

THE FAMILY, STILL IN AMORIS LAETITIA?: BACK TO JESUS' NEW FAMILY

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Pope Francis' Amoris Laetitia (AL) is remarkable in its treatment of marriage and family in personal-relational, biblical, and Christological terms as well as in its deeply appreciative awareness of and sense of empathy for the actual situations of families all over the world. Its base document Relatio Synodi has noted the thoughtful concern of the bishops for all the families of the world. The pope's apostolic exhortation is marked by the same concern. However, it cannot fully offer a more encompassing and catholic view of the family as the hermeneutics of continuity with essentialist undertone seems to be an underlying concern. From "all the families" under the Church's solicitous embrace it shifts its focus to the traditional-magisterial view of marriage, the indissoluble union between man and woman, which gives birth to the nuclear family. The essay is a modest attempt to fill in the void by engaging the concept of family not as a metaphysical but as a socially constructed reality in variegated forms each of which may have a potential place in God's Kingdom here on earth. It recommends a preliminary set of universal norms drawn from the Judeo-Christian Tradition in the discernment of the presence of the Word's seeds in different family forms, structures and situations under consideration in light of Jesus' envisioned new family.

INTRODUCTION

Pope Francis' *Amoris laetitia* (AL) which takes its pastoral-theological base from *Relatio Synodi* (RS) or *Lineamenta* to

Instrumentum Laboris and to *Relatio Finalis*¹ recasts the Church's traditional teaching on family in even more personalist-relational, more biblically grounded and more strongly Christological terms. It is remarkable as well in its deep awareness of and sense of compassion for the actual existential situations of families all over the world. While it highlights the beauty that is in it echoing the Church's proclamation of the family as good news (*AL* 1), it does not romanticize it. The document says, "(f)aithful to Christ's teaching we look to the reality of the family today in all its complexity, with both its lights and shadows" (*AL* 32). The complexity owes to "(a)nthropological and cultural changes in our times" which "influence all aspects of life." This calls "for an analytic and diversified approach" (*AL* 32). Even when talking about the ideal family, "there is no stereo-type, but rather a challenging mosaic made up of many different realities, with all their joys, hopes and problems" (*AL* 57).

There is, however, a noticeable lacuna in *AL* in its existential, pastoral and biblical treatment of the family. The base document *RS* reports that the bishops began the synod assembly by turning their thoughts to all the families of the world (*RS* 1). If "all the families" is what the bishops have in mind, then one hopes that the document appreciates and gives space in its pastoral-theological reflection on the families as socially constructed realities. By doing this it serves notices that the Church of today has a more down-to-earth, more inclusive, and more catholic view of the family.²

¹ This essay confines itself for the most part to the use of the documents *Relatio synodi* and *Amoris laetitia* since it is an original commentary on how family is treated in *RS*, while *AR* remains the papal final output of the Synod of Bishops' documents *Instrumentum laboris* and *Relatio finalis* both of which proceeded respectively from *Relatio synodi* in terms of text and time.

² The original version of my paper which I presented during the 13th DaKaTeo Annual Conference in June 2015 is a commentary on par. 22 of the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops' *Lineamenta*. In it I proposed the removal of a few phrases that do not seem to fit with the Church's project of advancing inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue. I also argued for the grounding of her teachings on the existentially heterogeneous and dynamic reality of families all over the world and *in there* and *with them* discern the actual divine graces operating outside the purview of orthodoxy. I cite the relevant lines and I bracket the couple of expressions I am referring to: "From the same perspective, in keeping with the teaching of the

However, both documents cannot fully do this as the hermeneutics of continuity with essentialist undertone is seemingly an underlying concern. From “all the families” *RS* shifts its focus on the traditional-magisterial view of the family that is rooted in the indissoluble union of the man and woman. The post-synodal apostolic exhortation picked up where the Synod documents left. This is understandable from the perspective of doctrinal orthodoxy. In fairness to *Amoris laetitia* as well as the three Synod of Bishops’ documents one does not expect everything to be put in it since “time is greater than space” (*AL* 3). Moreover the Pope has pointed out at the outset the Synod’s trajectory towards “a renewed awareness of the importance of marriage and *the* (italics mine) family” (*AL* 2). He made it clear that “not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium” (*AL* 3).

This paper is a modest attempt to fill in the void by engaging the concept of family in a more existential light while more seriously taking into account the diversity and dynamism of today’s evolved and emerging family forms. It is of relevance to note at this point that both *RS* and *AL* do not explicitly define family in terms of form or structure even as both prefer to use the term “family situations” in highlighting domestic complexity. Be that as it may neither document is remiss in re-affirming the Church’s traditional teaching on the beauty and splendour of marriage between man and woman although it does so in keeping with the pastoral and personalist spirit of Vatican II while drawing on the insights of human sciences.

Apostle who said that the whole of creation was planned in Christ and for him (See *Col* 1:16), the Second Vatican Council wished to express appreciation for natural marriage and the valid elements present in other religions (See *Nostra Aetate*, 2) and cultures, [despite their limitations and shortcomings] (See *Redemptoris Missio*, 55);” and “The presence of the seeds of the Word in these cultures (cf. *Ad Gentes*, 11) could [even] be applied, [in some ways,] to marriage and the family in so many societies and non-Christian peoples.” When I juxtaposed the text of par. 22 with its counterpart in *Amoris Laetitia* (*AL*), namely, par. 77 in its revised form, it was a pleasant surprise that the triumphalist sounding phrases like “despite their limitations and shortcomings,” “even” and “in some ways” are gone in the papal document.

Since the Pope's exhortation does not differ substantively from its textual foundation that is *Relatio Synodi* my essay retains substantively my original commentary on the RS's consideration of the family. However, it cites parallel texts where helpful in *AL* as cross-reference to underscore its ideological continuity with the Synod document. The last major part of my essay is an attempt to propose a set of guidelines or guideposts drawn from the Judeo-Christian Tradition on how best to view the family, or better any contemporary family, in light of Jesus' envisaged Kingdom of God or new family. This will assist hopefully the Church in discerning the presence of the Word's seeds (*RS 22; AL 77*) in various family forms/structures in different cultural and existential settings under consideration.³

FAMILIES ON THE GROUND

The term 'family' is neither a monolithic nor a homogenous reality. Sociologically, it refers to a variety of forms and models each with its peculiarly inner dynamic shaped by historical and cultural forces. As such its "boundaries are always decomposing and recomposing in continuous interaction with larger domains."⁴ Indeed there is no such thing as *the* family that is universal and normative in form and structure. Even until today, patterns of family life vary, and "no single form need be regarded as inevitable or more 'natural' than any other."⁵ So we have such families as nuclear, extended, two-generational nuclear,

³ My paper does not mean to disparage the traditional teaching of the Church magisterium on indissolubility of marriage as it re-interprets it in more relational and less juridical terms. The couples' fidelity to their pledge of a life-long, loving and exclusive partnership of equals that shares in the creative design of the Creator is a sure sign of His abiding grace. On a personal note I cannot thank the God of love enough for gifting me with a very understanding, patient and faithful wife and three lovely kids.

⁴ Stephanie Coontz, *The Social Origins of Private Life: A History of American Families 1600-1900* (New York: Verso, 1988), 13; Maruja M.B. Asis, "Family Ties in a World without Borders." *Philippine Sociological Review* 42, nos. 1-4 (2004): 17.

⁵ Stuart A. Queen, Robert W. Habenstein, and Jill Soberl Quadagno, *The Family in Various Cultures*, 5th ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1985); See Mark Poster, *Critical Theory of the Family* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978).

matrilienal/patrilienal/dual, blended, single-parented, family of origin, family of orientation, nuclear-bilateral, and the relatively recent phenomenon of migrant families. The Eighth Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (*FABC VIII*) has acknowledged the variety of family forms different from the 'traditional' and even 'ideal' family: intercultural families, interfaith families resulting from 'mixed marriages'; single-parent families, families with separated parents, families of remarried couples, families with parents-only-and-no-children. *Relatio Synodi* (RS) recognizes as well the multiple reality. It specifically alludes to extended families (RS 5) and explicitly mentions long-standing traditional practice of polygamy, the custom of "marriage in stages", "arranged marriages," families born of mixed and interreligious marriages, cohabitation before marriage, cohabitation with no intention of a legally binding relationship, blended or reconstituted families and divorced families (RS 7, 8). Many of these forms would fall under what the magisterium calls as order-of-creation category. Some are referred to as irregular or broken families.⁶ At least one (of relatively recent development) is being viewed by the FABC as deeply disturbing: same-sex unions.

THE FAMILY IN THE TEACHING OF THE MAGISTERIUM

At this juncture the paper turns to the Church's traditional doctrine of the family as represented by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) since it has a definitively authoritative claim to doctrinal tradition. Moreover any succeeding magisterial documents are fundamental affirmations of the deposit of faith albeit with new emphases or fresh perspectives meant not to negate but to contextualize, enrich, and expound what has been constantly taught (cf. *Relatio Synodi* 17). Magisterial references cited by CCC include the Vatican II documents *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*,

⁶ The dynamic character of the family is such that a Christian social scientist-author has proposed to view it as a verb rather than a noun in the context of family ministry (Dennis B. Guernsey "‘Family’: Noun or Verb?," in *Using a Family Perspective in Catholic Social Justice and Family Ministries*, ed. Patricia Voydanoff and Thomas Martin (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1994), 39-46.

Gravissimum Educationis and, above all, John Paul II's *Familiaris Consortio* (1981). One may refer as well to the late pope's "Letter to the Families" (1994) written on the occasion of the Year of the Family.⁷ I present the following main descriptions of the family, sociological and theological, from CCC most pertinent to my paper:⁸

- The family is composed of "a man and a woman united in marriage" (2002) and their children. It is founded and constituted from the order of creation. In this sense it "is prior to any recognition by public authority, which has an obligation to recognize it" (*Ibid.*).
- It is the "original cell" of social life, "the natural society in which husband and wife are called to give themselves in love and in the gift of life. Authority, stability and a life of relationships within the family constitute the foundations for freedom." (CCC 2207).
- The family, in the eyes of Christian faith, is "a sign and image of the communion of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit" (CCC 2205) which reflects the creative work of God in the procreation and education of children. A "community of faith, hope and love" (CCC 2204), the Christian family is "a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion" (CCC 2204), hence, "it can and should be called a domestic church" (CCC 1655ff., 2204). Thus the family is "the first school of Christian life" (CCC 1657).

The magisterial pronouncements on the family follows beyond dispute a theological model that is based on the natural law-tradition of the Catholic Church which privileges the deductive approach.⁹ Using its lens the document seems to be unable to

⁷ I am indebted to Norbert Mette, a lay theologian-sociologist for the ensuing presentation. See Norbert Mette, "The Family in the Teaching of the Magisterium," in *The Family*, ed. Lisa Sowle Cahill and Dietmar Mieth, Concilium 4 (London: SCM Press; Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995): 74-83.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 77-80.

comprehend the complexity of the full reality of the family. In such a scheme it appears that the family is secondary to marriage as it is merely its consequence, “an original and distinctive social form which is not derived from other institutions – either by society or by the church.”¹⁰ Existentially the image of marriage that is projected “has little to do with the experience of cultural givens.”¹¹ This is contrary to the more anthropologically grounded idea that marriage “is a relationship with its own dynamic that is lived out according to cultural customs and values”¹² and it is then “institutionalized”¹³ by a particular society on account of its importance.

Norbert Mette argues that contrary to the magisterium’s fundamental view the family is not a structure beyond time and context, to which even Biblical data attest. The magisterium’s predilection is virtually for a specific form of the family: the middle-class that has evolved in the course of modernity and is characterized as a “natural organism, the original cell of state and society, on the frontier between the public and private spheres, with a clear structure of authority.”¹⁴ In the Western hegemonic culture (European-North American) the *European family* is even identified with what is seen as being *the Christian family*.

The ‘usual theological treatment of the subject begins with the study of the family in the Old and New Testaments, goes on to analyse it in Roman and mediaeval culture, and ends with an examination of it in modern Europe. In this way judgments are passed on contemporary change in late capitalist societies. No account is taken of the fact that this viewpoint historically and

¹⁰ Ibid., 77.

¹¹ Jan Grootaers and Joseph A. Selling, *The 1980 Synod of Bishops ‘On the Role of the Family’: An Exposition of the Event and an Analysis of Its Texts* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1983), 307-308, 311-318.

¹² This is an echo of Grootaers and Selling’s critique of FC that views marriage “as an institution in itself which is then recognized by society” (Grootaers and Selling, *The 1980 Synod of Bishops*, 307-308).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Mette, “The Family,” 77.

systematically – is *exclusively* European and is valid today for some twelve per cent of the world's population."¹⁵

Another weakness of the magisterium's model is that it virtually reduces the family to a static reality minus the inner dynamic inherent to family life and the differentiated routes its development has taken which is anything but uniform. The traditional doctrine treats the family "as a pre-existing ordinance the normative expression of which can be found, say in the commandments of God (above all the Fourth Commandment)." This view "consequently leaves only very limited room for its shaping,"¹⁶ something that runs against the course of history that testifies to the dynamic and changing character of the family.¹⁷ The past century down to the present has been a witness to the struggles of Western women in particular to achieve parity with men both in the home and the world outside in effect defying the traditionally patriarchal and hierarchical set-up and resulting in the restructuring of domestic duties and responsibilities.

Mette is critical as well of the magisterium's reductionist definition of the family tied up exclusively to and is founded upon the institution of man-woman marriage. In this narrowly sociological perspective families-detached-from-marriages in a diversity of forms is *a priori* labelled illegitimate. This is an understanding that does not do justice to the variegated situations of family "as a distinctive and psychological reality differing from marriage in structure and function."¹⁸ Raising the sociological to the theological plane, he keenly perceives that "the family often remains a secondary entity: after all, it is marriage which is given the sacramental dignity and which therefore as a rule is reflected on

¹⁵ Enrique Dussel, "The Family in the 'Peripheral World,'" in *The Family*, ed. Lisa Sowle Cahill and Dietmar Mieth, *Concilium* 4 (1995): 53 in 53-65.

¹⁶ Mette, "The Family," 78.

¹⁷ See Lisa Sowle Cahill and Dietmar Mieth, "Editors' Preface" *The Family*, ed. Cahill and Mieth. *Concilium* 4 (London: SCM Press; Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), vii.

¹⁸ Mette, "The Family," 78.

with greater intensity. Here, too, there is a tendency to derive the family as a theological reality from marriage.”¹⁹

Familiaris Consortio and JP II’s subsequent 1994 ‘Letter to Families’ reflect the pope’s impressively personalist thought steeped in the theology of revelation which images the family as a community of persons grounded in and animated by love, whose origin and goal is the ‘divine We.’ Unfortunately the letters’ “romanticizing exaggerations and the inability to perceive relationships as they really exist . . . all too obviously favours an attitude which interprets any deviation from the ideal as a collapse and condemns it morally.”²⁰ Mette presses his criticism further:

The various situations of partners and families which are stigmatized as ‘irregular’ (cf. *Familiaris consortio* 79-84) cannot then be looked at and assessed in a differentiated way, but are all regarded as the symptom of a social development which is branded decadent and pathological. They thus fall victim to the sweeping verdict that is passed on the forces which cause and further this development. Internally it is also the case that the concerns for a differentiated understanding of the reality of marriage and the family, which has now become pluralistic, and for a pastoral solution which takes account of this, have come under suspicion of giving way to relativistic tendencies and dissolving the truth.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 79.

²¹ Ibid. FC rightly criticizes attitudes of consumerism, hedonism, materialism and utilitarianism; diminished capacity for community solidarity; a degradation of sexuality which in particular reduces women to objects of pleasure). “But it is too much also to want to derive a collapse of the family directly from this. If we follow the findings of sociologists, what can be noted, rather is a remarkable stability in the family today; and even the rise of new and alternative forms of family is by no means as large as widespread opinion would suggest. What most certainly has happened is a far-reaching change in the structure and function of the family. While this is still not perceived – and Vatican II at least began to become aware of the fact – and instead the perspective remains rooted in a traditionalist image of the family, it is not surprising that the statements of the Magisterium are seen by

Vatican II's teaching on family (and marriage) is an attempt to shift attention from the pre-Vatican era's fixation on the institutional and static nature of the family to its complex structure of relationships while challenging the traditional patriarchal image in favour of a familial form of life marked by partnership. The council's existentially friendly approach stands in contrast to the sometime very rigid normative definition of the family that keeps floating above where families actually and existentially are.

CCC projects the family as the 'original cell' of society. This is a classic theme of Catholic social doctrine and is a fine statement provided it "does not mean . . . that all social structures are present in an embryo in the family and take their departure from there. . . ." ²² If the explanation points to the fundamental significance of the family in the social order both biologically and morally this is problematical given the breakthrough of modernity which is marked by social differentiation. In the process the family-part system has become independent from the other social part-systems but its link with them is only to a limited degree. Furthermore the quality of intra-family relationships is antithetical to the purely functional relationships operative in a modern society. The family-as-original-cell notion does not stand for "conservative ideas of order but rather (prophetic) criticism of a society which tends to make the family the rubbish dump or workshop which repairs human damage elsewhere, and leaves those concerned to their own resources in coping with it. The propagation of ideals is no help at all in such a situation. Rather, families need to be understood, and if possible given some solid support for the different balancing acts that they have to perform because of the different expectations pinned on them from outside and from within."²³

the persons concerned as being blind to reality, and dismissed as being not much help" (Mette, *The Family*, 79-80).

²² Ibid., 80.

²³ Ibid.

THE FAMILY IN LINEAMENTA AND THE NAZARETH FAMILY AS ICON

The document contains so many salutary ideas on family particularly its recognition of the graced elements, however imperfect, found in 'natural' families (order of creation). It does not present the Sacrament of Matrimony as a total break from a sinful past but "in continuity with natural marriage in its origin, that is, the manner of God's saving action in both creation and the Christian life" (13; AL 77). Another strength of the document is its emphasis on the relational/partnership character of marriage (17; AL 72-74), an emphatic reaffirmation of the Vatican II teaching to rectify the one-sidedly essentialist and determinate view of family. However *Lineamenta's* focus on the heterosexual (man-woman, husband-wife, groom-bride) and monogamous marriage stamped with indissoluble character as a locus of theological reflection in effect leaves out other forms of families in its hermeneutics of appreciation.

To be sure the document casts the order-of-creation families in a positive light (22; AL 77). The bishops' statements grounded on magisterial documents seem to imply that the divine plan is tied up with marriage in the Christian sacramental form. But Jesus was not referring to a special ritual-sacramental form of marriage but on marriage in its natural order as historically expressed in ancient Israelite/Jewish marriages.²⁴ In the sense that couples of the non-Christian or natural or cultural marriages are able to manifest the Kingdom values of love and fidelity (as culturally circumscribed in some cultures), natural marriages may be considered as sacramental in the broader sense of the word. In the same vein it is conceivable, in fact testified in many cases where

²⁴ And with the rate with which increasing number of nations, even Catholic ones the latest being of Ireland have come to accept homosexual marriages as legitimate ways of conjugal relationships, what about families formed out of such consortiums? Revisionist moral theologians like Lisa Sowle Cahill, Philip Keane, Charles Curran, Richard McCormick and William George have a flexible position on the issue. See Vincent J. Genovesi, *In Pursuit of Love: Catholic Morality and Human Sexuality* (Quezon City: Jesuit Communications Foundation, 2003), 289-298).

the family maybe numerically complete, may be heterogenous but its structure remains to be fundamentally patriarchal and rigidly hierarchical where women very often are the victims of violence. This kind of unequal conjugal relations is opposed by the papal document (see AL 54; See RS 8).

The Asian Bishops have something inspiring to say about the Nazareth family which they consider as “the family par excellence, the model of the Christian families” (FABC 65). *Amoris Laetitia* refers to the Holy Family of Nazareth as the icon with its “share of burdens and even nightmares as when they met with Herod’s implacable violence” (30). To be sure the ‘marital’ relationship of Mary and Joseph is not useful as a model for couples since their conjugal union precluded full sexual expression which is an essential aspect of the marital life. The bishops recognize by implication their (divinely sanctioned) limitation stating that theirs is “not the ordinary lot of man and woman falling in love and getting married” (FABC VIII 65). They do not view, however, grace in Jesus’ biological family in decisive terms of its form or its completeness thereof or structure as either model par excellence or the definitively divinely ordained.²⁵

What the bishops are saying is that this family is model in so far as responding to God’s summons is concerned. They explicitly point out that it is in the ordinary that it experienced the ‘extraordinary’ in the contrasting realities of deprivation and exultation, joy and suffering/sorrow, distress/confusion and great relief (FABC VIII 65 & 66). Through all these the family “bond of love, of communion, between parents and son, between family and God in the covenant that Mary had obediently and freely accepted in faith” (65) got strengthened. In the Nazareth family experience can one “encounter the recurring theme of covenant love and life, communion ‘unto death’, solidarity and mission, a mission that extends from the limits of the nuclear family to the family of faith and beyond” (66). If we adopt the family of Mary, Joseph and Jesus

²⁵ Certainly the three-member Nazareth family seems to fall short of the expectation of today’s ecclesiastical authorities if the number were to be the measure of divine predilection.

as the family par excellence or model in terms of their total submission to the Father's will, then it will be more correct to say that what will authenticate a model family is the personal-collective life of faith within and among the members of the family lived in obedience to the will of God rather than regularity/completeness of family form.

This fundamental way of viewing the Christian-ness of the family fairly provides room for considering other family forms actually existing without detracting from the significance of the envisaged sanctity and life-long commitment of marriage. There is a tacit challenge here for the Church: in dealing with actual families start not on the basis of culture-bound form or *a priori* doctrinal statements, let alone unrealistic ethical demands and ideals, but where they are concretely (See AL 36-38). Even families born of ritual-sacramental unions, like any other natural family or other evolving forms, are in continuous need of redemption in the here and now (cf. AL 50-51, 54-55).

JESUS' NEW FAMILY IN LIGHT OF GOD'S REIGN

To better appreciate the family functioning as decisive determiner of what it means to be a family in the biblical-Christological sense, let us go *ad fontes* and find there Jesus' envisioned new family here on earth as in heaven. So much has been written about the Israelite/Jewish familial world into which Jesus was born, a world where the nuclear model did not make sense.²⁶ That world is marked by social distinctions and

²⁶ Leo G. Perdue, Preface to *Families in Ancient Israel*; Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh*, 285-92; P. A. H. de Boer, *Fatherhood and Motherhood in Israelite and Judean Piety* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974); Carol Meyers, "To Her Mother's House': Considering a Counterpart to the Israelite *Bêt 'ab*," in *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman K. Gottwald on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. David Jobling, Peggy L. Day, Gerald T. Shepherd (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1991), 39-51. Jesus' household Jewish world was not pristine as centuries earlier Greek cultural thoughts and practices had crept into it starting with Alexander the Great's expansion to the west region of the Mediterranean around 300 B.C.E. Like the Hebrew *bayit*, the "family" as a modern term does not have exact equivalent in the Greek language and practice. The existing ancient terms used

discrimination, love of prestige, wealth, a protective sense of justice and ethnic kind of solidarity that is propped up by a religious-ideological superstructure.²⁷ Against his rather close-knit ethnic background, Jesus of Nazareth's seemingly anti-family remarks and preaching on the kind of family he envisions in God's kingdom is truly startling.

When Jesus of Nazareth burst into the public scene he immediately served notice that his preaching and ministry would be centered on the gospel of God's kingdom or reign, and that our response would be turning away from our sins and embracing the good news (Mk. 1:14-15; Mt. 4:23; Lk. 8:1). Every person, every institution, every family is to be judged by the religious-ethical norms of the Kingdom vision very often couched in familial terms by the gospel writers. The path is narrow and commitment to it demands self-denial (Mt 16:24; Lk 9:23; Mt 7:14). The commitment so requires depth of conviction and total acceptance of the gospel that even within earthly families there will be division (Lk 12:53-54; also Mt 10:35-36). Here Jesus is preaching about a radically new kind of family: one that is not proscribed by cultural, ethnic, legal, biological or sexual strictures. St. Paul, who uses frequently family and household terminology

which had reference to the concept of the household were *oikos* or *oikia* whose closest equivalent would be "house" or "home," although its particular meaning needs to be rooted in the various cultural contexts of the ancient Mediterranean world. *Oikos* could be used in two different senses: it either refers to the material possessions of the head of the household; or to all the members of the household, those who were under the authority of the head such as wife, children, and other blood relatives, as well as slaves and servants. See Halvor Moxnes, "What Is Family?: Problems in Constructing Early Christian Families," in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*, ed. Halvor Moxnes (London/New York: Routledge, 1997), 21. In the New Testament St. Paul employs both *oikos* and *oikia* to mean, in general, the household together with its persons and property. Both words were used by the Septuagint translators to render in Greek the Hebrew word *bayit* or *bait*. In classical Greek *oikos* refers to wealth, possessions, or a physical room, while *oikia* puts more stress on the members of the household. Paul's koinē Greek is closer to the Greek of the Septuagint. See Herman Hendrickx, *The Household of God*, (Quezon City: Maryhill School of Theology; Claretian Publications, 1992), 3.

²⁷ For a closer look at Jewish hierarchy of values see Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2008).

for the Christian community, captures this best in his oft-quoted line: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). On one occasion Jesus offers us the metaphysical basis of the kind of family he envisions in God’s kingdom: “Who are my mother and my brothers? He asked. “Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother” (Mk. 3:33; par. Mt. 12:48-50; Lk 8:20-21). The reign of God is actualized here on earth in Jesus’ new family now defined ultimately not by man-made strictures but by doing the will of God, in short one that is of the spiritual kind.

In more positive and sharper terms, how do we understand Jesus’ vision of the new family? What lasting footprints did he leave that, for us today, we must follow both in renewing and strengthening Christian families that are ultimately accountable to the religious and ethical demands of the Kingdom value of inclusivity?²⁸ In more universal terms how do we define “family” in such a way that it is not confined to the four corners of a sectarian home? For this purpose we walk back *ad fontes* and re-enter the home of the Judeo-Christian tradition.²⁹ These values are Christological too in the sense that Jesus himself incarnated them in his teachings and in his works. I proffer here a number of guideposts to help us in discerning the seeds of the Word that promise to bloom into the new ‘family’ tree Jesus wants it to become. These gospel motifs, if one wishes to call them, are open to wider and more in-depth exploration.

²⁸ A word of clarification: when I use the term “Christian” this has nothing to do with its imperialistic or exclusivist linkage that, for so long a time, had foreclosed the possibility of dialoguing with other sources of religious and moral wisdom. The term itself and its attendant historical expressions is not immune to elements hostile to cultural or contextual diversity, hence ought to be subject to Jesus’ vision of what it means to be the new family of God in the here and now.

²⁹ Needless to say this is, must be, open to a much wider conversation that can be undertaken within the living and dynamic magisterial tradition of the Catholic Church. I hasten to add that the conversation will by theological and pastoral necessity include the magisterial teaching on marriage, fidelity and family.

▪ MERCY AND COMPASSION

The gospel is awash with narratives depicting a merciful, compassionate Jesus. Many of these stories are home-based. Residences are with home doors continually open for sinners' repentance (Lk 19:1-10) and where healing takes place (Lk 4:38-41; 7:1-10; 8:41-42, 49-56). The narrative pattern of mercy and compassion follows the following lines: Jesus enters a household "brings salvation to the household," stays in houses for table fellowship.³⁰ When Jesus enters a house, healing takes place (Lk 4:38-41; 7:1-10; 8:41-42, 49-56). He dines with the people there (Lk 7:36-50); 11:37:54; 14:1-24 and uses the occasions to teach (e.g. Lk 10:38-42). He can convert a household (Lk 19:1-10) - which suggests the corporate experience of salvation in the domestic sphere.³¹ The house is the place for the restoration and cleansing of sinners.

While there are beautiful chronicles of conversion happening among persons of prominent status, economic position and political power (e.g. Cornelius), the gospel of Luke in particular radically elevates the poor and the destitute to a position of prominence. The rich members of the community must change their ways (Lk 12:13-21; 14:12-14; 16:9; 16:19-31; 18:18-30). The story of the rich ruler is presented to the effect that the rich man and his problem occur within the context of the Lukan community (Lk 18:18-30).³² Indeed while Luke addresses both the rich and the poor members of his community, his is an encouragement to the poor and a stern warning to the rich.³³ The Christian predilection given to the poor falls within the scheme of salvation in the here and now in and through the Christian community.³⁴ The justice-vision "is not merely an eschatological

³⁰ David Lertus Matson, "Household Conversion Narratives in Acts: Pattern and Interpretation," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series* 123 (1996), 55-82.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

³² The story is adopted from Mk 10:17-31; cf. Mk 10:22 and Lk 18:23.

³³ Philip E. Esler, *Community and Gospel of Luke-Acts. The Social and Political Motivation of Lukan Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 197-198.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

reality, but is a vital component of Christianity in this world, here and now.”³⁵ The gospel teaches us that the reversal of conditions of the rich and the poor (Lk 1:52-53; 16:19-31) will not occur until the next world, but the process must begin here on earth. Such remarkable bias given by Jesus to the poor during his time could only be motivated by a deep love for them, by compassion. Albert Nolan has argued that in Jesus’ Kingdom scheme and in contradistinction to the rigid sense of justice propped up by the conservatively religious superstructure, compassion, for Jesus, is far more important than justice.³⁶

▪ LOVING SERVICE AND SHARING

In Jesus’ new family the members are to be last of all and servants of all (Mk 9:35; 10:42-45), where love for wealth and its attendant social divisions are repudiated (Mk 10:17-27). Mutual service and the renunciation of dominating power signify Jesus’ new family; the one who is great is the table servant (*diakonos*) of all (Mk 10:43b-44). Referring to his whole life Jesus adopts this language of table service giving a definite meaning to his suffering. He is the Son of Man who has authority on earth (Mk 2:10). Yet he is the one who will suffer and die although be raised up (Mk 8:31; 10:33), and will come in glory (Mk 8:38); a servant who does the ultimate service by giving his life that others may experience freedom. The ethics of discipleship makes sense only when combined with a Christology of redemptive liberation. The liberation that Jesus has given the community must express it in mutual service. This is what it means to be in solidarity with Jesus who by renouncing power becomes the source of freedom for others.³⁷ In the home “the only visible structure of ‘authority’ seems to be that of mutual service.” Matthew rejects titles and the honor they bring but recognizes the functions concomitant to the

³⁵ Hendrickx, *The Household of God*, 84.

³⁶ Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, 27-36, 73-82, 113-123.

³⁷ John R. Donahue, *The Theology and Setting of Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1983), 47-50.

titles. In his community, ministry or function has nothing to do with status.³⁸

The value of hospitality takes center stage here. Jesus' new family is not bounded by sectarian walls. In the nascent Christian movement the expansion of the house churches required the practice of hospitality, the mutual welcoming and cooperation between the residents and the travelers as both share in the missionary task. Here the meal setting again is part and parcel of the residential communities, the primary locus for such interactions.³⁹ The houses eventually become the base for missionary work (Acts 16:13-34; 17:2-9; 18:1-11). But the value of hospitality is not merely seen as an effective means of overcoming a practical problem. There is a theological base that supports it: hospitality is the concrete expression of Christian love (Rom 13:9-13; Heb 13:1-2; 1 Pet 4:8-10).⁴⁰ Hospitality involves both material support and attachment to the gospel as expressed in sharing in Paul's work (Phil 4:14-18; 2 Cor 8:1-5; also Rom 16:1-2; Phil 2:27-29). The connection between early Christian hospitality and missionary work also occurs in the gospel accounts of Jesus' instructions to apostles for the preaching task (Mk 6:10; Lk 10:8-9).

The common meal is the most visible and profound means in which the community expresses its fellowship.⁴¹ It is an entire ordinary meal now given a Christian meaning by the believers as a celebration of their unity in Christ and one another.⁴² That is why Paul's focus is not on the things used in

³⁸ Andrew J. Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism. The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 122-124.

³⁹ John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 86.

⁴⁰ Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 67.

⁴¹ Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 80-85.

⁴² Paul describes a full meal. His expression for celebrating the Lord's Supper is *kyrakon deipnon phagein*. The Greek word *deipnon* indicates a main meal, usually in the evening (cf. Lk 14:12; Jn 13:4; 21:20). The word describing participating in this supper is the normal word for "eating," *phagein* (aorist of *esthiō*, cf. Rom 14:2; 1 Cor 10:27; Lk 10:8). See Vincent P. Branick, *The House Church in the Writings of*

the meal but the attitude and behavior towards one another. It is also probable that the Pauline church does not exclude outsiders from its assemblies (1 Cor 14:23) despite Paul's propensity to stress the singularity and distinctiveness of the Christian identity. He certainly draws boundaries between the members and the non-members yet he also puts stress on a basic missionary thrust toward all people (Col 1:28). Although the influence of the Gospel tradition of Jesus' inclusive "table fellowship" on Pauline Christianity is difficult to gauge, general social relationships like those involving meals with non-Christians are accepted as normal (1 Cor 10:23-33).⁴³

▪ INCLUSIVENESS

Jesus, the head and master⁴⁴ of the new household, determines who will be in and who will be out of the family (Mk 3:20-35; also 3:13-6:13). His choice is not latched on to a biological or kinship relationship but the openness of his disciples and those gathered around him to hear his teaching. He insists that those interested to become members of the new family are summoned to do the will of God.⁴⁵ The agonizing moment of Jesus in Gethsemani exemplifies doing God's will. Using the familiar and familial language of a child to a father, he prays to Abba, Father, as the one to whom all things are possible even if he drinks the cup of suffering. His radical disposition is one of accepting the will of the Father. To do the will of God (Mk 3:34) and become a member of Jesus' family "is in its most fundamental sense being like Jesus, and willing to accept even suffering and rejection as being willed by God."⁴⁶ What makes of one a brother,

Paul, Zaccheus Studies New Testament, gen. ed. Mary Ann Getty (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1989), 98.

⁴³ Branick, *The House Church in the Writings of Paul*, 105-108.

⁴⁴ Diane Jacobs-Malina reconstructs Jesus' image from a feminist perspective. She basically views Jesus' image as household head analogous to the idealized role of the wife/mother as it was established in the world of Jesus. See Jacobs-Malina, *Beyond Patriarchy: The Images of Family in Jesus* (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1993).

⁴⁵ Handrickx, *The Household of God*, 36.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

sister or mother to Jesus who himself is truly son of God is solidarity with him who can address his father in faith and trust before his impending cross.⁴⁷ Membership in the family of Jesus transcends ethnic, sexual and social boundaries.

The solidarity entails membership in the new family of Jesus, which, in turn, demands leaving one's family behind. The new family is based not on natural kinship but on the power of God. Here there is no father, only "brothers, sisters, mothers and children," for there is only one father and that is God (Mk 11:25; 14:36; See Mt 23:9), where children are to be welcomed (Mk 9:36; 10:13-16). Although Jesus remains the sole authority of the house church, the community is not meant to be sectarian that exists solely for its inner nurture. The members are called to a mission of breaking down any kind of barriers which divide peoples like Jews from Gentiles. Exclusivism is out of place: the stranger who offers drink will receive a reward (Mk 9:40-41).

Jesus is not against the natural family per se. The fact is that Jesus the Jew grew in wisdom presumably under the care and guidance of his parents. His mother's presence at the foot of his cross is an eloquent symbol of the mother's undying support to a suffering son viewed from a familial perspective. Also there are several Gospel accounts which depict him supporting the traditional Jewish family structure (e.g. Mk 7:6-13; 10:9).⁴⁸ Even Jesus' disciples did not give up all property and family ties. What Jesus inveighed against is making the earthly family more important than doing the will of the Father. Thus family ties are made relative for the sake of the Jesus, whose total dependence on God enables him "to establish a household on earth that reflected the standards of the kingdom of heaven."⁴⁹ Carolyn Osiek recognizes both the importance of the family in early Christianity and Jesus' negative stance vis-à-vis the family. She, however, views Jesus' skepticism towards the natural family as

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Elliott C. Maloney, "We Have Given Up Everything To Follow You," *The Bible Today* 29, no. 4 (July 1991): 211.

⁴⁹ Diane Jacobs-Malina, *Beyond Patriarchy: The Images of Family in Jesus* (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1993), 113.

having a major import and it is that the disciples must now function as a family. Hendrickx argues, however, against such an absolutely anti-family thesis. Referring specifically to Mk 3:33-35, he thinks that the family concept “is not lost” but “transformed.”⁵⁰ For Nolan the ultimate basis of solidarity in Jesus’ new family is not anymore biological or ethnic (exclusive) but universal solidarity (open to all).⁵¹

If the pagan meal signifies social discrimination, the Christian meal stands for inclusiveness.⁵² When the Church in Corinth tends to maintain the distinction between rich and poor, masters and slaves Paul has to remind them of the real meaning of the Eucharist and the spirit with which it has to be celebrated, so that the participants should be worthy to be part of it (1 Cor 11:20-29). Table fellowship between the Jews and the Gentiles means a legitimization of the admission of the Gentiles to the believing communities. In light of the new era of universal salvation inaugurated by Jesus, the Eucharist fellowship has decisively destroyed old barriers that had long separated the Jews and the Gentiles.⁵³ The legitimization of the inclusive practice is found not only in Acts 11 but also in Acts 15. Despite Luke’s repeated insistence, he had to raise the issue again in Acts 27:33-37, where Paul enters into table-fellowship once again with the Gentiles. Paul exhorts everyone on board – Jews and Gentiles alike – to share food together, for this pertains to their salvation [sotēria in Acts 27:33-34].⁵⁴ Indeed the household setting of the

⁵⁰ Hendrickx, *The Household of God*, 9.

⁵¹ Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, 73-82.

⁵² Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 199.

⁵³ Esler, *Community and Gospel of Luke-Acts*, 93, 96, 103-104.

⁵⁴ The Jews also consider it improper as a matter of ritual obligation to share table-fellowship with those whom they look down as “tax collectors and sinners” (Lk 5:31; cf. 7:33ff.; 15:1-2; 19:7), and they are strict about it. The sinners are usually those referred to as the ‘*ammei ha-aretz*’ or ‘the people of the land’. They may be those who lack training in Torah or those who show lack of piety and religious concern in general or people who fail to live up to the norms of tithing and purity. In the rabbinic literature the scrupulous Jews (*haberim*) should avoid contact with the sinners when it comes to table-fellowship. The Greek Psalms

table-fellowship becomes the 'sacred space' for inclusiveness. Only the home can embody, in the words of John Elliott, "socially and ideologically the structures, values, and goals of an inclusive gospel of universal salvation."⁵⁵

▪ EQUALITY

To be a member of the new household will entail letting go of the *paterfamilias*, the traditional authority figurehead in the Roman *domus*.⁵⁶ The new household is an alternative religious, economic, and political system that challenges the status quo of the Roman Empire.⁵⁷ Here patriarchalism has no place in a radically egalitarian nature of Jesus' new family (see Mk. 9:30-10:45), where husbands and wives treat each other as subjects (Mk 10:1-12). Matthew preaches equality of all member-disciples, frequently referring to *brotherhood* (Mt 23:8-12), who are co-responsible for making disciples (Mt 28:16-20).

The mission of Jesus is oriented towards building an egalitarian community where no one lords it over the other.⁵⁸

referred to 'sinners' in a rather general manner and not to particular individuals. Sinners constitute the wicked and those opposed to God in the ambit of a dichotomized moral universe. After the destruction of the temple (70 C.E.), the meaning of 'sinner', which prevails in the gospel of Luke, comes to be associated with someone for whom mercy and forgiveness are appropriate among the Jews possibly due to Christian influence. See David A. Neale, *None But Sinners: Religious Categories in the Gospel of Luke* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 40-97.

⁵⁵ John H. Elliott, "Temple versus Household in Luke-Acts: A Contrast in Social Institutions," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 213. It is interesting to note that eight of the nine meal scenes depicted in Luke's Gospel involve an explicit use of the household setting [Lk 5:29-32; 7:36-50; 10:38-42; 11:37-54; 14:1-24; 19:1-10; 22:7-38; 24:13-35]. The only exception is that in 9:10-17 [feeding of the multitude] where the setting is a 'desolate place' [v. 12]. See Arthur A. Just, Jr., *The Ongoing Feast: Table Fellowship and Eschatology at Emmaus* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 172.

⁵⁶ See e.g. the sons of Zebedee leaving their occupations - nets and boats - and severing their ties with their father the *paterfamilias* as a symbolic narrative.

⁵⁷ Michael F. Trainor, *The Quest for Home: The Household in Mark's Community* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 87-105.

⁵⁸ Richard Horsley, *Sociology of the Jesus Movement* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 117.

This would require the dismantling of the traditional hierarchical relations between men and women and the sharing of property and power in the envisaged community. To follow Jesus is to place one's commitment to his mission above his/her family, more precisely beyond patriarchal family loyalty. Jesus' criticism of the kinship ties is precisely an indictment of the patriarchal structure dominant in his time.⁵⁹

There are further indications that Jesus envisions the creation of a new community that defies the traditional patriarchal model. In the ancient Mediterranean world, biological motherhood is the primary role of women. On one occasion Jesus refuses to uphold the cultural priority on the nurturing function of the women (Lk 11:27-28) thereby suggesting that God's primary work for women, according to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, is not biological motherhood but faithful discipleship.⁶⁰ In another instance (Mk 10:29-30) Jesus "calls into question the role of fathers"⁶¹ The 'hundredfold' reward for leaving family behind is the new kingdom to be enjoyed by the new 'family' of Jesus, the family of equal discipleship that has no room for 'fathers.' The absence of fathers in the lists of those who will inhabit the new kingdom is an indication . . . that the patriarchal privilege of fathers is rejected, that hierarchy cannot be a part of new life in Christ. So men and women are included, but privileged and powerful fathers are not.⁶² Still another sign is the order given by Jesus to his followers to "call no one your father" (Mt 23:9) which means to say that any kind of domineering power has no place in the Christian community.⁶³ The Gospels are not absolutely against the 'natural' family per se but against a family where men have absolute power over women, something that runs contrary to the envisaged evangelical discipleship of equals. Distinctions, too, which segregate the "holy" from the "common"

⁵⁹ Julie Hanlon Rubio, *A Christian Theology of Marriage and Family* (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2003), 50-54.

⁶⁰ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroads, 1983), 146.

⁶¹ Rubio, *A Christian Theology of Marriage*, 51.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 150.

members in the church have no place in the community. No one or no special group has a monopoly of holiness. All members of the community possess the same Spirit (1 Cor 3:18; 12:13, 4-11; Eph 2:18; Gal 5:22-25).⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

Pope Francis' *Amoris Laetitia* has re-affirmed rightly the orthodox teaching of the Church on the indissolubility of conjugal partnership that is grounded on love and open to life out of which a family is born. With such persistent emphasis his is but the latest official voice to proclaim that any family that is not born of the man-woman marital commitment it seems is *not the family* that is in accord with God's design. This makes sense within the narrow purview of religious orthodoxy. But this begs the question: how can the Church, then, turn itself into a "family of families" (AL 87) in the *really catholic* sense of the term if in its doctrinal fold its normative definition of the family is linked virtually to one single form?

This essay does not mean to undermine the traditional teaching of the Church on the free, loving, indissoluble, life-long commitment of every man and every woman with its procreative potentiality to form a nuclear family. What it contends is that the family-on-earth is neither a metaphysical reality nor a monolithic reality but is socially constructed. As such it covers a plurality of forms and models each with its peculiarly inner dynamic shaped by historical and cultural forces, thus an existential reality. There is no such thing as *the family* that is universal and normative in form and structure.

Ethno-religious and family strictures did not define Jesus' preaching and ministry that was centred on the coming of God's kingdom or reign that embraces all persons, all groups and all families. He went beyond the sectarian teachings of his religion as they were interpreted by the conservative teachers of the Law and religious leaders and challenged the understanding and practice of family that was exclusively based on blood and ethnicity. To be

⁶⁴ Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, 133-135.

sure he did not reject the household families of his culture much less his own but in his proclaimed gospel of the new Kingdom family the ultimate basis is spiritual, hence universal: it is doing the will of God. Within the Kingdom perspective every earthly family including emerging forms and structures is certainly welcome and can be a spiritual part of his new family here on earth. Jesus has left us lasting footprints that lead us to his home: mercy and compassion, loving service and sharing, inclusiveness and equality. He proclaimed these Kingdom values in words and in deeds while the early Christians gave expression to them in their actual historical context.

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