

The Church as Source of Christian and Conscience Formation According to the Encyclicals of John Paul II

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Abstract

Christians, empowered by baptism, are urged to embody and propagate Christian values through various avenues, such as families and organizations, promoting Gospel-centered living and compassion. This echoes Paul's teachings and the parable of the Good Samaritan. Families play a crucial role in nurturing community spirit and adherence to Church doctrines, shaping consciences according to Christian ethics, and inspiring acts of kindness. Churches, acting as agents of unity and reconciliation, facilitate dialogue and understanding amidst societal divisions. They provide spiritual refuge for the marginalized, advocating for equity and equality based on biblical principles. Through education, advocacy, service, and prayer, the Church endeavours to create a just and inclusive society in line with Christ's message of unity and interconnectedness.

Keywords: Christianity, Baptism, Families, Church, Unity

Introduction

We can categorically say that a religion that neglects its spiritual core is doomed to wither and fade into obscurity. The growth of religion is empirically evident in its achievement of spiritual comprehension. We see how His Holiness Pope John Paul II envisioned the spiritual duties of the Church. To Christians, the term "great treasure" is familiar

in ecclesiastical language. What does it mean? We can see some aspects of the Church, such as the Bible, the Apostolic Fathers, and their teachings, practices, etc., which have continued for the past 2000 years. But the most salient feature is the ‘personal experience of Christ by the faithful,’ which gives meaning to Christian living. The Bible, the Apostles’ teachings, and the Church’s teachings aim to help humanity experience God’s love.

Christian spirituality stems from the teachings of Jesus Christ and their interpretation by Church Fathers throughout history. These interpretations, added to the Church’s “treasure,” show how Christ’s message continues to be relevant and “incarnate” in new contexts. This ongoing process highlights the dynamic nature of Christian faith, which should not be solely judged by material growth. True growth lies in deepening understanding and personal connection, not the number of institutions the Church runs.

Misconceptions about growth often focus on material aspects, but the essence lies in spiritual development. This concept aligns with Thomas Nehrer’s work, “The Essence of Reality,” which explores the complex interaction between our minds and the world, and how our “inner selves” influence our lives. By providing tools for self-reflection and change, Nehrer’s work aligns with the spiritual growth emphasized in Christian teachings.

Throughout history, the Church has emphasized the difference between core principles and methods. Its teachings, like Vatican Council II documents, remind followers that material aspects (means) serve only to achieve the ultimate goal (essence). This goal is sharing Christ’s message with today’s believers through “incarnation,” achieved primarily by current Christ-centered individuals. This “reinterpretation” for each generation is what defines evangelism and fuels the Church’s growth. The Church, entrusted with “a great treasure,” sees its growth as its primary task. It guides its followers, reminding them of their duty to proclaim the “Word of God” through personal reinterpretation and living out its essence. This “living reinterpretation” is the Church’s core spirituality.

Spiritual Formation of Conscience

The importance of conscience is self-evident, as it is integral to our being. Respecting the conscience of others is synonymous with showering love on them. Social interactions harmoniously proceed

because many strive to respect their neighbour's conscience. This mentality of respecting others lays the foundation for peace in families, communities, societies, etc. A well-formed conscience is the root of a good society or community. A clear conscience makes a soft pillow. Invariably, there is a solid need to have an honest, upright life, and let me tell you, a clear conscience is indeed a prerequisite.

How do we define a well-formed conscience? It must be considered in light of the time, circumstances, culture, and the good of the community or society. A civilised human society has an ideal behavioural system for its members, supported by morality, spirituality, tradition, and so on, recognising every person's importance in the community.

A well-formed conscience considers factors like context, culture, and societal well-being. It's an internal sense of right and wrong, like a built-in guide. Derived from the Latin word for "knowledge," conscience implies moral awareness. It prompts us through "pangs of conscience" when faced with ethical dilemmas. This awareness encompasses obligations to God, community, and oneself. Mere knowledge of right and wrong is insufficient. We need guidance to form and apply our conscience. For Christians, the Church's teachings based on the Gospels provide that crucial guidance. A well-formed conscience may be the only true guide a person can rely upon" (Kochalumkal, 2003, p.90). We need to be guided by someone to assess and form our conscience. The reliable help Christians receive from the Church is because she teaches, directs, and evaluates us according to the teachings of the Gospels.

A problem may occur when someone says, "I acted according to my conscience." This is where the term "well-formed conscience" becomes relevant. A particular person's conscience, while it may be right for him/her, may not be right for other people. Their conscience is not an isolated reality, as they are part of a family and a particular society. Therefore, their conscience is inevitably linked with the consciences of the family and the community in which they live. "Serious decisions taken lightly, judgments made on the basis of insufficient information, failure to consult appropriate authorities in complex questions, can all lead to an erroneous conscience" (The New Dictionary of Theology, p.229). In this case, one needs help from society to develop a right conscience. Conscience means our internal voice. A man who evaluates situations by listening to his inner voice and acts in accordance after introspection is a 'man with a conscience.'

The Church is an effective way to form the human conscience in accordance with the expectations of society. Since the Holy Spirit guides the Church, she has the moral authority and obligation to direct her children for the common good. She has a crucial duty to give all of humanity the formation of conscience, especially her children, according to the expectations of the natural laws and particular laws that are essentially related to each other. Therefore, the Pope says, “Christians have a great help for the formation of conscience in the Church and her Magisterium” (Veritatis Splendor-64). The Church’s main task is to communicate the meaning of the Word of God to humanity.

The Church’s teaching body (Magisterium) guides its members to heed conscience, a moral compass. Frequent neglect of its warnings can weaken it. To prevent this, the Church reminds believers of their duty, mainly accepting Church teachings. Leaders then implement these at the local level, adapting them to cultural context. The Church’s teachings are tenaciously grounded in truth. “The Church remains faithful to the integral truth about man; she thus respects and promotes man in his dignity and vocation. Consequently, she must reject the theories which contradict this truth” (Veritatis Splendor-83). The Holy Spirit inspires the Church to teach truth because God is the source of the eternal truth. The Church must teach and enable the faithful to follow truth, which is illuminated through the medium of good conscience.

Formation of conscience is a major challenge for the Church because it is through this faculty that human beings discern good from evil and make decisions for themselves. “The Church seeks, with great love, to help all the faithful to form a moral conscience which will make judgments and lead to decisions in accordance with the truth” (Veritatis Splendor-85). The Church desires that every human being respond to their conscience, and she teaches them how to do so. But this is not the end of the Church’s mission. It is the duty of human beings to be willing to form their conscience according to the law of God. This is the relationship between the Church’s teaching and the formation of conscience.

The Church empowers humanity to make sound decisions, judgments with adequate information and to discern one’s unique calling without infringing on the rights of others. To achieve these qualities, we must overcome selfishness, ignorance, prejudice, arrogance, feelings of superiority, and self-sufficiency (The New Dictionary of Theology,

p.229). However, a common criticism of the Church is that her teachings restrict the freedom of Christians. This is true only when one evaluates the Church superficially, without understanding the purpose of human existence.” Freedom is the power, rooted in reason and will, to act, not to act, do this or that, and perform deliberate actions on one’s responsibility. By free will, one shapes one’s own life. Human freedom is a force for growth and maturity in truth and goodness; it attains its perfection when directed toward God, our beatitude” (Catechism of the Catholic Church-1731).

The Church promotes this freedom through her teachings based on the Gospels. As the Pope has said, “The authority of the Church in no way undermines the freedom of conscience of Christians. ... The Church puts herself always and only at the *service of conscience*, helping it to avoid being tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine proposed by human deceit and helping it not to swerve from the truth about the good of man but rather, especially in more difficult questions, to attain the truth with certainty and to abide in it” (Veritatis Splendor-64).

“Freedom is exercised in relationships between human beings. Every human person, created in the image of God, has the natural right to be recognised as a free and responsible being. All owe to each other this duty of respect” (Catechism of the Catholic Church-1738). The Church stands for “this duty of respect,” and therefore, she teaches humanity this universal truth. The self-proclaimed defenders of “freedom” forget the Church’s status. For Christians, the Church is Mother. Can a mother remain silent when her children are in danger? Will a mother promote wrongdoing among her children? Is it right to say that civil laws restrict people’s freedom since they are one of the organs of conscience formation in society? Is it not hypocrisy to advocate the right of civil authorities to help people form a conscience while questioning the exact role of religious authorities? The formation of conscience by civil law restricts people’s freedom more than religious leaders do because fear of punishment compels people to follow civil laws. As the mother of the faithful, the Church never destroys people’s freedom but rather provides support during times of difficulty. When God provides a lot of responsibility or burden, he ensures the person to utilise his broad shoulders to carry it.

The Church stands for truth; her ultimate aim is to lead her children to truth. This does not mean that the Church has always been perfectly sincere in her living of truth. Yes, the Church may have made mistakes in

its past. She never clings to her mistakes, but once she recognises them, she is hopeful and open to accepting them and trying to move beyond them. The Church believes that truth is the only agent of freedom. “The Church’s firmness in defending the universal and unchanging moral norms is not demeaning at all. Its only purpose is to serve man’s true freedom. Because there can be no freedom apart from or in opposition to the truth, the categorical – obstinate and uncompromising – defence of the absolutely essential demands of man’s personal dignity must be considered the way and the condition for the very existence of freedom” (Veritatis Splendor-96). The Church believes in the freedom that fosters the integral growth of the faithful. She is steadfast in its responsibility to form the moral integrity of Christians. She is prepared to face challenges and criticism to protect the rights of the faithful. Integrity is the foundation of leadership. We only lead people if they trust us. That’s why the right to lead is earned, and it’s earned by being trustworthy. The most damaging sin a leader can commit is to betray the trust of his/her people.

As a guide for its faithful, the Church may limit its freedom when facing moral dangers from philosophies or emerging trends. This stems from its role as a protector and adherence to Gospel teachings. The Church doesn’t compromise its core principles due to societal changes without carefully considering their impact on Christians. Christian principles, rooted in real experiences with Christ, are not mere ideals but require intellectual engagement. The Church encourages “full use of reason” (*Fides Et Ratio*) to strengthen faith. In contrast to other ideologies imposing rigid rules, the Church invites its followers to examine their faith using reason critically. The Church empowers its members to make choices, including challenging ones, even seeking guidance from various sources like the government. However, the imperfections of any organisation compel individuals to exercise discernment. Laws, for instance, can be influenced by majority beliefs, which do not always represent absolute truth.

The Church emphasises following one’s conscience, yet many laws contradict natural law, like those legalising abortion or euthanasia. In such cases, the Church believes the institution and its members have a moral obligation to refuse participation (*Evangelium Vitae*-74). Natural law, the Church argues, originates from a Creator God who instilled order and logic in the universe. Natural laws exist because the universe has a logical Creator God who has imposed order on His

universe (Genesis 1:1). The conflict between protecting human rights and legalising harmful practices, the Church argues, stems from an individualistic view of freedom neglecting solidarity and service. This “culture of death,” as they call it, empowers the strong over the weak. Therefore, the Church guides its followers to refrain from practices like abortion, euthanasia, and war.

Here, we see the duplicity and self-contradiction of the promoters of justice, equality, harmony, and prosperity. The significance of the teachings of Pope John Paul II is that we have no obligation to cooperate with anyone if a practice is against the law of God. Our obligation does not end with not collaborating with such practices; we also have a continuing responsibility to make others aware of the fallacy of the approach. “A well-formed conscience may be the only true guide a person can rely upon” (Kochalumkal, 2003). The Church is aware of this reality. Therefore, she gives Christians the opportunity to form their consciences according to the teachings of the Saviour. The faithful must cooperate with her and help others to understand and practice it.

Spiritual Formation of Christian values

Authentic individuals maintain stable values despite challenges. The Pope emphasises understanding God and His love as the foundation for a correct values hierarchy: “... *obedience to the truth* about God and man is the first condition of freedom, making it possible for a person to order his needs and desires and to choose the means of satisfying them according to a correct scale of values...” (*Centesimus Annus*-41). Unstable values lead to neglecting norms and pursuing immediate happiness regardless of means. Shared values are crucial for personal growth, decision-making, group unity, and building a desired future. The Church prioritises instilling Christian values like peace, justice, and brotherhood (*Redemptories Missio*-17). Embodying these values is the core Christian duty.

The Church’s task is described as though it had to proceed in two directions: on the one hand promoting such “values of the Kingdom” as peace, justice, freedom, brotherhood, etc., while on the other hand fostering dialogue between peoples, cultures and religions, so that through a mutual enrichment they might help the world to be renewed and to journey ever closer towards the Kingdom (*Redemptories Missio*-17).

What is the value of the Kingdom, then? It can be summarised as “the values that the Gospels deal with.” The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3-12) summarises the Kingdom’s theology. Christ’s life epitomised the practice of these values. The values of the Sermon on the Mount challenged the people of that time because they were not the values of a decent society but rather the values of the marginalised. However, Jesus transformed them into the fundamental nature of a lifestyle essential for living as a citizen of the Kingdom of God. Therefore, the beatitudes became norms of conversion for those who regarded their spiritual life as meaningful. “All the beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount indicate the way of conversion and reform of life” (*Dives Et Misericordia*- 14). These Kingdom values do not promise prosperity in the material realm.

Realising the status of the Kingdom is a grace. These values are nonsensical to those who value worldly achievements because the potential of these values is more fully realised when one goes beyond the material realm. It is an enlightenment that reveals the superficiality of materialism and the emptiness of exaggerated worldly success. It is concerned with both individual and communal encounters with the realm of the divine. Here, the Church represents the community and leads all people of goodwill to the heart of values. “She is a dynamic force in mankind’s journey towards the eschatological Kingdom” (*Redemptories Missio*-20).

The Purpose of Formation

Values such as love, peace, and justice unite humanity regardless of their source (religion, community, etc.). This is evident in responses to natural disasters, where people from diverse backgrounds come together to help, transcending differences like caste, colour, or creed. Despite the harmful division, the vast majority demonstrates unity through shared values. From a spiritual perspective, accepting the impermanent nature of life and the inherent uncertainty can help us maintain stability in the face of challenges. What led fundamentalist groups to label the affected people as Hindus, Muslims, Christians, low caste, high caste, and different political parties? We call this the misguided, perverted, or toxic value system that is acquired and maintained from forces of hatred.

Divine and human values are collective treasures and heritage that belong to all people. Good values are the medium through which divine principles are taught. Therefore, all true religions are supposed to

mould their followers according to these fundamental values. Religions are genuine only when these values are taught to the faithful. Once these fundamental values are neglected, humanity's spiritual existence and goodness are endangered. The Pope says, "One cannot fail to be worried by the decline of many fundamental values, which constitute an unquestionable good not only for Christian morality but simply for human morality, for moral culture..." (*Dives Et Misericordia*-12). Therefore, the Church has always believed that teaching its children the importance of fundamental values is an indisputable duty.

The primary purpose of the Church's teachings is to make the faithful aware of the fundamental laws and values that the Gospels highlight as the core of the life of Christ, the Saviour. Therefore, the Pope reminds the Church, "Bear glorious witness among non-Christians to the majesty and love of God, as well as to unity in Christ" (*Ad Gentes*-40). The Church should exemplify and proclaim the Gospel values to the whole world so that people may know that we are the followers of Christ Jesus.

Through the Gospel values, one comes to understand God's will, the well-being of one's neighbours, and the responsibility of oneself to humanity. This means that the Gospel values empower a person to live in accordance with the values of the Kingdom of God. "The church serves the kingdom by spreading throughout the world the "Gospel values" which are an expression of the Kingdom and which help people to accept God's plan" (*Redemptories Missio*- 20). The Kingdom of God is comprised of all human beings who live together and love in divine protection. Therefore, the core of every fundamental value is love itself.

Two Challenging Areas of Formation in the Church

It is fascinating to observe in his Encyclicals that Pope John Paul II is deeply concerned about the challenges and tasks of the contemporary Church. He does not shy away from any topic, even if he fears it may displease some. He is outspoken in his beliefs about what is right. Today, the terms "conversion," "evangelisation," and "mission" are hotly debated in many corners of the world. In some countries, such as India, these terms are highly sensitive among non-Christians and even among some Christians. Indeed, some theologians have attempted to misrepresent these terms by offering inaccurate interpretations. Therefore, the Pope invites theologians to reflect on their place and

responsibility in the Church. “When theologians, as servants of divine truth, dedicate their studies and labours to ever deeper understanding of that truth, they can never lose sight of the meaning of their service in the Church, which is enshrined in the concept *intellectus fidei*” (*Redemptor Hominis*- 19). The Pontiff then goes on to discuss the Church’s expectations of theologians. ‘As in preceding ages, and perhaps more than in preceding generations, theologians and all men of learning in the Church are today called to unite faith with learning and wisdom to help them. This task has grown enormously today because of the advance of human learning, its methodology, and the achievements in knowledge of the world and man’ (*Redemptor Hominis*- 19). The Pope emphasises that theologians and other learned men and women are called to respond radically to the Church’s teachings in order to help the faithful on their spiritual journey. He highlights that this journey and the fulfilment of Christian responsibilities are only possible through mutual support within the Church.

Pope John Paul II was keenly aware of the Christian’s calling and the Church’s duties to the community and the world. He refused to compromise with anyone or any system at the expense of the Church’s fundamental teachings. The modern Church faces many challenges on its journey towards Christian perfection. In his encyclicals, Pope John Paul II reflects on two primary challenges.

The Challenge to Grow in Holiness

Holiness, central to Jesus’ teachings, is the core mission of Christians. We strive to regain the original pure state lost through sin, allowing us to experience God like Adam and Eve. Jesus’ sacrifice offers us hope for holiness through the Spirit. The Church emphasises this call, urging its followers to follow Jesus’ example of obedience to God’s will (*Veritatis Splendor*- 115). The Gospels, outlining the path to perfection, highlight the values we must embrace to achieve holiness. The Church guides its members on this journey, freeing itself from worldly influences and promoting tolerance. However, growing intolerance in modern times threatens these values. We must understand and respect diverse views to combat intolerance and foster unity. Religious intolerance is a form of intolerance that is based on religion. It is the refusal or denial to tolerate another religion’s practice, person, or belief. Religious intolerance can lead to violence and discrimination. Remembering that everyone has the right to practice their religion freely is essential. We

should all strive to be tolerant and understanding of people who are different from us.

The Pope in *Redemptoris Missio* instructs how Christians must approach other faiths. “Those engaged in this dialogue must be consistent and congruent with their own religious traditions and convictions and be open to understanding those of the other party without pretence or close-mindedness, but with truth, humility and frankness, knowing that dialogue can enrich each side. There must be no abandonment of principles nor falsehood but instead, a witness given and received for mutual advancement on the road of religious inquiry and experience, and at the same time, for the elimination of prejudice, intolerance and misunderstandings” (*Redemptoris Missio*- 56). Holiness grows in the faithful as the spirit of the Lord showers the gift of understanding and tolerance in our faith and religions. Pope John Paul II tells the faithful to abandon erroneous beliefs and put our effort into evangelical truths, which are meaningless to those who have not experienced God. We must not put our hope in human effort but in the teachings of Jesus.

Another realm of Pope’s reflection on ‘The Church is committed to freeing herself from every purely human support’ prompts us to re-evaluate our involvement in and perspective on our institutions, mission efforts, pastoral activities, and humanitarian endeavours. Sometimes, individuals place excessive faith in their contributions and take pride in their accomplishments. The modern technological era strongly emphasises personal achievements, and even within religious congregations, individualism prevails. In this context, the focus shifts to the successes of individuals and human endeavour. Christians must recognise that without God’s divine support, purely human efforts are futile, and our achievements must stem from our submission to the Lord. The notion of “purely human support” carries the inherent risk of succumbing to moments of despair and feelings of inadequacy during our service, which can compromise the integrity of our existence and erode our faith in the spiritual realm. This holds particularly true for consecrated individuals. We must remain acutely aware of God’s unwavering support and acknowledge our position as mere instruments of His divine will. This understanding is an integral component of holiness.

To attain this state of holiness, we must immerse ourselves in the divine providence of God. Providence of God signifies the unwavering conviction that God will shield us and guide us through

all circumstances. I fulfil my responsibilities diligently, entrusting the outcome to God's hands. This represents absolute submission to God's will. I have no qualms about God's presence within me, permeating all my undertakings. "Faith is a lived knowledge of Christ, a living remembrance of his commandments, and a *truth to be lived out*. A word, in any event, is not truly received until it passes into action until it is put into practice" (*Veritatis Splendor*-88). Once we practice this faith, we become persons of holiness because we are not led by their achievements but by the work of the Holy Spirit. It is a challenge for all Christians. Embracing this faith transforms us into individuals of holiness, as we are guided not by our own accomplishments but by the work of the Holy Spirit. It is a demanding calling for all Christians.

Formation of the Christian Family and Its Challenges

In the heart of Christian teachings lies the significance of maintaining a family unit grounded in peace, harmony, and Christian conduct until it is dissolved by death. The Bible guides us in fulfilling various family responsibilities, including raising children, caring for ageing parents, and creating a stable home environment. By adhering to these principles, families can experience God's grace and blessings, fostering a nurturing and secure environment for all members involved.

The family serves as a microcosm of the Church and the foundation of Christian life. The Christian family's fundamental calling is to cultivate holiness. "... the family is called "the sanctuary of life" by nature (*Evangelium Vitae*- 11). Unity, love, integrity, and other virtues are ingrained from the very beginning within the family environment. As we become an integral part of communities, society, and humanity, we must not disregard fundamental virtues, for they are the life-giving force that nurtures us through the family. "...one cannot fail to be worried by the decline of many fundamental values, which constitute an unquestionable good not only for Christian morality but simply for human morality, for moral culture: these values include respect for human life from the moment of conception, respect for marriage in its indissoluble unity, and respect for the stability of the family" (*Dives Et Misericordia*- 12). Naturally, this emphasis on the family expands throughout human society worldwide. The Church's history constantly demonstrates its enduring commitment to the family and its formation. Following the Second Vatican Council, the Church's vision of the family significantly emphasises the role of the Laity.

The Christian family is more than just a family in the anthropological or social sense; it is the essence of Christian living. Therefore, the family is a microcosm of the Church, a temple where all gather to praise God. “The family celebrates the Gospel of life through daily prayer, both individual and family prayer. The family prays in order to glorify and give thanks to God for the gift of life, and implores his light and strength in order to face times of difficulty and suffering without losing hope. But the celebration which gives meaning to every other form of prayer and worship is found in the family’s actual daily life together, if it is a life of love and self-giving” (*Evangelium Vitae*- 93). It is the altar where salvation history is remembered and the first place where children learn to respond to Christian challenges.

In this microscopic Church, the parents are the authorities who teach their children the Christian ideals they receive from Scripture and the teachings of the universal Church. In other words, the Christian family is a domestic church, the most influential institution in the Church. “As the domestic Church, the family is summoned to proclaim, celebrate and serve the Gospel of life” (*Evangelium Vitae*- 92). As in the case of the Church, the family is also responsible for proclaiming the word of God. It is the family’s primary duty, though the proclamation area differs from the Church. Therefore, the family has significant influence and importance in the Church, as it is the foundation of Christian formation. The family profoundly provides love and selfless service to its members. “This is the love that becomes selflessness, receptiveness and gift. Within the family, each member is accepted, respected and honoured precisely because he or she is a person; and if any family member is in greater need, the care which he or she receives is all the more intense and attentive” (*Evangelium Vitae*- 92). The Church acknowledges and promotes the family with great interest.

The Church has great concern for the family because she deals with human persons in the spiritual and all other components of human persons and family. “The social concern of the Church, directed towards an authentic development of man and society which would respect and promote all the dimensions of the human person, has always expressed itself in the most varied ways” (*Sollicitudo Rei Sochalis*- 1). The Church in the modern age emphasises the family apostolate as many social changes occur internationally. One of the striking realities in society is a shift of focus from the spiritual realm to the secular realm. The Church faces a radical challenge to this reality, and she

must tackle it with greater participation of the family and the basic Christian community.

It is a reality that the number of church-attending faithful is declining, and some no longer believe in the institutionalised form of religion. This reality must be taken seriously; the only way forward is Christian formation through the family. Whatever the approach, reversing church attendance decline will be a painful, complex process that requires breaking out of a comfort zone.

There has been much discussion about why people attend Church less often. From thought leaders like Carey Nieuwhof to mass media like NPR and the Washington Post, everyone is talking about weekly church attendance and sharing their thoughts on why there has been a prominent church decline. The most critical challenge of the Church is to be vigilant and open to societal changes. Changes take place quickly, and the Church must be prepared to respond. In the past, the Church had time to respond to social changes. However, the media has great influence, bringing new and profound challenges and daily changes in the communities. This reality demands that the Church be vigilant and vibrant in responding to each movement in the communities and families in particular because "...it must be admitted that modern social, economic and cultural conditions make the family's task of serving life more difficult and demanding" (*Evangelium Vitae*- 94). It requires the family, parish, and local Church to take more initiative to detect changes in the community and respond to them without delay.

Christian family holds a significant position in the Christian worldview, as it is considered the primary context for fostering deep faith and respect for human and divine values. In a society increasingly driven by individualism and selfishness, Christian marriage as a sacrament stands as an inspiration for commitment and procreation. Unlike casual relationships that prioritise companionship over family structure, Christian marriage emphasises the importance of nurturing new generations and upholding traditional values. As the domestic Church, the family is called upon to support, celebrate, and exemplify the Gospel of life. As Pope John Paul II eloquently stated, "This is a responsibility which first concerns married couples called to be givers of life, based on an ever greater awareness of the meaning of procreation as a unique event which clearly reveals that human life is a gift received in order then to be given as a gift" (*Evangelium Vitae*- 92). This responsibility

lies primarily with married couples who are called to be “givers of life” and recognise procreation as a sacred gift.

The concept of “living together” instead of sacramental marriage does not align with the true essence of Christian marriage. The Christian marriage and family extends beyond mere companionship; it encompasses the responsibility of bringing forth new life and celebrating the “Gospel of life.” In recent years, the Church has given greater attention to the family unit, recognising the importance of couples responding to God’s call for procreation. Raising children demands sacrifice; Christian couples find fulfilment in nurturing their love and celebrating their family’s growth. Just as Joseph and Mary presented Jesus to the Lord, Christian parents become participants in creation, continuing the mission of the Gospel of Life by offering their children to the heavenly Father.

The family bears a significant burden of responsibility, as it serves as the cornerstone of the Christian life. Therefore, couples must possess a deep faith in God and a profound respect for the institution of family. In modern society, individualism exerts a powerful influence, fostering a pervasive sense of selfishness that often leads to a diminished appreciation for family formation. Many individuals engage in cohabitation arrangements primarily for companionship, often dissolving these bonds in favour of new partnerships. They prioritise personal fulfilment over the traditional value system of raising a family. “It must be remembered and affirmed that the family constitutes one of the most important terms of reference for shaping the social and ethical order...” (*Laborem Exercens*-10). Therefore, establishing a family for the betterment of society is a solemn responsibility entrusted to the Christian family.

Christian marriage not only emphasises companionship but also acknowledges the inherent natural demand for family rearing. Consequently, the Pope asserts that cohabitation alone does not constitute the true purpose of marriage. Rather, marriage fulfils the responsibility of nurturing new generations, which he terms the Gospel of life” and encourages couples to celebrate and proclaim.

In recent years, the Church has devoted considerable attention to families and parents, recognising the lack of responsiveness to God’s call among couples. We know churches have unique needs for adapting and growing in a changing culture. Together, we can make an impact

in your community. While procreation undoubtedly entails significant sacrifice, couples find fulfilment in their love within the family sanctuary. Children are the cherished fruits of their love, and parents are prepared to shoulder the responsibility of nurturing these blessings. Just as Joseph and Mary presented Jesus to the temple and dedicated him to the Lord, it is the duty of every Christian to bring forth new generations and offer them to the heavenly Father. In this act, parents become co-creators with God and instruments for perpetuating the mission of the Gospel of Life.

Every sphere of life carries its own responsibilities, and the family's significance lies in its ability to proudly bring forth new members for the family, the Church, and society. Human beings are not made to live alone. They are born into a family and in a family, they grow, eventually entering society through their activity. 'From birth, therefore, they are immersed in traditions which give them not only a language and a cultural formation but also a range of truths in which they believe almost instinctively' (*Fides Et Ratio*- 31). Therefore, raising children is a privilege and a responsibility of immense weight for couples. The Church views this act as a profound collaboration between humans and God in creating new life. Even when human freedom remains intact, and through their involvement, God wills the emergence of a new generation. This process must be rooted in deep love for God, society, and one's partner. Initiating a new life must be guided by proper knowledge, love, and spiritual preparation. Therefore, couples must be individuals who rely upon God's grace to bestow new life. "It is above all in raising children that the family fulfils its mission to proclaim the Gospel of life" (*Evangelium Vitae*- 92). Only when the mission of proclaiming the Gospel of life is practised within families does the family honourably embody the essence of a Christian family. This constitutes the family's most fundamental mission. It is from this foundation that the family's genuine participation in the mission of the Church begins.

Individualism undeniably exerts an increasingly pervasive influence on society and human relationships. Even procreation and childbirth are sometimes perceived as relics of an uncivilised society, as many believe that having more children restricts parental freedom. This perception of people must be reoriented within families through a transformation of parental attitudes towards the inherent dignity of parenthood. The Pope poignantly asserts, "In order to overcome today's extensive

individualistic mentality, what is required is a concrete commitment to solidarity and charity, beginning in the family with the mutual support of husband and wife and the care which the different generations give to one another” (*Centesimus Annus*- 49). Respect for humanity begins within the family, particularly among parents. Parents serve as moral exemplars from whom children derive their values. If parents fail to uphold societal values, children become alienated from those very principles. A commitment to each other must be the cornerstone of parental guidance, which, in turn, will be instilled in their children. The best gift parents can give their children is to love one another.

Love flourishes within the family, nurtured by the practice of all virtues. Every Christian family should strive to embody the spirit of “reunion” exemplified in the parable of the prodigal son. At the heart of the Father’s love lies a transformative power that neither condemns the younger son nor the elder son but embraces them unconditionally. This love, characterised by tenderness and transformation, can be aptly termed “merciful love.” The transformative impact of merciful love is evident in the younger son’s metamorphosis. Merciful love stands as the most sublime expression of love. “Merciful love also means the cordial tenderness and sensitivity... Consequently, merciful love is supremely indispensable between husbands and wives, parents and children, and friends: it is indispensable in education and pastoral work” (*Dives Et Misericordia*- 149). The ultimate goal of Christian living lies in this transformative or merciful love, which permeates the family and the Church. The Church places paramount importance on empowering families to become instruments of compassionate love.

In response to this Christian vision, many parents, despite their hardships, exemplify heroic virtues within their families. In this era of dwindling concern for unborn children, many parents embrace the challenge of upholding human dignity and strive to practice the teachings of the Church and the dictates of their conscience by welcoming vulnerable, differently-abled children into their homes. These virtuous parents extend an extraordinary measure of love to these children. The Pope commends them for their exemplary witness and selflessness, acknowledging the Church’s unwavering support throughout their challenges. “The Church is close to those married couples who, with great anguish and suffering, willingly accept gravely handicapped children. She is also grateful to all those families which, through adoption, welcome children abandoned by their parents

because of disabilities or illnesses” (*Evangelium Vitae* -63). Indeed, through their actions, the Church gains further recognition as the religion that upholds the sanctity of life. These parents are the primary embodiment of the Church’s visions and the practical application of our Lord’s Gospel. Our Lord came to this world to demonstrate that the value of the Gospel of life finds its continued expression primarily through Christian parents who embody Christ’s teachings.

While recognising the unwavering commitment of many Christian parents to upholding the sanctity of life, the Church acknowledges the existence of those who fail to heed God’s will and the call of conscience. This, the Church recognises, is a reflection of her own shortcomings. Therefore, the Church begins self-examining its apostolic activities, seeking effective strategies to guide families towards the genuine domains of love, sacrifice, hope, and other virtues. “The church must untiringly promote a plan of pastoral care for families, capable of making every family rediscover and live with joy and courage its mission to further the Gospel of life” (*Evangelium Vitae*- 94). The Pope emphasises the need for comprehensive pastoral care that empowers families to fulfil their mission.

Conclusion

Christians, strengthened by baptism, must live and spread Christian values. This is achieved through organisations and families promoting unity, Gospel living, and charity. Christian communities can lead by example, fostering justice, equality, and inclusion. This echoes Paul’s message (Romans 2:11) and the Good Samaritan’s parable. Christian families can serve as beacons of hope and positive societal influences by fostering a strong sense of community, encouraging adherence to Church teachings, shaping consciences according to Christian principles, and motivating acts of kindness (*Familiaris Consortio*-72). Churches can foster unity and reconciliation in a divided society by promoting dialogue and understanding. They can be spiritual havens for the marginalised, upholding biblical principles of equity and equality. Through education, advocacy, service, and prayer, the Church strives to shape a just and equitable society, fulfilling Christ’s message of unity and interconnection.

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