – which profoundly marks the woman's personality.⁴

He continues to remark on the responsibility given to women: "The moral and spiritual strength of woman is joined to her awareness that God entrusts the human being to her in a special way. Of course, God entrusts every human being to each and every other human being. But this entrusting concerns woman in a special way, precisely by reason of her femininity."⁵

5. Pope Francis' Presentation of Parents as Saints

In the history of the Church, very few lay people are canonized. This fact gives the impression that holiness or sainthood is not for those people who lead a family life. The statement of the Pope regarding our very parents becoming "*living saints* with all their self-emptying concern and care for us" opens the door of holiness to them. It assures the couples, parents and grandparents to live their marital spirituality more zealously. Declaring Louis Martin and Zelie Guerin, the parents of the Little Flower, saints, Pope Francis assured that parenting is a way to holiness.

We are called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we are. Our parents become living saints with all their self-emptying concern and care for us (GE 6, 14). If you are a parent or a grandparent, you are instructed to be holy by patiently teaching the little ones to follow Jesus (GE 14). Pope Francis contemplates the holiness present in the patience of God's people in their ordinary living. He lists several examples: holiness present "in those parents who raise their children with immense love, in those men and women who work hard to support their families, in the sick, in the elderly religious who never lost their smile." Their holiness is the holiness of the Church militant. This is the

⁴*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 18.

⁵*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 30.

holiness, which we often find in our “next door neighbours” who live amidst us and “reflect God’s presence” (GE 7).

6. Chavara Considered His Mother a Saint

Before Pope Francis instructed the people of God to regard their parents as saints, Chavara considered his mother a saint. For him the life she lived in the family by caring for her children and husband was enough to take her as a saint. For example, after receiving the Holy Communion or in preparation to welcome Jesus into his heart, he invites Mother Mary and his other favourite motherly saints including his own mother “എന്റെ അമ്മ എന്നെ പെററവൾ” (“My mother who gave birth to me”). Chavara contemplated the holiness present in his mother who raised her children with immense love, devotion, self-sacrifice and patience and she attained holiness through ordinary, daily and mundane activities. He believed in the possibility of becoming a saint by living one’s holiness through small gestures. He instructed the sisters of the convent at Koonammavu: “When you open or shut the door, when you are in the room or at work, when you walk, when you spit, when you sit down, when you sweep with a broom or when you pray, remain united to God.”⁶

7. Celebration of Love

Amoris Laetitia is a celebration of love that is treated lavishly and extensively in its fourth chapter. Many call the chapter the masterpiece of the entire document. The chapter is aptly and appropriately named Love in Marriage. After the love that unites us to God, the document considers conjugal love as the ‘greatest form of friendship (AL 123). It is a tribute to married couples’ energizing and binding love for each other. Conjugal love is no more treated as a concession granted to the weak to save themselves from allurements of concupiscence. It is seen within the realm of God’s love and friendship. Love is not a conceptual, philosophical notion, but it is relational. It unites human beings who are made in the image and likeness of God; God is essentially love; and, thus, family becomes an image of heaven.

8. Sacredness of Human sexuality

Many approach human sexuality with fear and trepidation and often it is reluctantly discussed in hushed tones. In this way, some avoid scandalizing the weak or the sanctimonious. Unfortunately, there is a

⁶CKC 1.

certain amount of distorted notion about human sexuality and it is treated like a taboo by many. Today, the Church has come a long way to accept the reality and the sacredness of human sexuality, and yet, some sort of vague, hazy and fuzzy approach to sexuality still lingers on in some circles. A right approach to and a holistic view of human sexuality come only when one accepts the fact that all are made in the image and likeness of God. The male-female differences are not something one can casually dismiss as something of no importance.

In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis clearly states: "God himself created sexuality, which is a marvellous gift to his creatures" (AL 150). Marriage was not instituted solely for procreation of children, but also for the expression of mutual love, that it should grow and mature (AL 125). It contends that the Church's official teaching has never rejected 'Eros' as such, but she has exposed the destructive form of it. With clarity the Pope writes: "In no way ... can we consider the erotic dimension of love simply as a permissible evil or a burden to be tolerated for the good of the family. Rather, it must be seen as gift from God that enriches the relationship of the spouses" (AL 125). Thus, he encourages the spouses to celebrate the gift of human sexuality and elevate it to the level of Christian virtue, which will enable them to build a family of love and compassion. "Sexual union, lovingly experienced and sanctified by the sacrament, is in turn a path of growth in the life of grace for the couple" (AL 74). *Amoris Laetitia* has given a holistic outlook on human sexuality, which every human person needs to accept as a great gift from God, whatever may be one's status in life - married, single, consecrated or celibate. No one could read these words of spiritual wisdom of Pope Francis and not be deepened in his/her commitment to his/her families and marital spirituality.

9. Children and their Upbringing

In the *Testament of a Loving Father*, under the title 'Upbringing of Children' Chavara numbered 16 points, which can be seen as a reflection of his satisfaction in the kind of upbringing he received from his family. He opens this session by powerfully placing the responsibility of parents in establishing good family relationship at home. "Parents, remember that it is your primary duty and responsibility to bring up your children."⁷ To his parents, family life was an experience, a period of self-sacrifice, commitment - a bond of

⁷Chavarul, II: 1.

love relation. Hence, he warns: "Children are sacred treasures entrusted to you by God. Know that these children have been entrusted to you, to be purified with the precious blood of Jesus, to be trained in his service and to be returned to God on the judgment day; your child belongs to God." Today many parents struggle with disciplining their children. Many families are child-centred, acting according to the child's likes and dislikes; as a result, very often the child gets spoiled.

10. Mother's Role in Upbringing Children

Chavara appreciated Thoppil Mariam's (his own mother) method of disciplining children. Parenting is difficult. Can a child be disciplined without beating, shouting and scolding? Thoppil Mariam proved it affirmatively for which Kuriakose is proud of her. He claims that his mother never beat him:

യാതൊരു കാരണാൽ കരുവാലും കരത്താലും തൊട്ടില്ല.

എല്ലാം കണ്ണുകൊണ്ടു കഴിച്ചിടും

ദുഃഖിപ്പിക്കും തോഷിപ്പിക്കും ചക്ഷുസ്സാൽ

നോട്ടം കണ്ടാൽ ഭയപ്പെടുമഹം. (*Atmanuthapam*, 1/81/84)

Chavara praised God for the infinite mercy He had shown through his parents, especially his mother (*Atmanuthapam*, 1/119/133). She disciplined him with her eyes; no shouting, no beating, no scolding. Looking into the eyes of his mother he came to know what he had done was right or wrong. Her approval or disapproval for his behaviour was written in her look. On account of this kind of an upbringing, Kuriakose became a favourite of God.

While breast-feeding, his mother instilled in him the divine virtues and the heroes of the Bible became his heroes.

Mixed in her sweet milk, she regaled me

With thoughts of heaven, and words of grace so pure!

And when reason grew strong, my little mind

Patently, informed, to lisp holy names

Huddled close to her feet, I learnt aright

Gently, of matters sublime, of my faith

As at midnight she rose and knelt at prayer

Warding off sleep and petty dullness to the air

Long hours, on her knee in prayer she stayed

Leaning on her then I would seat myself.

(*Atmanuthapam*, 1/ 49/60)

Chavara gives wings to his appreciation for his mother's method of disciplining: He notes that she was a praying mother, she taught him

how to pray and instilled faith in him and she introduced to him other great mothers such as Mary of Nazareth, Teresa of Avila, the mother saint of mystical prayer, 3 Marys (Saint Mary of Egypt, Saint Mary of Cortona and Saint Mary Magdalene), whom he called penitential mothers (പരിഹാര മധ്യസ്ഥകൾ, എപ്പോഴും എന്നെ തുണക്കുന്ന അമ്മമാർ).

When John Paul II wrote a letter in 1995 thanking the women of the world for all they had done and continue to do for society and for the church, his words echoed St. Chavara's presentation of his mother:

Thank you, women who are mothers! You have sheltered human beings within yourselves in a unique experience of joy and travail. This experience makes you become God's own smile upon the new born child, the one who guides your child's first steps, who helps it to grow, and who is the anchor as the child makes its way along the journey of life.⁸

On 13 January 2019, Pope Francis reminded parents of their task of transmitting the faith to their children. He stressed that they must do so with their own example, with their own life of faith and not just through catechism classes, but at home, making their children see Jesus there and know Him.

11. Feminine Style of Holiness for the Church

Pope Francis acclaims the "genius of woman that shines in the feminine styles of holiness," which is the essential means of reflecting God's holiness in this world. Indeed, in times when women tended to be most ignored or overlooked, the Holy Spirit raised up saints whose attractiveness produced new spiritual vigour and important reforms in the Church. He mentions the examples of saints Hildegard, Bridget, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila and Therese of Lisieux. But the pope also remembers "all those unknown or forgotten women who, each in their own way, sustained and transformed families and communities by the power of their witness (GE 12). In another place in the Exhortation, in order to explain how holiness grows through small gestures, Pope Francis gives an illustration of an everyday feminine style of holiness.

A woman goes shopping, she meets a neighbour and they begin to speak, and gossip starts. But she says in her heart: "no, I will not speak badly of anyone." This is a step forward in holiness, later, at home, one of her children wants to talk to her about his hopes and dreams, and even though she is tired, she sits down and listens

⁸Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women in 1995, no. 2.

with patience and love. That is another sacrifice that brings holiness. Later she experiences some anxiety, but recalling the love of the Virgin Mary, she takes her rosary and prays with faith. Yet another path of holiness. Later still, she goes out into the street, encounters a poor person and stops to say a kind word to him. One more step (GE 16).

Time and again Pope Francis has striven to highlight the importance of feminine genius in every area of the Church's life. What we saw in this example is yet another illustration of his commitment to the cause of highlighting feminine style of spirituality in the context of their family and motherhood.

This is true about Chavara as well. A number of motherly saints, he believed, always helped him. When he is in his meditation, he is surrounded by all these motherly saints. He pictures his meditation room in this manner: Jesus is seated on a throne of mercy, at his right side Mother Mary and at his left Saint Joseph are seated. Mother Teresa of Avila is kneeling down in front of the throne of Jesus in order to teach him how to meditate well. Those penitential mothers are there to intercede for him. [One may notice that except Saint Joseph he has not mentioned the name of any male saints in his life]. Whereas these motherly saints had great influence in his life. He seemed to believe that feminine style of holiness is an essential means of reflecting God's holiness in this world. May be because of such a belief, in his poem "*Anastasiayude Rakthasakshyam*," he presented Anastasia, a woman martyr as a heroic model of faith commitment to Jesus. He wrote this poem in 1862 when the faith of the Church of Kerala was shaken because of the arrival of a schismatic bishop Thomas Roccas and many parishes had accepted him as their bishop sent for them. That young martyr Anasthasia is presented before the Saint Thomas Christians as a shining star who in the midst of great persecution and suffering stood firm in her strong faith. One may wonder why he was attracted by the story of this young girl while in the Roman martyriology hundreds or thousands of male martyrs are there.

Another example of his appreciation for feminine style of holiness can be this: In the collection of his daily prayers we see a prayer used by a fifteen-year-old Protestant girl who died in her sanctity. She prayed daily a particular prayer for attaining happy death. Saint Chavara kept it as his favourite prayer. She was not a catholic, nor a canonized saint. Still he allowed himself to be touched by the prayer of a teenage girl.

One may notice in his autobiographical poem *Atmanuthapam* that he wrote more than 100 happy lines about his mother. [But about his father he is totally silent.] He had a bright picture of his mother which enabled him to form a noble vision on the greatness of womanhood. He worked hard to empower women and raise their status in the society. He addressed the sisters in the convent at Koonammavu as 'O! Royal ladies' (മഹാരാജസ്ത്രീകളേ), 'the spouses of my Lord!' He loved the sisters and they loved him too. He admitted the depth and beauty of that love as he writes to them: "You love me now more than you love your blood relatives. I, too, do the same." He gratefully accepted the contribution of women in his undertakings and recorded it for the posterity.

Chavarul clearly speaks of parents' accompaniment and their responsibility to give proper education to their children: "As soon as the children come to the age of reason they must be sent to school. Besides, parents should be enquiring how the children study and behave, and who their companions are. Their studies should be tested every Sunday."⁹ He seems to be aware of the possible influences outside the family, such as peers, adults other than parents and media that affect children in healthy or unhealthy ways. We also see many psychological insights in the upbringing of children in the *Chavarul*: "Do not send your children to stay with your relatives, for very often they leave your house as angels and return as devils."¹⁰

12. Mutual Respect in the Family

Chavara gives much emphasis to mutual respect in the family. He says: "Seeing the father respecting the mother, children must respect their mother. The mother should set an example to the children in honouring and loving their father. So also the father should show love and respect for the mother. If the parents do not respect each other, neither will their children respect them."¹¹ It means that if father does not respect the mother, children also will not respect their mother, sons will not respect their wives, boys will not respect girls, brothers will not respect their sisters and priests will not respect ladies or religious women... A good number of children have not seen their fathers respecting their mothers or fathers giving equal dignity to their mothers. Instead, a widespread understanding is that wife must be

⁹*Chavarul*, II: 6.

¹⁰*Chavarul*, II: 7.

¹¹*Chavarul*, II: 9.

inferior to husband – in age, size, beauty, talents, educational qualification, salary, etc. If the wife is more educated, earning more, more beautiful, more known than her husband, if the wife is earning and husband is jobless, ego clash begins and leads to wife-beating, belittling the wife's parents and family and the husband inflicts many other forms of torture, both mental and physical. In such families, children do not grow in the atmosphere of mutual respect and love as Chavara expects. For a good number of men, wife is meant for cooking, cleaning, procreating and giving sexual pleasure to her husband ..., in short, attending to *his* needs.

The husband looks at the wife as an unpaid servant, not as a partner equal in dignity. A father's first responsibility to his child is to show that he loves his wife. Poor parents who fight and do not have unity raise poor and unhappy children. Rich parents who do not have love and unity raise rich and unhappy children. Your gift to your children is your happy married life. Your child will become what you are, so be what you want them to be. The most favoured children in the world are those whose parents love each other.

13. Unequal Status of Boys and Girls at Home

Preferential treatment of the son is another reason for lack of mutual love and respect in the families. The birth of a boy child in a family, especially in the North Indian states, is celebrated in various ways, not only on that day of birth but continuously on different occasions of festivals and gatherings. Whereas, the birth of a girl child is not a welcome event; instead of celebrations some families raise a loud cry when a girl child is born. She is considered less important compared to the boy in the family. The boys are served first, after taking meals they can play; they are given the best education, best medical care, etc., but the girls are deprived of all these. Discrimination against the girl child and women in matters of food, health and education has direct repercussions on the health and education of the other members of the family. Since women are child bearers, discrimination against women results in the poor health of the children, infant mortality and/or maternal mortality.

Another area that women are most ignored or overlooked is the decision-making regarding the family matters, study of the children, etc., which also tells us that women have to fight for space in the decision-making power politics within the family, community, places of work and in the Church. Pope John Paul II says: "The awareness that in marriage there is mutual subjugation out of reverence for

Christ, and not just that of wife for husband, must gradually establish itself in the heart, consciences, behaviour and customs. This is a call which ... does not cease to challenge future generations."¹² The increasing number of sexual violence and atrocities against women, which is termed as 'epidemic of sexual violence' can be seen as the result of the lack of respect of the father for mother and husband for wife. "In creating the human race 'male and female', God gives men and women equal personal dignity, endowing them with inalienable rights and responsibilities proper to the human person."¹³ The unequal treatment prevailed in the families has been perpetuated in the Church in different forms. The services of the priests and men religious are considered great, not that of the women religious. Pope John Paul II observes:

Many forms of degrading discrimination still persist today in a great part of our society that affect and seriously harm particular categories of women, as for example, childless wives, widows, separated or divorced women and unmarried mothers. The Synod Fathers deplored these and other forms of discrimination as strongly as possible. I, therefore, ask that vigorous and incisive pastoral action be taken by all to overcome them definitely so that the image of God that shines in all human beings without exception may be fully respected.¹⁴

14. Challenges and Pastoral Care to Families

The global scenario of family life does not present a glowing and rosy picture but a bleak and grim reality of the contemporary society. The number of dysfunctional and broken families is on the rise, compared to yester years. Husband and wife living apart has become a common phenomenon. Life for everyone has turned harsh and family tragedies are on the increase: divorce, depression, rebellion, teen suicide, alcoholism and drug addiction are some of them. Mixed marriages need special pastoral care since these marriages provide occasions for interreligious dialogue (AL 248). Those with homosexual orientation are to be shown pastoral concern (AL 251). Care and respect need to be shown for the sufferings of those who have unjustly endured separation, divorce, abandonment or those who have been victims of maltreatment from a husband or a wife. Those who are divorced and

¹²*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 24.

¹³*Familiaris Consortio*, 24.

¹⁴*Familiaris Consortio*, 24.

have entered into new unions must also be made to feel part of the Church.

‘The pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization’ or ‘the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and in the contemporary world’ is a great concern of Pope Francis and of the Church today. This is the first time in the history of the Church that two synods were convoked in consecutive years with almost the same theme – Family. It clearly discloses and strongly conveys the message that the Church is concerned with the family life of the faithful and she wants to visibly manifest her maternal care for all her children, especially during these times of desolation and turbulence.

When family life becomes weak in the society and the family is not valued – when goals become extremely individualistic – the society begins to deteriorate and eventually falls. The role of the family in building up a just, emotionally stable and healthy society has become an energizing topic and recurring concern of people of all nationalities and cultures. The call here is to make every family a loving home. The couples, elderly parents, those who are terminally ill and bedridden, parents who are worried about their kids’ waywardness, etc., want to pour out their struggles and difficulties before someone. They may not expect from us ready answers or solutions. We need to equip ourselves in order to be effective pastors and in the family apostolate what we need is a listening heart.