

The Christian family in the secularized context of our society

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: *This article presents the problem of the family from the Christian perspective and its role in the postmodern society, but also the most serious problems affecting its functionality. As social form, the family is the environment of existence and training ordained by God for man. It has been instituted since the beginning of the creation of the first people, yet by Christ, by the Holy Mystery of Marriage, has been sanctified the union of love between a man and a woman. As time has gone by, under the impulse of the fundamental freedoms and rights specific of man, recognized especially by the modern society, serious abnormalities have appeared, affecting the integrity of the family, such as: sexual immorality as plague of the matrimonial life, divorce, abortion, the so-called “families” of same-sex people. The contemporary man adheres without due consideration to all these, without taking into account their consequences. Certainly, the Christian Orthodox norms bring along with their application the remedy as well, namely life in Christ, which means full humanization.*

Keywords: Christian family, postmodern society, humanization, sexual immorality, abortion

Introduction

The Christian family, in the secularizing and consumerist context of the postmodern society, is faced with special moral challenges affecting its integrity and functionality.

Family has always been more than a complex system of socio-affective life based on love feelings that have been generating mutual human relations; it has exerted a major influence on the development of man and of society.

As social form, family represents the basic cell of any type of hierarchy. In the context of every society, the human family has been playing a stabilizing role, yet due to the continual social changes, of mentality and of status, the problem of the family will remain a reality with a dynamic dimension and content, permanently engaged in the phenomenology of man's existence in the world.

In a compared and synthetic analysis of the Christian thinking and humanist logic, it is acknowledged that the organization of the human species had as fundament the family as core of the society, yet, at its basis, laity always puts the association of two beings free to live together, whereas Christianity institutes it by the Holy Mystery of Marriage. In Christianity, the family is not just a social form, a social group, but a reality in which God's love is at work.

Chap. 1. Family, man's environment of coexistence and mutual relations

The family is, first of all, a social form, involving a social life. While, according to the non-Christian vision, the civil society has been born based on an initial contract established between its first members, at the basis of community life has been people's consent to get associated and to be led by the public organs representing the power.

Even since the Antiquity, the family has been the social unit whose members lived in a certain **home**, submitted to the authority of the owner, usually called "pater familiae" [1]. The family members had a common identity and common aspirations. In general, a family defined as a "home" [2] was organized along with a common religion, led by a head taking care of everything related to its welfare.

In the Christian revelation, the relation between God and the creation is one of love and reflection; all the creation and especially man is part of the divine revelation, it attests the Creator's goodness. The man created in the image of God accomplishes himself by his relation and collaboration with the divinity, living in grace the fullness of the existence, and this state is actually the family environment. Cohabitation, as a natural existential relation between a man and a woman, relies on the fact that together they make up the complete unity of the human nature. The first family was created in Heaven, having God Himself as priest and witness: "*And the Lord God said: 'It is not good for man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable and complementary for him'*" (Genesis 2:18) "*Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth*" (Genesis 1:28). The man and the woman express two modalities of existence of the human being, as reality of the [call to or possibility of] perfection of the two. Man has been created "*as duality to exist in relation, taken individually he does not feel complete, he looks for the other for accomplishment and creation*" [3].

From a Christian perspective, the family is a divine institution and the basis of social, community life. Our Savior, by His presence at the wedding of Cana, Galilee (John 2:2-11), where he performed His first miracle, blessed the wedding elevating it to the rank of mystery. Marriage or the wedding is "*the mystery in which a man and a woman, agreeing freely to live together all their life, to give birth and raise children and help each other, receive, by the priest, the grace sanctifying their relation and helping it reach its aim*" [4]. The Christian family is founded by the Holy Mystery of Marriage, which consecrates the relation of love between a man and a woman. This relation is a natural accomplishment of the need of communion ordained by God for man. "*For this reason, a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh*" (Ephes. 5:31). The main aim of marriage is the perfection of the two, which is configured by the mystery of marriage. Out of the need for accomplishment and cohabitation in the matrimonial world, other family aims emerge as well: reciprocal help of the wife and the husband to make their life easier; giving life and raising and shaping children; refraining from lusts to protect morality, "*as guard against sexual immorality*" (1 Cor. 7:2) and others.

The family defines a society in a certain stage of its civilization, but it also deeply marks the destiny of each human person. As institution, the family gives stability to a society, this is why it is protected by written and unwritten laws. The State takes on responsibility for regulating the relations between individuals inside the family, especially during crucial moments.

At the origin of life there is "*the family as a core of the society, and at the basis of the family is marriage*" [5]. Saint Basil the Great, in full agreement with the biblical

teaching, presents the family as a divine institution, underlining its unity and indissolubility.

The full unity and harmony in the family as a microchurch is highlighted by the Holy Father Basil the Great by the prayer practiced in common by the family members [6]. Regarding the birth and the bringing up of children, the physical relation between husband and wife is not justified if it is viewed only as a remedy against lust; procreation is also to be had in view, as *“the acts of physical union combine with assuming a higher spiritual responsibility”* [7]. The dignity and the responsibility of the husband and of the wife in the family rely on the divine creation of both of them, in the divine image they both are endowed with to the same extent because *“male and female created He them”* (Genesis 1:27), this is why those who have *“the same nature also have the same works, and those who do the same deed receive the same reward”* [8].

By virtue of the mutual love between husband and wife, it is possible to understand the place and the role of each of them in the unity of the family, each having rights and responsibilities in their cohabitation: the right to love (1 Corinthians 7, Ephesians 5), the obligation for the husband to take care of his wife as he takes care of his own body, sacrificing himself according to the model of Christ’s sacrifice for the Church (Ephesians 5). The family founded by marriage gives the wife and the husband each other’s virtues, namely: the unfaithful man is sanctified by the faithful woman and the unfaithful woman is sanctified by the faithful man (1 Corinthians 7).

Chap. 2. The issue of the family in the postmodern society

De-institutionalization, individualization and democratization of family life are the processes that have weakened, in time, the importance and the role of the family. The main challenges brought on the family by the contemporary society are an injury to and a denial of its Christian aims. The postmodern society focuses on the benefit of the individual, and not of the family or of the society. In this context, in Europe, for example, the number of marriages has decreased (5 marriages per 1000 people) and the number of divorces has increased, especially in Western Europe. The immediate consequence is the following: few young people, and an ageing continent.

If to the world’s spiritual crisis we add problems like: poverty, unemployment, proselytist sects, violence, uncertainty regarding tomorrow, emigration and immigration, child abandonment, increased family violence and juvenile delinquency, certainly we shall direct the attention to the role and the importance of the family.

The main problems weakening family life are:

Sexual immorality as plague of conjugal life

“But I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery and whoever marries the abandoned one, commits adultery.” (Matthew 19:9)

Debauchery or meeting one’s physical lusts outside marriage is considered a serious sin, by which the body is reduced to the role of object of sinful pleasure, being no longer considered the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6).

Monogamy is justified precisely to fight debauchery and support faithfulness to God and to the members of the family. *“But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should fulfill his marital responsibility to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.”* (1 Corinthians 7:1-3). The excessive debauchery of the postmodern man has intensified the pornographic

industry, the exploitation of women and human traffic, which some societies have even legitimized.

The issue of divorce

Founding a family by marriage is a teandric action, for eternity. The teaching of Christ our Saviour is firm: *“What God has joined together, no one must separate.”* (Matthew 19:6).

Today, one can notice that family and marriage are reduced to contractual acts, from which the partners exit in a consensual way, confirmed by the civil institutions responsible in the domain, whenever they want.

The issue of abortion

In the fact of creation, God commanded man: *“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it!”* (Genesis.1:28). The perpetuation of the nation is a mission of man in the world. The Church claims that the dual nature of man represents the synthesis between transcendent and immanent, and appears unitarily. The soul comes from God together with the body, *“life begins right at the moment of conception, because it is then that the cells’ reproduction, specialization and functioning begin”* [9]. The Church, with its whole revealed teaching, is against abortion as theory and practice, qualifying it as crime against human life, among the sins that cry to heaven.

Life is the most precious asset that God has endowed man with, and the premise of all the other goods. Life is for man an asset overflowed from the divine love and he has the duty to perfect it for his own good and for his fellows’ good. Since, in the womb, is present a living soul in relation to an undeveloped body, created by God even since the moment of the child’s procreation, abortion is a crime, also forbidden by the 5th commandment of the Decalogue, which says: *“Do not kill”* (Exodus 20:13). From a Christian perspective, this fact does not remain without consequences. The effects of a crime are transmitted not just on the parents but also on the collateral branches of the family tree.

Abortion, as a legal act, contributes to the depersonalization and dehumanization of the human being, to the breaking up of the family, and makes the whole society ill, as it throws it into the torments of its own self-sufficiency. Abortive (and contraceptive) practices are a reality of the contemporary secularized world, offered to men as solutions of life.

Today, the bioethical conclusions support the idea that abortion, interrupting a life with a separate identity, is murder; that the embryo has a life with existence and identity of its own, which give him rights since the moment of its conception and especially the right to life.

The issue of the “families” of same-sex people

Worldwide, there are pressures with a view to adopting a legislation permitting marriages between same-sex people. This fact, invoked in the name of the fundamental human rights and freedoms really goes against the rationality of the human existence. The so-called “families” formed of same-sex persons are not justified from any logical, rational perspective. Their presence in the society is a pathological evidence of the downfall and decadence some of the postmodern men are struggling with. The existence of such cohabitations is prejudicial both to the partners involved, and especially to the children adopted, who are raised and educated in an environment that is hostile and harmful to life and to man. For Christianity, which really does treasure the human being and condemns the sinful passions mastering man, same-sex “cohabitations” are not considered families, and will never be accepted.

Chap. 3. The Christian family, an essential factor in man's education and training

The multitude of relations established between the members of the family include cultural values, including the educative ones, transmitted by means of these members, and constituting together the family environment. Full harmony in the family is achieved based on just relations between its members, in the sense that one has to respect the divine commandment: "*Children must honor and obey their parents*" (Ex. 20:12; Eph. 6:1-3), and "*parents must raise their children in the teaching and scolding of the Lord, with all gentleness and patience, and under no pretext concerning them, should they stir their anger and sadness*" [10].

To sensitize to this relation between parents and children, Saint Basil the Great turns to another example from the animal world: "*If the lioness loves its offspring and the wolf fights for its cubs, what will man say, who does not obey the commandment and spoils nature, either when the child dishonors his father's old age, or when the father, by his second marriage, forgets the children of his first marriage. Unstoppable is the love between parents and cubs among animals, because God, the One Who created them, replaced in them the lack of reason by the richness of feelings*" [11].

The Christian family has a significant role in the education of the religious-moral character. Education is necessary even since [the child is in] the bosom of the family, because it is there that the temporary future begins and is founded - a future for which the Christian family is responsible to people and to God. The Christian family is meant to introduce the child in the religion he belongs to by baptism but also by the shaping of the first behaviors. The first religious notions are received by the child in the family, because parents ought to teach their children God's word, yet they ought to be models especially by their actions, their life and their virtues: charity, kindness, forgiveness, piety to the saints and to the Holy Mysteries of the Church. The relations between parents and children suppose a special mechanism, filtered socially; these relations rely on the norms related to communication, by which a behavioral pattern is realized. Paternity and maternity is "*a rich source of love because a parent is not made a parent by the birth of his child ... but by his or her endeavor to teach the child all that is good and useful for the child's soul*" [12].

The Christian norms and values are meant to unite and bring people together, solidarizing them freely. Christian education relies on the personal capacity of openness and acceptance by love of our neighbor, life being a continuous high and low tide of revelation and generosity. The Christian Church is "*the repository of the divine and forever redeeming grace, the holy community founded by our Savior Jesus Christ with the aim of spiritual salvation*" [13]. By the divine cult, the Church is continuer of the religious-educative work begun in the family and in school.

Conclusions

The family is the "small church", comprising divine love, involving an ecclesial commitment and faithfulness to the Person and activity of Christ. As a member of the ecclesial family and community, the Christian intensifies the living and the union of faith, in order to acquire perfection in Christ, Who makes love present in the world, because "*if God loved us like that, we also ought to love one another*" (1 John 4:11).

The balance of the community order is supported by the reality of moral life, lived by following the commandments that Christ has asked unconditionally from any human person divinely bearing the imprint of His reason through the spiritual birth given by the Mystery of the Holy Baptism.

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