

HOW SOCIETY CAN HELP PROMOTE THE FAMILY AND HOW FAMILIES THEMSELVES ARE WORKING IN DEFENSE OF THIS COMMON GOOD?

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*Francesco Belletti, Director of the
International Center for Family Studies (Milan, Italy)*

1. From family to society and back: a two way-relation

“The Joy of Love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church” (AL, n.1). From its very beginning Pope Francis’ *Amoris laetitia* clearly states that families can and do generate a wider good than their own private good (or private wellbeing or pure self-interest). Joyful families create joy for the whole Church, with an overflow of benefits, which trespasses family boundaries, enriching the whole Church. And we can extend this dynamics to the relation between families and the whole society. *“Joyful families create joy for society”*.

So, if we want to discuss, even briefly, on “how society can and should help to promote the family”, as my intervention’s title requires, I’m not saying that family wellbeing is primarily generated by public support and by State intervention. Surely some help is needed by society; but first of all it is important to recognize that family, as a natural institution, has its own inner and proper resources, and public and State support should limit to strengthen its freedom and responsibility. In other words, the principle of subsidiarity should be the **golden rule**, giving families subjectivity, autonomy and freedom of choice. Else, we could have State family policies aimed to influence the free choices of families and individuals, rather than promoting their abilities, competences and responsibilities. In *Amoris laetitia*’s view, as I have just recalled, it is the family’s joy which generates the Church’s joy.

2. The responsibilities of society: positive actions supporting families

In the Charter of the Rights of the Family, issued in 1983 by the Catholic Church and addressed to all governments, art. 9 states that *“families have the right to be able to rely on an adequate family policy on the part of public authorities in the juridical, economic, social and fiscal domains, without any discrimination whatsoever”*. This request is rather easily accepted and shared all over the world, especially after 1994, when United Nations celebrated the first International Year for the Family, which was followed by the institution of the 15th of May of every year as the International Day of the Families. Actually, this celebration has contributed to raise an explicit attention to families, even going, in some cases, beyond the *“normal percentage”* of rethorical and unpractical formal celebrations of

such initiatives. In some cases, in some countries, new actions have been adopted in favour of the families, right because of the UN attention to the family.

This also meant that it was clearly recognized that family policies are indeed necessary, since families and societies have common needs and common responsibilities. We can very briefly list at least four necessary “directions” for sound family policies: 1) a strategic framework of public family policies; 2) a special attention to the economic dimension; 3) an explicit and adequate support to care functions of the families; 4) the promotion of a family friendly cultural attitude.

1) family policies are not welfare or social policies; they need to be comprehensive, related to the ordinary problems of daily family life, mainly devoted to preventive actions, rather than focussed on specific targets of distressed families. They also need to be promotional of family responsibilities, rather than making them passive recipients of services. That’s why it is so important the “*family mainstreaming*”, which means to take into consideration, for every kind of public action, its impact on families’ welfare, going beyond the individualist approach of too many policy actions.

2) the economics dimension is also crucial in determining families’ welfare or their distress. Family poverty is growing more and more, also in developed countries, while the last global crisis is determining a growing inequality between the very rich and the very poor, in the same countries. Another important problem related to economics is the balance between family life and working time. Too often work is strongly stressing the daily life of couples, and the parental responsibilities for education of their children. Some companies are adopting good practices for helping workers to have a good family-work balance (especially women), and in some countries legislation is indeed helping firms and workers. But in many other countries the working conditions surely are not family-friendly as they could and should be. Fight against poverty and social marginalisation, good (decent) work and family-friendly flexibility have still to become first priority in public policies of too many countries.

3) Families are “*naturally*” the first and most important resource for people in need of care. With the word “*naturally*” I mean that care is one of the native relational codes of family life, not only towards disabled or frail people, but in all the relations between the family members, during every phase of the life of individuals and families. Newborn babies, teens, youngsters seeking their first job... for all of them family care remains the first and most valuable resource to cope with life challenges. That’s why the new frontier of welfare systems should not be “*more public services to solve more persons’ problems*”, but a better and more explicit alliance between family care and public services, “*helping families to help themselves*”.

4) Finally, the public discourse on family nowadays is highly controversial. The stereotype of traditional family as a “*traditional burden from the past times*”, to be overcome as soon as possible in favour of individual’s freedom and “*relational liquidity*”, is very strong. So in

media communication and in policy actions the stability of couple relationships is not supported, “gender fluidity” is highly supported as a positive factor of modernisation, large families are frequently marginalized, while new forms of bio-technology related to birth and death are promoted as the future and so-long awaited frontier of the scientific development. All over the world, the vast majority of families, founded on the sexual difference and on the explicit alliance between a man and a woman, open to generation of life and engaged in a permanent and stable relationship (possibly “for ever”), often feel that they are considered as old-fashioned and unfair. Actually the “*public discourse*” on family is not “family friendly”, while families need to feel sheltered and encouraged by the external context.

Families therefore need (and they do deserve) a family friendly environment, in policies, in economics, in care and in cultural attitudes, in order to be reinforced in living their own responsibilities, and in facing the growing challenges of these difficult and rapidly changing historical transition.

3. How families generate common good?

On the other side of the dialogue “family-society”, going back again to the Charter of the Rights of the Family, art. 8 states that “*the family has the right to exercise its social and political function in the construction of society*”. It means also that this right turns into a direct responsibility of the family in building society. In Cicero’s word, in a pre-Christian culture, family is defined as “*seminarium rei publicae*”, that is, “*training ground for the public matters*” – republic, *res-publica*). More precisely, family is the first place where to be educated in rights and duties of citizenship.

So this is the first and most important way through which family generates common good; educating new citizens to social values, persons able to act not only for their selfish interest, but also for others. Thus families generate a set of “*social values*”, such as trust, responsibility, hope, education to common good. In Pope Francis’ words, during the Eighth World Family Meeting, in Philadelphia, in September 2015, “**family if the fabric of hope**”. We can also say that family is the “**fabric of society**”, as it is reported in the title of a recent and precious international research promoted by the Pontifical Council of the Family, which was in direct prosecution of a research coordinated by Cisf, under the scientific direction of prof. Pierpaolo Donati, which was presented in 2012, in Milan, during the Seventh World Meeting of the Families, whose title was “**Family - Resource for society**” (*Famiglia: risorsa della società*).

It also means that in contemporary society, if families want to keep being a fabric of solidarity, they cannot limit their action to the close relations between individuals, but they have to become a public actor on the public scene.

A second and wider level of public responsibility of families is building solidarity networks, through mutual and self-help relations, opening the internal relations of solidarity, reciprocity and donation to others: in the local community, in the neighbourhood, in fostering care and adoption for children in distress, in dialogue and care for migrants... This capacity of solidarity by the families is a huge deposit of social capital, which GDP does not consider, but which is able to improve the quality of life, the life projects and the hope of millions of people with problems, all over the world.

A third level of social responsibility by families is the formal organization of family associations, which can help families not only in solving their problems through solidarity networks, but especially “giving voice” and public relevance to their problems and request. Family associations can and should represent families in the public scene, “lobbying for families” in front of public bodies, asking for family policies, planning innovative policies, contrasting policies who are not in favour of the families... Giving voice to families, in front of political, economic and cultural groups of power.

In this sense, family associations can be one of the more efficient and prophetic” ways, for the families, to act “politically”, playing their responsibility for the common good. At the same time they can bear witness that, through Pope Paul the Sixth’s words, *“politics is one of the highest forms of Charity”*.