

A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE MAGISTERIUM'S TEXTS ON THE FAMILY

MATHIAS NEBEL

Director, Caritas in Veritate Foundation

1. Two different emphasis on the family

Many texts and interventions of the magisterium have addressed the family and almost every important text at least mentions it. A “charter of the rights of the family” has even been proposed by the Holy See in 1983. This introduction will not, therefore, pretend to cover all the occurrences of the term in the corpus of Catholic Social Teaching, but only highlight some of the most recurring issues raised by the magisterium when speaking on the family. Accordingly, we have chosen to publish in the following section a very small number of interventions that relate to the three themes treated in the previous part of this volume: migration, poverty and business. To give at least an overview of the rest, we have asked the Pontifical council for Family to provide us with a text that would present the Church’s teaching on the family. This text closes this section.

Two periods clearly divide the way the Catholic Church has addressed the family. The first encompasses the texts going from *Rerum novarum* (1891) up to *Populorum progressio* (1967), the second embraces the time frame that spans from *Humanae vitae* (1968) to *Caritas in Veritate* (2009). During the first, family itself is seen as a shared evidence and is approached mainly through its social and economic dimensions. The second period, however, is characterized by the debate around the legal evolutions of marriage, the social transformation of sexual behavior and new reproductive techniques. Here the family is mainly addressed in the perspective of these questions, usually in order to recall the Christian definition of family (natural law).

The two periods do not so much capture a change of content but rather a change of emphasis. The social and economic importance of family is never denied, but instead coexists within another dominant perspective. In his recent teaching, however, Pope Francis has given strong signals that he does not desire to see the family reduced to a debate on marriage and sexuality. The present Synod on the family is precisely investigating this pastoral aggiornamento of the Church discourse on the family.

2. The economic importance of the family

The oldest texts composing the corpus of Catholic Social Teaching documents are the most explicit on this issue. The following paragraph mentions the lasting elements put forward regarding the economic importance of the family:

1. Family is first mentioned *as a production unit*; that is, how a whole family may be seen as producing together some good (typically a farm), or as the income aggregation of the family members' work. *Rerum novarum* therefore recognizes the family as an economic unit that is important to the way we analyze production and income distribution (RN 43-46).

2. *Wages, poverty and family*. Miserable wages nurture extreme poverty, which brings about the disintegration of the family (RN 5 43-46). Catholic Social Teaching emphasizes how important just wages (QA 74-76; MM 68), total working hours (RN 39), health conditions at work (RN 42), dignified working conditions (LE 9), the limitation put to children's work and women's work (RN 42), are to the dignity of family life. The housing conditions – often in that time attached to the factory – are also mentioned (QA 135), as well as the need for work to avoid impeding access to basic education (LE 10). Even if these remainders are not any more pertinent to industrialized countries, none of this is out of context in most of the developing world.

3. *Family, economic security and stability*. “In the task of development man finds the family to be the first and most basic social structure” (PP 38). The family brings security and stability to its members. They provide each other help in times of distress, mutual comfort, and they share, in solidarity, family resources. This is why social encyclicals have stressed access to private property not in a defense of liberalism, but out of meeting the needs of poor families (QA 61). The access to private property provides basic security and stability (MM 33. 119); the possession of goods is the first and most straightforward risk insurance against life hazards (GS 69). The same reason is behind the support of the magisterium for mutual insurance systems. By mitigating poverty and social risk, they provide the security and stability needed by families to flourish.

4. *Equilibrium between work and family relationships*. John Paul II and then Benedict XVI have both insisted on the need for equilibrium between work and family relationships (LE 10; CV 51). The increasing engagement of both parents in formal working activities should leave enough time for family life. It should, especially, never encroach on the development of the children's relationship with their parents (CV 63).

5. *Family breakup and poverty*. Pope Francis has underlined the fact that extreme poverty and exclusion grow where family solidarities are lacking: “Evidence is mounting that the decline of the marriage culture is associated with increased poverty and a host of other social ills, disproportionately

affecting women, children and the elderly. It is always they who suffer the most in this crisis.”¹ The family network is the best prevention to social exclusion. The instability of families reduces their capacity to prevent the fall into extreme poverty.

3. The family as source of social life

The second Vatican Council has famously stated that the family is the “foundation of society” and a “school of humanity” (GS 52).

It is the place where children are introduced to social life; where language, culture, knowledge, values, and institutions are transmitted and learned (FC 43). The family is key to introducing the young generation to the practical functioning of the social world. This has been explicated through the following statements:

1. *A logic of love and solidarity.* Of utmost importance is the fact that family relationships are built – or should be built – on mutual love and not self-interest (CA 39; FC 12). The family is a school of humanity in the sense that our relationships with others are born into a “logic of gift” (GS 52; FC 43; CV 6.34). The rationality of solidarity and of the common good precedes the logic of competition and power relationships (FC 43). Therefore the logic of love is not something estranged from the social reality, but is the basis of the solidarities on which social life is built (CA 39; CV 2).

2. *Necessity of this community of love for children to become part of the society.* A child raised out of this logic is estranged to a crucial part of social life (FC 50). As the first community, family relationships are the cradle where a child is initiated into the sense of justice, of truth, and to the respect for the common good. (JM 57, CA 39).

3. *The State’s protection of the family.* As the source of social life, the family precedes the State²; it commands the effective transmission of the social and political institution of a country to the younger generations (GS 46-52; CA 39, Catechism 2224). Hence the family is entailed to receive from the State a legal recognition that defines and protects it (AA 11). But keep in mind that marriage – the legal institution, explicated in positive law by each country – has its root in the anthropological reality of the family (RN 12-13; FC 13). Beside the mere legal recognition of the family, governments should also enact adequate policies, whenever needed, so as to further and promote its social function and ensure its stability (FC 44).

4. *The responsibility of the spouses.* The Church also ties the family’s legal protection to the recognition of some limits to the State’s legislative power or to the scope of its policies (RN 14; FC 45-46). The spouses must be free to choose to marry; as they are the ones who bear the responsibility to choose how many children they want a have (Charter art. 3), theirs is also the choice of the faith in which they want their children to be brought up (Charter art. 5). The insistence of those two aspects by the Church is

historically grounded in the conflicts that gave rise to the modern State. The magisterium frequently refers to subsidiarity regarding procreation and education of children (RN 11. 35-36). The State should only intervene where the primary responsibility of families is failing to live up to its duties (FC 45).

4. Sexual revolution and Christian ethics

As said in the introduction, the last five decades have been largely dominated by questions raised by the sexual revolution of the sixties and the quick transformations of social behavior that followed. The way in which the magisterium would address the family react to these changes, up to the point of appearing sometimes as a “Leitmotiv” occulting other aspects of the previous Church’s teaching on family.

1. *A sexual revolution.* Over a relatively short period, western countries first, followed by the globalized elites around the world, have undergone a sexual revolution. Some of its features, as seen by the magisterium, have been (FC 4-10): a. the irruption of efficient medical technology in matters of sexual reproduction (birth control, assisted procreation, genetic engineering, etc.); b. the rapid transformation of mass behavior and social norms regarding sexuality sparked by a change of culture (individualism and a “right driven” equality); c. the impressive increasing of fragility and instability in marriage and the correlative succession over time of different forms of unions; d. the steady rise of mono-parental and recomposed families; e. the legislative work which has given a legal framework to this revolution.

2. *Diversity and unity.* Since *Humanae vitae*, numerous documents of the magisterium have addressed these questions. They all share a fundamental point which is the following: the different historical roles assumed by the family are indeed plainly normal, arising from the cultural diversity of human societies (FC 10). But this diversity is not such that it can impede the rational and universal recognition of some normative elements that define the family (FC 17). In the same way as the difference among individual does not impede the recognition of the rational and universal recognition of their dignity, some normative elements are key to the existence of family whatever they actual cultural diversity may be.

3. *Essential and universal elements of the family.* Among these permanent and normative features the magisterium maintains the following: a. Families are composed by a man and a woman; it is a community of love and freedom open to the gift of life through the reception of the children they may have; b. Children are a gift and their existence cannot be submitted only to their parent’s will of power or to the birth control policies of the State. They have rights that apply from their very conception; c. The family plays an essential social function as school of humanity and fabric of

social relationships; it must be protected by the State; d. The legal forms given to family must maintain marriage as between a man and a woman, freely contracted, one and indissoluble. On the basis on those elements, the magisterium insists on some well-known moral norms: a. Fidelity; b. Responsible paternity and maternity; b. No abortion; c. Natural forms of contraception only, etc.³

4. *Rebalancing the Church's teaching.* The Church's insistence and the media's infatuation on these issues have dangerously reduced the relevance of the family in public debate to its mere legal definition and to questions of sexual ethics. Pope Francis has deplored this narrowing of the perspective and called for the Church a Synod on the family that will deliver its work in 2015. The social role of family, especially regarding the prevention of poverty, has however already been marked by Francis as one key issue.

5. Family perspective on the three topics of migration, poverty and business.

It came as a surprise in the creation of this Working Paper that few texts would indeed be dedicated to these more specific issues. Curiously, when addressing migration, the magisterium seldom adopts a family perspective to understand the dynamic of migration flows. More surprisingly still is the fact that on business, we could not find a single recent text that would stress the importance of the family in and upon the business world. This must be contrasted against the strong engagement of the Church on the ground. On migration and poverty, many Church affiliated organizations are longstanding pioneers; however, this engagement has not translated into a more family oriented advocacy by the magisterium on these questions.

On migration, the family's importance is highlighted by the magisterium mainly in the context of the vulnerability of migrants and the protection of their dignity and human rights. As far as family is concerned, a special emphasis is put on the right to family reunification, on housing and work, on the needs and rights of child-migrants, on the right to education for children and on the integration of migrant families in the country of destination (Charter, art. 12).⁴

Interestingly, the family also frequently emerges in relation to the country of origin (for example by addressing the fate of the "left behind" family members). The long separated spouses and the trend of children being educated without the presence of one of their parents are not desirable forms of family life (FC 77). Another example is the well-known importance of the monetary savings sent by migrants to their country of origin and the subsequent impact on development. These very important flows of capital are family based in the sense that they are invested within and through family cells (CV 62). It is to be remembered that Mater and magistra saw

in the need of the family the foundation of a right to migration (MM 45). The importance of family solidarity is another point which is stressed by the magisterium concerning migration. Usually not developed, the importance of family solidarity for security, work, health, integration and spiritual comfort is pervasive (FC 44).

On poverty and family. The family plays a fundamental role in the prevention of poverty. This is the constant view of *Rerum novarum* and the early twentieth century Encyclicals (RN 13). Families, by forming the first network of solidarity, are the most efficient and reliable source of help to the poor (FC 43; 50). In modern vocabulary, families are the first and main provider of human security, something that was included in the Charter of the rights of the Family: “The extended family system, where it exists, should be held in esteem and helped to carry out better its traditional role of solidarity and mutual assistance.” Charter, art. 6c).

The preferential option of the Church for the poor and marginalized obviously also extend to the household of poor families (SRS 42). The magisterium frequently reminds us of how poverty undermines a family’s stability and increases its vulnerability (QA 61; FC 85). Poverty affects the material basis of the family, its income and its capacity to help each other and show solidarity for the weakest (QA 135). Relationships within the family then become competitive about their resources and thus the family link grows ever more fragile (FC 81). Poverty will also adversely affect the education of children, their work and their social opportunities (Charter K).

Therefore the promotion of the family through adequate policies by States or the International community is not only required but should become one of the priorities of governments (GS 52). Housing, education, social security should concentrate on the family necessities to strengthen their capacity for the common good of society (FC 85).

On business and family, as said before, we were unable to find any significant documents of the magisterium. One eventually finds brief references to the family as unit of production (MM 85-142), its importance for development (PP 38), its role as early school for work or the important values it creates for economic activities (LE 10; 19), but no document really dwells on the relationship between family and business⁵. It clearly is a domain of future development.

NOTES

1. Pope Francis, *We Must Foster a New Human Ecology*, 24 November, 2014.
2. “The family: the “society” of a man’s house - a society very small, one must admit, but none the less a true society, and one older than any State. Consequently, it has rights and duties peculiar to itself which are quite independent of the State” *Rerum novarum*, 11.
3. See for the whole paragraph the charter of rights of the family, 1983.
4. The Charter of the family has an article on dedicated to migrants:
5. “The families of migrants have the right to the same protection as that accorded other families. a) The families of immigrants have the right to respect for their own culture and to receive support and assistance towards their integration into the community to which they contribute. b) Emigrant workers have the right to see their family united as soon as possible. c) Refugees have the right to the assistance of public authorities and International Organizations in facilitating the reunion of their families.” *Charter of the Family*, 1983, §12.
6. The most obvious mention is probably : “But if we hold to a human and Christian concept of man and the family, we are bound to consider as an ideal that form of enterprise which is modelled on the basis of a community of persons working together for the advancement of their mutual interests in accordance with the principles of justice and Christian teaching.” (MM 142).

ABBREVIATIONS

- RR. *Rerum novarum* (1891)
 QA. *Quadregesimo anno* (1931)
 MM. *Mater et magistra* (1961)
 PT. *Pacem in terris* (1963)
 GS. *Gaudium et spes* (1965)
 AA. *Apostolicam actuositatem* (1965)
 PP. *Populorum progressio* (1967)
 LE. *Laborem exercens* (1981)
 FC. *Familiaris consortio* (1981)
 CA. *Centesimus annus* (1991)
 CV. *Caritas in veritate* (2009)
 EG. *Evangelii gaudium* (2013)