

Editorial

The Church is a Family of Families

Pope Francis established the Year of the Family to help strengthen faith and live God's joy more fruitfully in family life. *Amoris Laetitia*, a post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation by Pope Francis, addressed families' pastoral care. It covers a range of topics related to marriage and family, challenges faced by families, and what the people in the faith community can do to accompany the family in difficult situations. Pope Francis states that the family is an image of the Trinity. While there is 'no perfect family...we are not perfect, do not get married to a perfect person, neither do we have perfect children,' we have to adopt a point of view of realism to avoid an abstract and artificial notion of marriage which is far from the lived experiences of families in the world today. Pope Francis referred to it as a particular year to grow in family love and an opportunity for a renewed and creative pastoral drive to place the family at the center of both Church and society. His hope for every family was that they might feel the living presence of the Holy Family of Nazareth in their home, which may fill the small domestic communities with sincere and generous love, a source of joy even in trials and difficulties.

The central theme of the January 2022 *Vinayasadhana* edition is 'The Church is a Family of Families.' The edition focuses on families and reflects on various aspects of families, parenting, the role of parents, and spiritual fathers, with a few articles reflecting on the characteristics of the Holy Family. It is no surprise that after almost two years of battle against the COVID-19 virus, one of the challenges amongst a variety of global issues has been the issue of stability in families. The Editorial brings into light the relevance of experiences and challenges of families as described in *Amoris Laetitia*, especially with the impact

of COVID-19, and how the Church can accompany families during difficult times as it is a Family of Families.

Joy of Love

Pope Francis also invites us to understand the Joy of Love as a continuity with the wisdom and pastoral practice that comes with the long tradition of the Church. The teachings of the ‘word of truth and hope’ reflected upon are drawn the Scripture and Church’s teaching heavily in the Magisterium, especially in that of Pope Paul VI (e.g., *Humanae Vitae*), Pope John Paul II (*Familiaris Consortio* and the Theology of the Body in particular), Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI (*Deus Caritas Est*) and the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

The role of bishops and priests to provide pastoral care and support to families to help them realize their role in the Church is one of the emphases placed in the Church (*AL* 200, 202). The Church also has recognized that the lay faithful minister pastorally serves as specialists, family advisers, and consultants in various Church bodies (*Familiaris Consortio* 75). Hence the contribution is not limited to having concerns for families but an increase in the evangelization of parish communities as families. Such care and support require committed and enthusiastic pastors and increased involvement in the lay faithful.

World-renowned Family psychologist and researcher Gottman was a part of 40-year research with couples and what makes relationships work. In their book *Eight Dates: Essential Conversations for a Lifetime of Love*, they offered to empower ways to discover the loved one wants and deserves and brought out eight funs conversation-based dates for a lifetime of love: trust and commitment, conflict, sex and intimacy, work and money, family, growth and spirituality, and dreams. The goal of the book is to be able to love one’s partner more deeply each and every year of togetherness. In their study, they found out that the couples who were most likely to have happy marriages had the following qualities and characteristics when they talked about their relationships: fondness, affection, and admiration either verbally or nonverbally while expressing positive affect for each other; a sense of togetherness instead of separateness; expansiveness versus withdrawal where they share vivid and distinctive memories; and they glorified their struggles where they express pride that they survived difficult times, emphasize commitment to the relationship, and talk about shared meaning and purpose, values, goals, and life philosophy. Connecting to the message

given by Pope Francis, the book reflects a lot of how couples who move forward with love and forgiveness can have happier and long-lasting relationships.

Challenges Faced by Families. Some of the challenges that are mentioned in *Amoris Laetitia* includes the lack of personal communication between spouses that could make family life more humane, less support from social structures compared to the past, extreme individualism, which weakens family bonds and feelings of isolation, and fear of entrapment in a relationship, to name a few.

The lack of personal communication between the spouses and the decrease in social support are becoming more pronounced. With the COVID-19 pandemic, as families were pushed to sit together at home due to social restrictions, communication became evident as they were forced to face the situation day-in and day-out. The American Psychological Association (June 25, 2020)

While individualism can foster spontaneity and exploration of one's talents, it can develop attitudes of suspicion, fear of commitment, self-centredness, and arrogance (*AL* 33). In the collectivistic culture of India, the introduction of excessive individualization has brought about a lot of disharmony in the families. Future research can focus on how the Church and the Mental Health Community help assimilate positive aspects of individualism while respecting a collectivistic society's boundaries and constructive features. Studies have shown individualist behavior intended to serve collectivist interests (Sinha, Sinha, Verma, & Sinha, 2004).

Pope Francis also commented on the 'fear of loneliness and the desire for stability and fidelity that exists along with the 'growing fear of entrapment in a relationship that is hampering the achievement of one's personal goals. The fear of entrapment is associated with a range of related fears, including the fear of loss of personal freedoms, a fear of disempowerment or of being controlled, a fear of intimacy and relationship commitment, and a fear of being unable or unwilling to meet relationship expectations (Schinieder, 2019). Pope Francis has in the past met with and encouraged groups that help married couples in crisis to find ways to address the root problems in their relationship and move towards healing and renewal (Vatican News, 2021). A practical approach to the accompaniment of pastors and priests with couples

includes helping them improve communication and rediscovering their love for each other to strengthen their marriage.

Family is the Cradle of Mercy. The tone of Mercy was initially set by Pope John XXIII in his Spiritual Itinerary and later in his famous opening address to the Second Vatican Council. He talked about Mercy as a medicine for healing. Pope John Paul II wrote the second encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, Latin for ‘Rich in Mercy,’ where he examines the roles of Mercy both in terms of God’s Mercy and the need for human Mercy. Through the Parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15: 11-32), he reminds us that Mercy is intended to give value and not humiliate the man. He reminds the Church to practice Mercy through the teachings of Jesus Christ. Benedict XVI, too, said:

“Mercy is indeed the central nucleus of the Gospel message; it is the very name of God... May all that the Church says and does manifest the Mercy God feels for mankind. When the Church has to recall an unrecognized truth or a betrayed good, she always does so impelled by merciful love, so that men may have life and have it abundantly” (*Regina Caeli*, 2008).

Pope Francis mentions that all of us are called “to keep striving towards something greater than ourselves and our families, and every family must feel this constant impulse. Let us make this journey as families, let us keep walking together” (*AL* 325). With neurological evidence showing brain plasticity in infants in the womb, data shows promising findings in how the human brain is conducive to change (George, 2017). As a cradle provides a safe space for the child, so should the family give a place of growth and development, nurture, and care for each of its members. This family could play a significant role in the sustainable and integral ecology as God placed the man and women in the Garden to be fruitful and take care of it. The *pastoral ministry can use the Amoris Laetitia* for guidance with families. Pope Francis said, “Marriage and family must be the central theme in pastoral care because the family is the way of the Church.”

Children. A report on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children, Youth, and Families (2020) drew upon Bronfenbrenner’s ecological system theory to understand a child’s immediate surroundings and expand to the larger environment: micro-level, which include the family and home life; meso-level which consists of the larger system with schools and healthcare; and the macro-level which indirectly

impact youth and families but permeate our communal beliefs, values, and culture. The use of the theory helped the report indicate that in all levels of a child's ecological system, the COVID-19 brought about challenges that need to be addressed. The issues with quarantine, social isolation, child abuse and neglect, family losses and separations, sleep disturbances, and exposure to unhealthy coping behaviors and environments are some of the challenges listed at the micro-level. At the macro level, school closures and limited access to mental health care is major challenge, especially considering how both parents and children at all levels were affected by this. In the larger community and society, there has been an increase in general anxiety, stigma against those testing positive for COVID-19, and racism, which can indirectly impact children and families. It is no small responsibility that the Church has on its shoulders to understand and care for the children in the community.

Time and again, Pope Francis returns to the topic of children. He understands parents are 'the foundation of the home' and children as the 'living stones' of the family (*AL 14*). He uses Psalm 128 to speak of "the gift of children" with the imagery drawn from the building of a house and the social life of cities (*AL 14*). Chapter 7 has been dedicated to the education of children. Parents need to consider their responsibility in ensuring that they are aware of what their children are exposed to, the forms of entertainment the children get, their peer groups, and their exposure to the contents in television and electronic media (*AL 260*).

Nowadays, researchers and practitioners in human development believe that early situations and connections matter (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). When provided with a close, true connection that gives love, nurturance, security, responsive collaboration, and consolation, children develop and flourish. As children and youth experience stress differently from adults, there is a need to identify and intervene early so that the long-term effects of stress can be diminished (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). The responsible parent can look out for various possible signs of stress among teens and children: negative changes in behavior, recognizing that children' feeling sick' may be caused by stress; being aware of how the child or teen interacts with others, listening to words of distress, and seek support (APA, September 5, 2019). "Children are a gift from the Lord; they are a reward from Him" (Psalm 127:3). Jesus asks us to let the little children

come to him and not to hinder them as the kingdom of heaven belongs to children (Matthew 19:14). The priests and the Church community must often remind parents that it is a blessing and a responsibility to be parents.

Parenting during COVID-19 Pandemic. It is necessary to acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic has altered lifestyles and environments in the family due to social restrictions and work-from-home situations. UNICEF acknowledged that parenting in the pandemic is a critical issue of concern. The organization answered mental health questions, attaining balance, busy work schedules, and keeping children motivated during the pandemic. The challenge for parents is to realize that in addition to working on personal and workplace struggles, they have to acknowledge and be there for their children to help them cope with the pandemic.

As the pandemic stressors continue, children's mental health needs to be taken seriously. A whopping 71% of parents said that the pandemic took a toll on their child's mental health, and 69% of parents said that the pandemic was the worst thing to happen to their child (Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, 2020). American Psychological Association (April 20, 2020), to help parents cope with the stresses of the present pandemic, gave seven pieces of advice: acknowledge your emotions, set boundaries, establish a routine, relax screen time rules, communicate with supervisors and co-workers, share responsibilities, and practice self-care. Among all of the suggestions, the common theme is that the individual needs to acknowledge their psychological needs and mitigate the present problems. Families, especially in post-pandemic times, need the help of the community they are a part of, and the Church plays a vital role in it.

Church: A Family of Families

Pope Francis, in *Amoris Laetitia*, mentioned the words "accompany" and "accompaniment" more than 60 times. The challenge of the Church is to come to a new understanding of pastoral care of families, which primarily includes parishes and families that belong to them (Kamiński, 2009). Pastoral conversion is necessary for accompanying families (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 25). Pope Francis emphasized that family is the "fruitful covenant between a man and a woman." This family could play a significant role in the sustainable and integral ecology as God placed the man and women in the Garden to be fruitful and take care

of it. Jesus accompanies the Church through the difficulties of bringing the Gospel to the family (*AL*, 60). Likewise, pastors must work to make people feel welcome in the Church. *Amoris Laetitia* offers the vision of a pastoral and merciful church that encourages people to experience the “joy of love.” The family is an essential part of the Church because, after all, the Church is a “family of families” (80).

One of the ways in which the Church and pastors can achieve pastoral care is by focusing on the sacrament of marriage (*AL* 200, 202). Accompanying engaged and married couples can help them learn and live a life of spirituality in the family. Also, understanding families as units that require care to strengthen their faith and mature in love (*AL* 211, 230) is necessary among pastors who need to be more enthusiastic in using their knowledge of the Scripture and position to help families.

According to Pope Francis, there are two aspects at the heart of all family ministry: “the frankness of the proclamation of the Gospel and the tenderness of accompaniment.’ The Church needs to help the couples, spouses and families grasp the ‘authentic meaning of the union and love, the sign and image of Trinitarian love and the covenant between Christ and the Church.’ The giving and caring nature of the Church thus entails the Scripture-based understanding of a family that accompanies each other during difficult times. “Holy Family of Nazareth, make us once more mindful of the sacredness and inviolability of the family and its beauty in God’s plan” (*AL* 325).

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