

The Interim

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Curriculum Supplement For Schools

The *Interim Plus* is a periodical dedicated to educational matters and specifically designed to assist teachers in integrating relevant life issues in their lesson planning.

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This edition of our curriculum supplement addresses the crisis of modern families and the efforts of religious groups to support families in being what they were intended to be, the basic cell of human society, and in a spiritual

sense, the engine room of faith development from the earliest stage of socialization of the children. The material is useful for parenting course, the individual and society course, and any religion and family life course.

Part A Parenting in a Challenging Environment

Are families crumbling today? Or are they simply taking different shape because of rising pressures? If the latter case, what are these new pressures and how are they impacting on the family and its ability to care for its members and contribute to the stability of the society at large? One of our summer interns, Vanessa Lentini, researched this issue. We are indebted to her for the suggested classroom questions and activities that follow. We hope they will help stimulate intelligent discussion of this important facet of contemporary life.

What can we take away from *Amoris Laetitia* "The Joy of Love", a papal document put out by Pope Francis? It presents an opportunity to

engage and confront the culture of death as it vies with the culture of life within the bosom of families across the world. Select chapters (1-3; 5.) from the document serve as the prime references for the discussion on the family.



From time immemorial the institution of the family has always been the basic cell in human society. Blood ties have bound people together for better or worse all through history. What exactly is a family? What is the traditional family? What new family structures are arising today? What are these new structures based on? Blood, simple desire to live together, economic dependence, or human love? What conditions hurt family life and what factors strengthen family life?

These are all pertinent questions. But there is no longer agreement on definitions, or what ails the family or what the solutions ought to be. Yet, statistics do tell us that there are signs of brokenness evidenced by increased homelessness and sickness, higher divorce rate, proliferating infidelity, spread of pornography, unemployment and debt, fewer children



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being born. Families are struggling in a darkening world.

Is there any source of light that is nevertheless shining in the darkness? How can the foundation, sacredness and unity of the family be restored? Perhaps it is religious faith that sheds light on the needs of the family in the modern world. Yes, there is a realization that things are not going in the right direction, that people are suffering, that families are in deep trouble. All this was evident in the sometimes controversial discussions arising from the Catholic Synods on the family in 2014-2015. The centrality of the family remains a pressing issue or some would say *the* pressing issue for the Christian faith.

In response to the issues raised at the synods *Amoris Laetitia*, a papal exhortation, was published; and it provides a genuine, detailed and careful approach to addressing the many problems and concerns that families face in the 21st century. Families find it very challenging to remain faithful to tradition and Church teaching. Each of us comes from a unique family, with a different composition, background, culture, traditions, and values, while at the same time all families are collectively united in a shared humanity. There is also a spiritual unity of families as all human beings are seen as children of the one Creator God. It is in reflecting this belief that Pope Francis proclaims that “The Joy of Love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church.” (pg.3 *Amoris Laetitia*).

What gets in the way of expressing and living this joy of love? Unfortunately, there are many forces at work which represent the anti-thesis of joy, the opposite of love, and these impact nega-

tively on family life. These forces can be characterized collectively as the *culture of death*. This term became widely used after Pope John Paul II included it in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, in 1993. The phrase covers a spectrum of the many evils that undermines respect for human life in all its diversity. The *culture of death* has risen alongside a triumphant secularism, a self-gratifying individualism, and spectacular technological advances. In its negative impact it has spawned an increase of “abortion, poverty, euthanasia, murder, suicide, war, capital punishment, contraception, human cloning, human sterilization, embryonic stem cell and fetal research, *in vitro* fertilization, infidelity, and divorce”. (Quite a list!) These developments undermine the stability and integrity of the family, stripping away much of the love and joy of human life. The *culture of death* can also manifest itself in more subtle ways, for example, parents constantly arguing in front of their children, parents not spending quality time with their children, children that are constantly “plugged” into the internet and social media or transfixed to the television, and families that don’t even eat a meal together. How healthy is that?

The modern world operates at a much faster pace. Communications are almost instantaneous today. Jobs are not for a lifetime. The material standard of living is higher, but also more costly, and hence there is greater pressure to acquire wealth in order to be able to afford the material comforts, food, clothing, vacations, cars, other possessions and homes of a certain size and quality. Expectations are different and higher all around. There is a race to get somewhere, but where? Financial problems arise because husband and wife and children may not be on the same page with respect to family budgets, each pulling in a different direction, not understanding the limitations within which they have to live. Marriages break up over these and similar disagreements. When these breakups occur and the children are very young, they in turn suffer greatly, seeing their safety, security and emotional well being disrupted or destroyed beyond repair. Messes are created instead of strength and stability. Worse still is the reality of married couples either not wanting any children or waiting to have children until it is biologically too



late in life. This lack of children creates its own source of friction and selfishness and growing apart due to pursuit of career goals over other considerations.

This is just a short introduction to the multiple problems that families face today, although it may be less extreme in some nations and cultures than in others.

Some Introductory Questions for class discussion

1. What is a family?
2. How have families reconstituted themselves in law?
3. Which of the problems described appear to be most serious in nature?
4. How does the culture of death impact on family life?
5. Can anything be done to stem the tide of family breakdown?
6. Is this all principally a spiritual crisis or the result of overpowering material conditions?



Housing: Village hut

Occupation: Father unemployed, Mother works in the field crops sunrise to sunset, 2 of the boys help out in the crops too, and the two girls stay at home to take care of the chores and their youngest brother, sick father who is in need of medication and the grandmother.

Example Two

Country: Canada

Family Size: 5 (Mom, Dad, two daughters and one son)

Housing: 2-story House

Occupation: Mother is a grade school teacher, Father is CEO of a food company. Two daughters are both in high school, the son is in elementary school. The father is always away on business trips, the nanny cooks and cleans for the family. The mother is rushed around after work picking up and dropping of her children in their extra-curricular activities.



Example Three

Country: China

Family Size: 3 (Mom, Dad, son)

Classroom Activity: Raising a Family

Divide the class into small groups of students (4-5 to a group). Assign to each group a description of a family from a different country. (Three examples are provided below, but create as many descriptions as needed to make sure that each group has a different one and each family description is very diverse, as would be the case of families living under different political, economic and social conditions on our planet). Based on the description, groups will research and present on their discoveries, and answer the discussion questions below. Students must also reference the text of *Amoris Laetitia* on the problems that attack the joy of love within families. For easy reference, see the **Appendix** below for the summary of the relevant passages and points from the exhortation.

Example One

Country: Kenya (East Africa)

Family Size: 8 (Mom, Dad, Grandmother, 3 sons and 2 daughters)



Housing: Apartment
Occupation: Mother is a receptionist at local clinic, father is an IT technician. The son is in high school. They do not have savings for their son’s post-secondary education and live pay cheque to pay cheque.

Questions

1. What are the social, economic and cultural factors that affect these families respectively?
2. Which factor(s) impacts the family the most?
3. List three “culture of death” aspects that might be relevant to these families.
4. What suggestion can you make to amend or alleviate some of the pressures and struggles the particular family is facing?
5. How realistic is Pope Francis’ approach in addressing the concerns of families? Did you feel the family you were assigned could benefit from what is discussed in *Amoris Laetitia*, and why?

Culture of Life in *Amoris Laetitia*

Pope Francis elaborates on the beauty within a family whose members seek a supportive relationship and love of one another. The culture of life does not try to eliminate all the evils of the world, but rather strives towards hope amidst all the dis-



order. Obedience within a family who is faithful to prayer and constantly hears the word of God during Sunday mass, and frequently receives the sacraments, will thus profit and bear fruit. This allows families to enter into greater unity with each other in a loving companionship and grow in love and communication. The culture of life promotes life in all of its stages (from conception to natural death). Life is vital, life is precious, and life is beautiful. As the Pope states “the couple’s fruitful relationship becomes an image for understanding and describing the mystery of God himself, for in the Christian vision of the Trinity, God is contemplated as Father, Son and Spirit of love. The triune God is a communion of love, and the family is its living reflection.” (Paragraph 11.) We are all created by love, and for love, God knew us even before we were formed in our mother’s womb, therefore it is a natural desire for us to love, and we first experience this love within our families. The family is at the forefront of giving and receiving love from and to each other.

Classroom Activity: Loving Family Photo Essay

In the opening line of chapter five of *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis says “love always gives life”. Especially within a family, the love between husband and wife and children with their parents will flourish if nourished properly. For this activity have the students compile photos for their essay, as they will account for 10 moments of everyday or special events that their family has shared over the years which have brought joy in their love for their family. Each photo clipping must be paired with a short description describing the event in the photo. Questions for the student to consider for their photo essay:



What is happening in the picture? Why was this event a memorable moment? How has this event brought joy in loving your family more?

Presentation Style: Students can submit their photo essay in a Scrapbook or PowerPoint format.

This activity is a great opportunity for students to be reflective of the love within their family and later on can present their final project as a gift to their family.

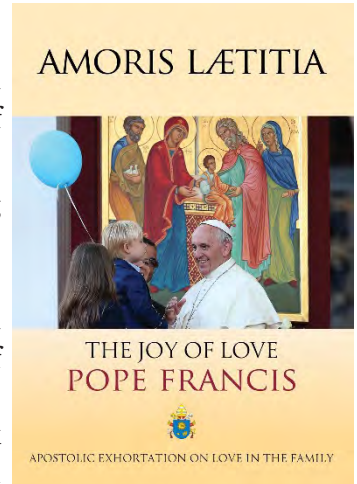
Key Quotes from *Amoris Laetitia* to Remember:

- “No family drops down from heaven perfectly formed; families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love”
- “Fruitful love becomes a symbol of God’s inner life”
- “The fear of loneliness and the desire for stability and fidelity exist side by side with a growing fear of entrapment in a relationship that could hamper the achievement of one’s personal goals.”
- “A crisis in a couple’s relationship destabilizes the family and may lead, through separation and divorce, to serious consequences for adults, children and society as a whole”
- “The gift of a new child, entrusted by the Lord to a father and a mother, begins with acceptance, continues with lifelong protection and has as its final goal the joy of eternal life. By serenely contemplating the ultimate fulfilment of each human person, parents will be even more aware of the precious gift entrusted to them.”
- “The love of parents is the means by which God our Father shows his own love. He awaits the birth of each child, accepts that child unconditionally, and welcomes him or her freely.
- “A mother who watches over her child with tenderness and compassion helps him or her to grow in confidence and to experience that the world is a good and welcoming place. This helps the child to grow in self-esteem and, in turn, to develop a capacity for intimacy and empathy.”
- “A father, for his part, helps the child to perceive the limits of life, to be open to the challenges of the wider world, and to see the need for hard work and strenuous effort. A

father possessed of a clear and serene masculine identity who demonstrates affection and concern for his wife is just as necessary as a caring mother.”

More Reflection Questions on *Amoris Laetitia*

1. In reference to the family, what does Pope Francis mean by “The Joy of Love”?
2. The following parable in verse Matthew 7:24-27, is mentioned in Chapter One of *Amoris Laetitia*. Why do you think this is a helpful analogy to understanding the family in the context of families who are faced with struggles but are rooted in Christ?
3. How does an individualistic culture lead to hostility in the family? (Chapter Two)
4. List and explain three or four pressures of young people that Pope Francis addresses as to why they are dissuaded from starting a family. (Chapter Two)
5. a) Why does Pope Francis refer to people with disabilities being a “gift for the family”?
b) With the rise of selective abortions based on disabilities, how is Pope Francis’ reflection a pro-life witness and verification for hope and a call to love?
6. How does Pope Francis view the elderly within a family? (Chapter Two and Chapter Five)
7. “The family is the image of God” – What does this mean? (Chapter Three)
8. How does Pope Francis reconcile a husband and wife who cannot have children with adoption? (Chapter 5)
9. How can clergy be more helpful to families and married couples who are experiencing difficulties? (Chapter 6)
10. How is the education of the children in a



family to be understood and the parents be fully responsible? (Chapter 7)

11. Family situations can be very complicated. What is the Pope referring to? What approach does he recommend? (Chapter 8)
12. How is everyday family life a real opportunity to grow in the faith and spiritual holiness? (Chapter 9)

Prayer to the Holy Family



Jesus, Mary and Joseph, in you we contemplate the splendour of true love; to you we turn with trust. Holy Family of Nazareth, grant that our families too may be places of communion and prayer, authentic schools of the Gospel and small domestic churches. Holy

Family of Nazareth, May families never again experience violence, rejection and division; may all who have been hurt or scandalized find ready comfort and healing. Holy Family of Nazareth, make us once more mindful of the sacredness and inviolability of the family, and its beauty in God's plan. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Graciously hear our prayer. Amen.

Websites

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- <http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-francis-apostolic-exhortation-on-the-joy-of-l>
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- <http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/marriage-and-family/>
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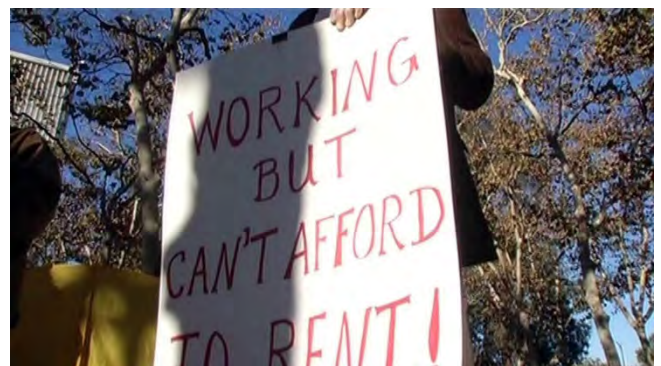
Appendix containing highlight excerpts from *Amoris Laetitia*

<https://www.catholic.org.au/all-downloads/bishops-commissions-1/family-youth-and-life/family-synod-joy-of-family/1810-sintesi-summary/file>

Chapter One: "In the light of the Word" (8-30)

Following this introduction, the Pope begins his reflections with the Holy Scriptures in the first chapter, which unfolds as a meditation on Psalm 128 (which appears in the Jewish wedding liturgy as well as that of Christian marriages). The Bible "is full of families, births, love stories and family crises" (AL 8). This impels us to meditate on how the family is not an abstract ideal but rather like a practical "trade" (AL 16), which is carried out with tenderness (AL 28), but which has also been confronted with sin from the beginning, when the relationship of love turned into domination (cf. AL 19). Hence, the Word of God "is not a series of abstract ideas but rather a source of comfort and companionship for every family that experiences difficulties or suffering. For it shows them the goal of their journey..." (AL 22).

Chapter two: "The experiences and challenges of families" (31-57) Building on the biblical base, in the second chapter the Pope considers the current situation of families. While keeping "firmly grounded in [the] reality" of family experiences (AL 6), he also draws heavily on the final Reports of the two Synods. Families face many challenges, from migration to the ideological denial of differences between the sexes ("ideology of gender" AL 56); from the culture of the provisional to the antibirth mentality and the impact of biotechnology in the field of procreation; from the lack of housing and work to pornography and abuse of



minors; from inattention to persons with disabilities, to lack of respect for the elderly; from the legal dismantling of the family, to violence against women. The Pope insists on concreteness, which is a key concept in the Exhortation. And it is concreteness, realism and daily life that make up the substantial difference between acceptable “theories” of interpretation of reality and arbitrary “ideologies”. Citing *Familiaris consortio*, Francis states that “we do well to focus on concrete realities, since ‘the call and the demands of the Spirit resound in the events of history’, and through these ‘the Church can also be guided to a more profound understanding of the inexhaustible mystery of marriage and the family’” (AL 31). Conversely, if we fail to listen to reality, we cannot understand the needs of the present or the movements of the Spirit. The Pope notes that rampant individualism makes it difficult today for a person to give oneself generously to another (cf. AL 33). Here is an interesting picture of the situation: “The fear of loneliness and the desire for stability and fidelity exist side by side with a growing fear of entrapment in a relationship that could hamper the achievement of one’s personal goals” (AL 34). The humility of realism helps us to avoid presenting “a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families” (AL 36). Idealism does not allow marriage to be understood for what it is, that is, a “dynamic path to personal development and fulfilment”. It is unrealistic to think that families can sustain themselves “simply by stressing doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace” (AL 37). Calling for a certain “self-criticism” of approaches that are inadequate for the experience of marriage and the family, the Pope stresses the need to make room for the formation of the conscience of the faithful: “We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them” (AL 37). Jesus proposed a demanding ideal but “never

failed to show compassion and closeness to the frailty of individuals like the Samaritan woman or the woman caught in adultery” (AL 38).

Chapter three: “Looking to Jesus: The vocation of the family” (58-88) The third chapter is dedicated to some essential elements of the Church’s teaching on marriage and the family. This chapter is important because its 30 paragraphs concisely depict the vocation of the family according to the Gospel and as affirmed by the Church over time. Above all, it stresses the themes of indissolubility, the sacramental nature of marriage, the transmission of life and the education of children. *Gaudium et Spes* of Vatican II, *Humanae Vitae* of Paul VI, and *Familiaris Consortio* of John Paul II are widely quoted. The chapter provides a broad view and touches on “imperfect situations” as well. We can read, in fact: “Discernment of the presence of ‘seeds of the Word’ in other cultures (cf. *Ad Gentes* 11) can also apply to the reality of marriage and the family. In addition to true natural marriage, positive elements exist in the forms of marriage found in other religious traditions’, even if, at times, obscurely” (AL 77). The reflection also includes the “wounded families” about whom the Pope – quoting the Final Report of the 2015 Synod extensively – says that “it is always necessary to recall this general principle: ‘Pastors must know that, for the sake of truth, they are obliged to exercise careful discernment of situations’ 3 (*Familiaris Consortio*, 84). The degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases and factors may exist which limit the ability to make a decision. Therefore, while clearly stating the Church’s teaching, pastors are to avoid judgements that do not take into account the complexity of various situations, and they are to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience and endure distress because of their condition” (AL 79).

Chapter four: “Love in marriage” (89-164) The fourth chapter treats love in marriage, which it illuminates with Saint Paul’s Hymn to Love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. This opening section is truly a painstaking, focused, inspired and poetic exegesis of the Pauline text. It is a collection of brief passages carefully and tenderly describing human love in absolutely concrete terms. The quality of psychological introspection that marks



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this exegesis is striking. The psychological insights enter into the emotional world of the spouses – positive and negative – and the erotic dimension of

love. This is an extremely rich and valuable contribution to Christian married life, unprecedented in previous papal documents. ...the Pope forcefully stresses the fact that conjugal love by its very nature defines the partners in a richly encompassing and lasting union (AL 123), precisely within that “mixture of enjoyment and struggles, tensions and repose, pain and relief, satisfactions and longings, annoyances and pleasures” (AL 126) which indeed make up a marriage. The chapter concludes with a very important reflection on the “transformation of love” because “Longer life spans now mean that close and exclusive relationships must last for four, five or even six decades; consequently, the initial decision has to be frequently renewed” (AL 163). As physical appearance alters, the loving attraction does not lessen but changes as sexual desire can be transformed over time into the desire for togetherness and mutuality: “There is no guarantee that we will feel the same way all through life. Yet if a couple can come up with a shared and lasting life project, they can love one another and live as one until death do them part, enjoying an enriching intimacy” (AL 163).

Chapter five: “Love made fruitful” (165-198) The fifth chapter is entirely focused on love’s fruitfulness and procreation. It speaks in a profoundly spiritual and psychological manner about welcoming new life, about the waiting period of pregnancy, about the love of a mother and a father. It also speaks of the expanded fruitfulness of adoption, of welcoming the contribution of families to promote a “culture of encounter”, and of family life in a broad sense which includes aunts and uncles, cousins, relatives of relatives, friends. *Amoris laetitia* does not focus on the so-called “nuclear” family”

because it is very aware of the family as a wider network of many relationships. The spirituality of the sacrament of marriage has a deeply social character (cf. AL 187). And within this social dimension the Pope particularly emphasizes the specific role of the relationship between youth and the elderly, as well as the relationship between brothers and sisters as a training ground for relating with others.

Chapter six: “Some pastoral perspectives” (199-258) In the sixth chapter the Pope treats various pastoral perspectives that are aimed at forming solid and fruitful families according to God’s plan. The chapter uses the Final Reports of the two Synods and the catecheses of Pope Francis and Pope John Paul II extensively. It reiterates that families should not only be evangelized, they should also evangelize. The Pope regrets “that ordained ministers often lack the training needed to deal with the complex problems currently facing families” (AL 202). The Pope then deals with the preparation of the engaged for marriage; with the accompaniment of couples in the first years of married life, including the issue of responsible parenthood; and also with certain complex situations and crises, knowing that “each crisis has a lesson to teach us; we need to learn how to listen for it with the ear of the heart” (AL 232). Some causes of crisis are analysed, among them a delay in maturing affectively (cf. AL 239). Mention is furthermore made of accompanying abandoned, separated or divorced persons. The Exhortation stresses the importance of the recent reform of the procedures for marriage annulment. It highlights the suffering of children in situations of conflict and concludes: “Divorce is an evil and the increasing



number of divorces is very troubling. Hence, our most important pastoral task with regard to families is to strengthen their love, helping to heal wounds and working to prevent the spread of this drama of our times” (AL 246).The last, pastorally poignant part of the chapter, “When death makes us feel its sting”, is on the theme of the loss of dear ones and of widowhood.

Chapter seven: “Towards a better education of children” (259-290) The seventh chapter is dedicated to the education of children: their ethical formation, the learning of discipline which can include punishment, patient realism, sex education, passing on the faith and, more generally, family life as an educational context. The practical wisdom present in each paragraph is remarkable, above all the attention given to those gradual, small steps “that can be understood, accepted and appreciated” (AL 271). There is a particularly interesting and pedagogically fundamental paragraph in which Francis clearly states that “obsession, however, is not education. We cannot control every situation that a child may experience... If parents are obsessed with always knowing where their children are and controlling all their movements, they will seek only to dominate space. But this is no way to educate, strengthen and prepare their children to face challenges. What is most important is the ability lovingly to help them grow in freedom, maturity, overall discipline and real autonomy” (AL 260). The notable section on education in sexuality is very expressively entitled: “Yes to sex education”. The need is there, and we have to ask “if our educational institutions have taken up this challenge ... in an age when sexuality tends to be trivialized and impoverished”. Sound education needs to be carried out “within the broader framework of an education for love, for mutual self-giving” (AL 280). The text warns that the expression

‘safe sex’ conveys “a negative attitude towards the natural procreative finality of sexuality, as if an eventual child were an enemy to be protected against. This way of thinking promotes narcissism and aggressivity in place of acceptance” (AL 283).

Chapter eight: “Guiding, discerning and integrating weakness” (291-312) The eighth chapter is an invitation to mercy and pastoral discernment in situations that do not fully match what the Lord proposes. The Pope uses three very important verbs: guiding, discerning and integrating, which are fundamental in addressing fragile, complex or irregular situations. ... Chapter eight is very sensitive. In reading it one must remember that “the Church’s task is often like that of a field hospital” (AL 291). ...He



reaffirms what Christian marriage is and adds that “some forms of union radically contradict this ideal, while others realize it in at least a partial and analogous way”. The Church therefore “does not disregard the constructive elements in those situations which do not yet or no longer correspond to her teaching on marriage” (AL 292). As far as discernment with regard to “irregular” situations is concerned, the Pope states: “There is a need ‘to avoid judgements which do not take into account the complexity of various situations’ and ‘to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience distress because of their condition’” (AL 296). And he continues: “It is a matter of reaching out to everyone, of needing to help each person find his or her proper way of participating in the ecclesial community, and thus to experience being touched by an ‘unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous’ mercy” (AL 297). ...On the “logic of pastoral mercy”, Pope Francis emphasizes: “At times we find it hard to



make room for God’s unconditional love in our pastoral activity. We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance. That is the worst way of watering down the Gospel” (AL 311).

Chapter nine: “The spirituality of marriage and the family” (313-325) The ninth chapter is devoted to marital and family spirituality, which “is made up of thousands of small but real gestures” (AL 315). The Pope clearly states that “those who have deep spiritual aspirations should not feel that the family detracts from their growth in the life of the Spirit, but rather see it as a path which the Lord is using to lead them to the heights of mystical union” (AL 316). Everything, “moments of joy, relaxation, celebration, and even sexuality can be experienced as a sharing in the full life of the resurrection” (AL 317). He then speaks of prayer in the light of Easter, of the spirituality of exclusive and free love in the challenge and the yearning to grow old together, reflecting God’s fidelity (cf. AL 319). And finally the spirituality of care, consolation and incentive: the Pope teaches that “all family life is a ‘shepherding’ in mercy. Each of us, by our love and care, leaves a mark on the life of others” (AL 322). It is a profound “spiritual experience to contemplate our loved ones with the eyes of God and to see Christ in them” (AL 323). In the final paragraph the Pope affirms: “No family drops down from heaven perfectly formed; families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love ... 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.

(...) May we never lose heart because of our limitations, or ever stop seeking that fullness of love and communion which God holds out before us” (AL 325).

Part B The changing family

In the article that follows there is a brief description of how the nuclear family has changed over time and some “myths” are dispelled associated with the family in the American context.

The “Perfect” Family

Is there such a thing as a “perfect” family?

The American [or read Canadian] family is a rapidly changing institution. You may have grown up in the stereotypical American family - two parents and one or more children, with a father who worked outside the home and a mother who stayed home and cared for the children and the household. Today, with the entry of so many more women into the workforce, with the increasing divorce rate, and with the growing number of single-parent households, other family structures have become more common.

If your own family is not like the one you grew up in, your situation is certainly not unusual. Currently, 30 percent of American families are now headed by single parents, either divorced, widowed, or never married. Some children live in foster families; others live in step-families or in gay and lesbian families. In more than two thirds of families, both parents work outside the home.

Any group of people living together in a household can create and call themselves a family. For example, to share expenses a divorced mother with two children may live with another divorced woman with children; together, they may consider themselves a family. A grandparent who lives with her daughter, son-in-law, and grandchildren may become an integral part of their family. The variations of family structures and definition are almost endless, but they have certain qualities in common: Family members share their lives emotionally and together fulfill the multiple responsibilities of family life.

MYTH 1: The “Nuclear Family” Is A Universal Phenomenon

The nuclear family is generally defined as a family group made up of only a father, mother, and children. Although most people tend to think that this particular family structure has always been the





dominant one, that is not the case.

The nuclear family is a relatively recent phenomenon, becoming common only within the last century. Before then, the “traditional” family was multigenerational, with grandparents often living with their children on farms as well as in urban environments, typically with other relatives living nearby. The nuclear family has evolved in response to a number of factors: better health and longer lives, economic development, industrialization, urbanization, geographic mobility, and migration to the suburbs. These changes have resulted in physical separation of extended-family members and in progressive fragmentation of the family.

MYTH 2: Family Harmony Is The Rule, Not The Exception

Although family life is often romanticized, it has always been filled with conflicts and tension. Difficulties between spouses are commonplace, with disagreements arising over issues ranging from how the children should be raised to how the family finances should be budgeted. Husbands and wives also often struggle with their inability to sustain romantic infatuation beyond the first few years of their marriage, thus having to learn to maintain a relationship in which partnership and companionship may become more important than passionate love.

Parent-children conflicts are commonplace too. As parents assert their authority, and children try to assert their autonomy appropriately, strife is inevitable.

While we often expect families to be above the chaos that exists in the rest of society, that outlook places unrealistic expectations upon the family. In the real world, families are not always a haven, since they, too, can be filled with conflict. Although stress and disagreements are common, they can be destructive to families, especially when conflict gets out of hand. Families are under constant stress, being pushed

and pulled from many directions, often without the support systems of extended families that may have existed in the past.

MYTH 3: The Stability of A Family Is A Measure of Its Success

Change is a part of life. Death, illness, physical separation, financial strains, divorce . . . these are some of the events families have to adjust to. Consequently, stability shouldn't be the only measure of a family's success. Many families function quite well, despite frequent disruptions. In fact, one important measure of a family's success is its ability to adjust to change. Daily life is full of stresses that constantly demand accommodation from family members.

MYTH 4: Parents Control Their Children's Fate

In reality, parents cannot determine how their children will turn out. Inevitably, children assert their autonomy, creating a niche for themselves separate from their parents. At the same time, many factors external to both the child and family can influence the way a child develops.

Even within the same family there can be tremendous individual variations among siblings in intelligence, temperament, mood, and sociability. Yet despite these differences, parents are responsible for imparting to each child a sense of being loved and accepted, for helping each child to succeed at various developmental tasks, and for socializing each child into respecting the rules and accepting the responsibilities society imposes. These are indeed awesome tasks.

Some parents perceive themselves as having total responsibility for their children's fate. This belief places a heavy and unrealistic emotional burden on them as well as their youngsters. If the children are having problems, they often feel a sense of failure; likewise, the children feel as though they have let their family down if they do not live up to their parents' expectations. In essence, parents can influence and shape but cannot control their children's lives.



Questions

1. What does the nuclear family refer to? Did it really ever exist as the ideal or as the dominant structure of the family? According to the author of this article what conditions or factors created the “nuclear family” and what stressors are impacting negatively on it? Are all these aspects of the explanation actually true? How can moving to the suburbs be a cause for the separation from the extended family but also a cause for the fragmentation of the nuclear family structure? Why do most American families make it a point to be together for Thanksgiving and for Christmas? Ditto for Canadian families of a Christian background.
2. Have students watch an old video of a typical episode from old television shows from the 1950’s and 1960’s, like *Father Knows Best* or *Leave it to Beaver* to get a sense of the “ideal” family at that time.
3. Ought one to be concerned with the statistic offered here - *30 percent of American families are now headed by single parents, either divorced, widowed, or never married?*
4. Regarding Myth 2, who calls that situation a myth? Given both past and current statistics regarding domestic life and struggles encountered by families is there more pain and misunderstanding today or has it always been the same and we simply have more information about these situations?
5. Regarding Myth 3, is this approach by the author just throwing in the towel and then justifying the brokenness as inevitable and of no real consequence? Does the author fail to see the real harm, the real pain that is inflicted on all concerned when a marriage relationship goes down the tubes? Don’t children need a stable family structure? Or don’t they benefit more from a stable family structure, able to respond better to the vicissitudes and challenges of life?
6. Regarding Myth 4, does anyone really believe that in general *parents control their children’s fate?* Is the author suggesting that in some sub-cultures that is a belief or practice?
7. What is the major point of the article regarding the Perfect Family? Is it a reassuring point in the long term or disappointing to you?

8. Although this is only a short article, compare and contrast its view of the human family with that presented in *Amoris Laetitia* and in the article that follows.



Part C Evangelical Christianity - Evangelical Views Of Family Relations

Christian marriage and family life is regarded as a sacred and creative calling by all Christians. It is a basic biblical teaching. Marital union *in Christ* appeals to divine grace for support and fulfillment of a natural union of a man and a woman. Whereas the Orthodox teaching and practice of marriage is understood in sacramental terms, emphasizing the ecclesial, salvific, and eschatological dimensions of the married life, most Protestants find other expressions and concepts to describe the marital union. Although unwilling to formulate marriage and family life in precisely sacramental terms, Protestants generally stress that this union is a profound spiritual commitment and covenantal relationship. The biblical teaching and the church’s participation in assisting the couple to preserve and complete their marriage are held as basic by all Christians. Most Protestants tend to limit the role of the clergy and the church in marriage, as contrasted with the Orthodox teaching, because for them marriage is not constituted by the marriage rite. Biblical wisdom is paramount to the Evangelical faith in fulfilling God’s direction for the family. However, the purpose of the scriptures is not to give a detailed description of the stages of family development or specific instructions for dealing with the diversity of challenges and tasks that face parents and their children. Still, there are specific commands and promises given to parents and children in the Bible. Subjects like discipline (Prov. 22:6), good communication



(Eph. 6:4), and familial responsibilities (1 Tim. 3:1) are certainly addressed. But it would be a mistake to look at the Christian scriptures as a textbook on family functioning. Lewis Smedes (1976) observed that what Protestant Christians generally hold as true is that it would be more helpful to look to the Bible as informing us about human life as a whole, so that we as humans can increasingly understand and evaluate our experiences as people in our nuclear and extended families.

Protestant Christians see the family as a social institution entered into by a private contract that may be blessed by the church. Where explicitly religious dimensions are present, they are thought of as bolstering the couple's private consent. The spiritual foundation for the family is thus by choice and orders the physical, social, and personal foundations of the family covenant with God. Because of this, the Christian family relies heavily on the church and Evangelical community for nurturing family life through its understanding of Scripture, tradition, and experience. The pastoral care provided by the church assists this process by making accessible the social skills and psychological insights helpful to it, and by offering assistance in articulating the theological and cultural context within which a given Christian family seeks to live.

The Christian church is an advocate for the family. There has always been something like what is called *the family* to protect and nurture those who are young. In modern times, however, there has been an exploration into the ways in which the whole human story might be told in terms of household

events. The history of Israel is often carried by family stories. Although the continuity of the church as the New Israel is not dependent on family lineage, the early Christian community is often described in family metaphors. The Bible everywhere assumes the significance of the family. The church has sought throughout its history to establish and maintain the sanctity of the home. It has taught that the family is the vehicle for God's continual creation and rule.

In contemporary times, the evangelical community has strongly supported *family values*. Although there is some divergence within this segment of the church on specific topics, this generally means that evangelicals share a common worldview—assumptions about the universe, about God, about human beings, about right and wrong, and about lifestyle. This evangelical worldview, for example, is often viewed as anti-divorce, pro-life, anti-gay marriages, and so on; in short, it is a conservative view dedicated to preserving the traditional family. Within this context, the evangelical community promotes family education. Marriage preparation and enrichment as well as child-rearing are clear examples of this. The evangelical community prizes opportunities to intentionally sponsor instruction in areas related to strong family values (Collins 1995).

Few would argue that the family is not of special concern to the Christian church. For Christians, it was the church that validated marriages and legitimated the birth of children. For most of its history, the church's care for families has centered on landmarks of birth, puberty, marriage, and death as primary modes of care that enable individuals and families

to live through the stress that usually accompanies change and loss. Preparing for, sustaining, and nurturing the family in a normative vision, however, is nowhere more apparent than in moments of tragedy in family life. Divorce, abortion, death, adultery, suicide, depression, spouse and child abuse, and a host of other devastating moments in family life are not understandable for Christians apart from a sense of how the Christian faith would have us see and respond to them. In the absence of that vision, Christians lose sight of what the family is about, and thus it and its tragedies are governed by other beliefs and experiences.

The family is an organism of change. Some of that change is unexpected. Some of it is inevitable as individuals within the family grow up and grow older. Because the family is always changing, adaptability is one of its essential characteristics. To believe in a God who is always making something new means that change is an unavoidable dimension of each family structure.

Despite wide diversity of form and function throughout human history, the family has fulfilled God's intent to provide a context for creation and care in order to ensure the continuity of humankind. From the perspective of Evangelical Christianity, however, the family can never be an end in itself. In order to be a vital human organism, the family is always moving outside itself for the sake of justice, peace, and freedom in everwidening human communities.

Bibliography

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Smedes, L. B. (1976). *Sex for Christians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

<http://family.jrank.org/pages/470/Evangelical-Christianity-Evangelical-Views-Family-Relations.html>

Questions for Reflection

1. *Christian marriage and family life is regarded as a sacred and creative calling by all Christians. It is a basic biblical teaching. What happens when marriage is not seen in these terms? What has happened to change the traditional view of the marriage covenant? Is it more likely to result in breakdowns and divorce etc. if this strong spiritual faith element is missing or not accepted?*

2. According to the author how do Protestant and Orthodox views of marriage differ?
3. How can the Church and Evangelical community assist couples in nurturing family life through scripture for example?
4. The term *family values* is often heard or spoken about. What does the Evangelical community mean by it?
5. How and why is the family of special concern to the Christian church?
6. Why is the Christian faith vital at the devastating moments in family life?
7. What empirical evidence is there that families are different today, perhaps *governed by other beliefs and experiences*?
8. If the family is an organism of change and subject to change, is it in danger of disappearing?
9. Of the many forces of change that impact on the health and stability of the family as an institution which constitutes the greatest threat and which offers the best hope for the continuation and resiliency of the family?



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