

CAREFUL READING OF THE SYNOD ON THE FAMILY

DELFO C. CANCERAN, OP

The Synod of Bishop on the family held in 2015 produced a final report entitled: The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World. This paper would carefully read this report using critical lens. This paper is divided into two major parts: 1) appreciation on the merits of the text on its unique contribution to the methodology of listening, not teaching and contextuality, not universality; 2) suspicion on the content of the text by interrogating its framework using critical lens in reading the text.

Church, Family, Hermeneutics

It was about trying to open up broader horizons, rising above conspiracy theories and blinkered viewpoints, so as to defend and spread the freedom of the children of God, and to transmit the beauty of Christian Newness, at times encrusted in a language which is archaic or simply incomprehensible.¹

Pope Francis

¹ Pope Francis, Address of his Holiness Pope Francis at the Conclusion of the Synod of Bishops on the Family, Synod Hall, Saturday, October 24, 2015. Accessed November 28, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151024_sinodo-conclusione-lavori.html.

INTRODUCTION

This paper carefully explores the presuppositions or assumptions that frame the document of the Synod of Bishops on the vocation and mission of the family. These presuppositions if they are not explicitly addressed will condition our conceptualization and may frame our mentality on the family. Moreover, this paper hopefully deconstructs these presuppositions or assumptions so that we can come up with a better understanding of the family as we grapple on the complex situation of the family in the global village. In this way, we become responsible in our production of knowledge and responsive to the difficulties besetting the family. In our critical reading, we analyze the family by highlighting the interactive paradigm between the family and the larger society.²

HERMENEUTICS OF APPRECIATION: FROM SEEING TO LISTENING

Hermeneutics is the science of understanding. Understanding tries to enter into the world of the other who discloses himself/herself to the self in the process of encounter. Thus, understanding is always social because there is an interaction or relationship established in the encounter of the self and the other. The distance that exists between the self and the other is gradually bridged by that encounter. However, that distance cannot be eliminated once and for all because there exists an alterity or difference between them. Thus, the self and the other cannot be fused or blended because the other remains elusive to the self. The self can only appropriate to some extent the other without grasping it because that will erase the alterity or difference of the other and the self will then master the other.³

² Deborah Chambers, *A Sociology of Family Life: Change and Diversity in Intimate Relations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 33.

³ See Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

There is a remarkable shift in the method employed by the bishops in the document. We are familiar with the triad of seeing-judging-acting paradigm popularized in the Social Encyclicals and the Vatican II Documents. However, the document on the Synod of the Family shifts to a different triad of listening-gazing-talking paradigm.⁴ This shift is of significance because it alters the cognitive paradigm from a panoptic observation to a compassionate audition. In observation, sight has the power to grasp and internalize the object produced by the subject. However, in audition, the auditory perception receives sounds and interprets them. Thus, the ear does not grasp the object but receives the sound. This speaking and listening interaction signals a communicative relationship between the families and the bishops, that is, among the people who were surveyed in the questionnaires and among bishops themselves who participated in the Synod. In this listening mode, the subject is informed and hopefully transformed by the other. In short, in observation, the object is muted, while in listening, the other speaks up. In this communication, the subject tries to understand the speech.

In listening, the speech of the other is carefully and seriously taken into account. Listening should predispose the bishops to understand the families in their complexities and change their usual ways of thinking. Thus, the bishops are no longer clinging on their parochial thinking but widened their horizon and perspective in listening. In this way, the church veers away from a self-referential method that is self-absorbed by its own thought, but is constantly changing itself in response to the signs of the times. Listening is not limited to monologic voice of the participants, but to plurilogic voices of the people as reflected in the consultation conducted and survey collated. These different voices produce irreducible cacophony that signals the democratic exercise of the participants. Listening to the different voices can open up the space

⁴ This triad is textualized in the *Lineamenta* of the Synod of Bishops as can be seen in the order of the table of contents of the document. See Synod of Bishops, XIV Ordinary General Assembly: The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World, Vatican City, 2014.

for transforming our worldview. Thus, there is a need to constantly discuss issues besetting the family.

According to Erich Fromm, listening is an art where one concentrates on the speech of the other. It is free from the distraction of greed, and is endowed with empathy. Empathy is the ability to enter into the feelings of the other person. “The condition for such empathy is a crucial facet of the capacity to love. To understand another means to love him/her [...]. Understanding and loving are inseparable. If they are separate, it is cerebral process and the door to essential understanding remains closed.”⁵ In short, listening is a loving act of empathy to the other. Thus, in listening, there is a reversal of action from the self to the other. The self is opened and reaches to the other who appeals to him/her for mercy and compassion.⁶ The other becomes the primary focus of consideration that informs and transforms the self in that relationship.

The distinction between seeing and listening is akin to the hermeneutical differentiation between explanation in the natural science and understanding in the social (human) sciences. Explanation in the natural sciences is based on observation in the laboratory which relies on the logic of causality (cause and effect sequence). Thus, the scientist controls or manipulates the variables in order to determine the direction and intensity of causality. However, in understanding, the philosopher enters into the social world on individuals and exchanges ideas with them. The philosopher does not enter into an uncharted territory but an inhabited world of language. In this case, the philosopher cannot use the logic of causality but the logic of hermeneutics. To understand is to interpret that social world where the actors reveal their social world to the philosopher. Analogously, the bishops

⁵ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Listening* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 193.

⁶ On the reversal of the same and the other, see Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1996).

assume the role of an interpreter (philosopher) that enters into the world of the families and dialogue with this complex reality.⁷

HERMENEUTICS OF LOCATION: FROM UNIVERSALITY TO CONTEXTUALITY

The document recognizes the contextuality of the different situations that the families across the world are plunged into. The bishops mentioned the contexts of the anthropological-cultural as well as the socio-economic contexts of the families. Although the distinctions between these two contexts are uncertain and contentious, they acknowledge the limits and scopes of these contexts.⁸ The preponderance of universalism in the past pronouncement is tamed by this contextuality in the present document. We can better understand the different situations of the families by locating them in their specific contexts. This context-dependency underscores the historicity of their unfolding in understanding the situations of these families. By recognizing the plurality of these contexts, the bishops are invited to enter into these different worlds so that they can understand the complexities of families in society.

However, we need also to note that contexts are connected to their texts. The contexts always already imply some texts. When we read the contexts of the families around the world, we are informed by different lens or optics from different disciplines, different experts and different voices and these optics and lens are

⁷ Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics, Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dithery, Heidegger and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 223-241. David Couzen Hoy, *The Critical Circle: Literature, History and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 41-72. Anthony Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method: A Positivist Critique of Interpretative Sociology* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976). Zygmunt Bauman, *Hermeneutics and Social Science: Approaches to Understanding* (London: Hutchinson, 1978).

⁸ In this postmodern period, we witness the blurring of distinctions and the overlapping claims of different disciplines. The strict disciplinarity has been transgressed by the force of interdisciplinarity in research and scholarship of the academe. See: Joe Moran, *Interdisciplinarity*, 2nd ed. (New York & London: Routledge, 2010).

blended into an integral whole by putting them into a preferred framework that unifies the strewn elements into one. The plurality of contexts also implies the multiplicity of texts. In the final analysis, in the choice of this framework, there are elements that are edited out in the process. The inclusion and exclusion of elements are political move in coming up with the well-crafted document. In the end, there are three interpretations going on: the interpretations of the families themselves of their situations, the interpretations of the researches who collated the data from the survey questionnaires and the interpretations of the bishops who participated in the synod.⁹

Moreover, considering the contexts read in different lens or optics generating different texts, we can also argue that we cannot bind or fasten the context and text altogether. This separation or interval between the context and the text allows the insertion of different meanings that readers can creatively and imaginatively put into their readings. This insertion shows the shifting or varying possibilities of meaning-making. The meaning cannot be pinned down once and for all because it slides or escapes determination. Hence, there is no one reading applicable to all and there is no meaning dominating the rest. Even if one puts into context his/her text, still one cannot circumscribe or demarcate them because they are separable by different readers or interpreters. Since meaning is open and free, there is a need to continue the conversation and the reflection on the contexts and texts of the families around the world.¹⁰

HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION

Hermeneutics of suspicion is employed as a strategic way of reading of the text. This suspicion interrogates the text since it is never neutral but partial. The text espouses a particular bias or prejudice of a group inscribed in the text. This bias or prejudice

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Signature Event Context*, Limited, Inc., trans. Samuel Weber (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1977).

needs to be interrogated by those affected or implicated in the text. In other words, the text is ideologically loaded with partisan interests. This suspicion tries to float up these ideological interests buried in the text and to engage into to an ideology critique of these interests. Let us enumerate these suspicious assumptions or presuppositions.¹¹

BIOLOGICAL BASIS OF THE FAMILY

If we examine the definition of the family, we notice that traditionally it has been defined as the basic unit of society.¹² This definition persists not just in the literature but also in our worldview on the family. It also parallels with the biological notion of the gene as the basic unit of an organism. There appears to be a genetic backdrop to the sociological definition of the family that zeroes in on this concept of “basic unit.” The basic unit is the smallest part of an entity. It contains the fundamental elements of an entity. This genetic backdrop confines the conception of the family within a blood relationship in a nuclear family. This genetic conception assumes that the family contains the building block that determines the progress of a society. It disregards the external or outside forces that impinge on and alters the constitution of the family.

However, scientists are coming into a realization that genetics cannot fully explain the heredity of the human body. They recognize the impact of the environment that can alter the genetic activities of the human body. The body can receive messages from the environment that can change the expressions of the genes.¹³ They call this as epigenetics which links the environment and gene in their interactive relationship. In this regard, we need to focus on the interaction between the family and the environment and factor

¹¹ See John B. Thompson, *Critical Hermeneutics: A Study in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur and Jurgen Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹² For the different theories on the family, see James M. White, David M. Klein & Todd F. Martin, *Family Theories: An Introduction* (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2015).

¹³ Delfo C. Canceran, OP, “Epigenetics: The Interaction between Environment and Gene,” in *Colloquia Manilana*. 23 (2015).

in this interaction in our formation of the family. This interaction can drastically transform our understanding of the family in society. Thus, the family is not a closed system that develops only according to its inner dynamics, but a part of a social system that operates in society in a dynamic relationship.

Thus, we have to shift our conception of the family from a genetic determination to a social construction that allows a reciprocal interaction of the different forces in an open system. When we relate the family with the larger system in society, we see the reciprocal as well as the conflictive relationship between them. In a way, the family is a microcosm of the mega system of society. In this way, we will not romanticize the family but we situate the family in the bigger picture making up the social system. The document recognizes the impacts of the social system (or social structure) on the family that espouses the culture of individualism and indifferentism in society. This culture is supported by the market that promotes consumerism and hedonism in a global scale by maximizing profits to businesses and offering pleasures to consumers. The market has invaded or encroached into the privacy of the individuals and the intimacy of the families.¹⁴ The family is not isolated from this culture but is immersed into it. In this way, the family is involved in a network of relationship.

AMBIVALENCE OF THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

The phrase “domestic church” found in the document has a long history in ecclesiology and has entered into the official vocabulary of the church.¹⁵ The family as a domestic church assumes that the church is 1) the original cell of social life and 2) the original school of Christian life. These assumptions are couched in an evolutionary logic that begins with the family as the

¹⁴ Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

¹⁵ This concept can be traced back to the fathers of the church (especially St. John Chrysostom and St. Augustine of Hippo) that has been invoked to justify the inclusion in its teachings. Norbert Mette, “The Family in the Teaching of the Magisterium,” in *Concilium* 4, (1995): 74-83.

kernel of the society and the parents as the first teachers at home. Since the family predates the state and church as institutions, it should be recognized and protected as a primary entity.¹⁶

As the original cell, the family is a building block that founds and funds society. In this conceptualization, the family is a primary potent force that constitutes society. However, with modernity, society has been differentiated into separate spheres (such as family, government, media, church, market, etc.). These spheres operate autonomously according to their respective logics and norms and supposedly without outside interference and any subordination. We have to admit though that these spheres are differentiated but also correlated. These spheres should all be working for the common good of the society.¹⁷ Although the people working in these different spheres come from various families, the family is only one among the forces at work in these spheres and cannot claim a privileged place among them. In the global market and technology, the family is affected by the omnipotence of the market and ubiquity of the media.

Moreover, as it is conceived, the family acts as a fortress of God and bulwark of the church. In this sense, the family has a teaching function in the transmission of Christian doctrines since it preserves the orthodoxy from sacrilege and syncretism. Thus, the parents are given the primary role as teachers so that they can

¹⁶ The family is also a model of the social structure of the church. In a traditional family the father is the head of the household and the wife is the heart of the household. This model is taken from the rationalization of the human body where the head is primary while the heart is only secondary (The father is like Christ who is head of the church so that the wife becomes subservient or subordinate to the husband). The father rules, if not owns, the family which the expression (the man and his wife) as the matrimonial rite implies. See Adrian Thatcher, *Theology and Families* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 231-256. Thus, the church should not endeavor to contain the family into copies of the official church, but encourage families to search for a meaningful faith in their own religious experiences of God. See the case of the African Families having their unique cultures. F. Kabasele Lumbala, "The Church as Family in Africa," in *Concilium* 4, (1995): 93-98.

¹⁷ Brent Waters, *The Family in Christian Social and Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 257-296.

properly transmit to their children the faith and correct them from heresy. This parental determinism has formed the early education of the children, especially on matters of sex education. However, in modernity, the family cannot be isolated from the other spheres of society. The actors interact with these spheres that overlap in functions and scopes. The family is linked with this social system and the parents are implicated in that system. Hence, the parents are not the sole teachers but the media as well. These different spheres in society educate these children in various ways and, sometimes, in hidden ways.¹⁸

Thus, this traditional conceptualization assumes the parents are the primary actors in the education or formation of the family. The social structure is the secondary actors in the education and formation of the family. Here we see the distinction between the internal agency of the family and the external agency of the social structure. This distinction assumes two separate spheres separated from each other. However, we cannot make a clear-cut boundary that would separate the two domains because in our society, this boundary is porous and transmissible. The media of communications have invaded the intimacy and privacy of the family located in society. Thus, we need to magnify the picture of the family and connect it with the bigger society because there is a link between them that mutually affect each other. The social system can create strain and stress in the relationship among the spheres and actors in a system that can bring about dysfunctional family.¹⁹

¹⁸ As we can see, the families do not just reproduce the official church, but also produce popular devotions. We need to include the cultures of peoples in different parts of the world outside the west. We have to go beyond the western model of the nuclear family having the characteristics of a white middle class nuclear family. Having disaggregated these families around the world across different cultures, we can assert that there is no such thing as a universal family but only particular families occupying different locations and having their peculiar cultures. Enrique Dussel, "The Family in the Peripheral World," in *Concilium* 4, (1995): 43-52.

¹⁹ See Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Free Press, 1968).

AGENCY OF THE FAMILY

Agency is the capacity to transform the world as we want it to be. As an agent, the actor intervenes in the situation and that intervention makes a different world. However, we cannot rely on the individual family alone to withstand the colonization of the system.²⁰ We need to link families and form a network of families that would work together in resisting this colonization. We cannot allow the victimization of the families in the social system/structure that would engulf it in the end if we will not resist it. The families interact with the system/structure but such interaction does not necessarily mean subjection or compliance. The families are not completely determined by it. We need to get out from the paradigm of family based on genetic determination and parental primacy and move on to a network paradigm of families where different agencies work together in forging an alternative worldview of society.

In order to reclaim the agency of the family, the church needs to engage in community building and organizing in the parish levels (like Basic Ecclesial Communities or BECs) through active lay participation of families and initiate consciousness raising (like Freirian conscientization process) in different communities so that families are involved in the making of their future.²¹ In this sense, we need to free the family from domestication or domination and recognize and affirm their agency in the transformation of our society. The families are equal partners and, given a chance and encouragement, are effective agents of social change in our society. Church leaders should act as facilitators in this community building and organizing so that families could exercise leadership capabilities in their communities. To show its seriousness, the church should share its resources for the realization of this endeavor. The church should not content itself with document on the family; it has to implement it in the parish levels. Moreover, church leaders should continue the dialogue with the families in

²⁰ See Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. II: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

²¹ See: Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

the parish and make programs for them based on those dialogues. It cannot impose its political will to these families in their communities. To get their participation, the families should own this endeavor so that it can be sustained.

The family should be a sacrament of the reign/kinship of God. Jesus was born to a family and was raised in a family. In his ministry, Jesus proclaimed the reign of God which is basically the rule of social justice. To continue that mission, the church should encourage the lay people and families to participate in building it in their communities. In this view, the families are linked together as actors that aspire for the transformation of society. In this sense, the family is not just educated by the parents and priests but also by some groups that work for social transformation. The family should be introduced into social issues affecting society and social justice for active participation.²² The individualism and hedonism prevalent in consumerist market should be opposed in favor of compassion for the marginalized sectors and struggle for social justice for the disadvantaged groups. In this sense, social change is a cooperative effort and a common struggle of different family actors that promote social justice in society.²³

CONCLUSION

Discussion about the family can be interminable because issues are complex. The institutional church should encourage this discussion on the family and expand participation of the people. Although the document has been published and released, the discussion lives on. We have to open always the channel of communication and listen to cacophonous voices of the people. We can no longer rely on a myopic view of the family that considers

²² In the recent protests against China and extended it against the US last Independence Day on June 12, 2015, the participants marched at the Chinese Embassy located in Makati and then continued the march at the US Embassy located in Roxas Boulevard, I witnessed the parents bringing their children in that protest movement. I am reflecting that the family can be a potent force for social change if members are socialized in this way.

²³ Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 83-110.

it as an embryo of society and the parents as primacy actors; we need to situate the family in a larger picture of the social system. Families are daily immersed in society and are experienced in the realities of life. However, they can get out from that immersion by raising their social consciousness and by organizing themselves in forging an alternative worldview. The church should facilitate this community building and organizing of family networks in the parishes. Families have to undergo self-criticism of their complicity to the mega-system of the market. They can engage into this self-reflexivity by connecting the family with the society at large and understand this interaction. Moreover, they should seek linkages with groups or actors that work for social justice in society. They can no longer work alone by themselves. The family networks act as catalysts would slowly transform their communities by advocating social justice affecting their society. This is a colossal task and we need to begin now.

Delfo C.Canceran,OP

San Lorenzo Ruiz and Companion Martyrs Parish

Phase 1-C Kaunlaran Village

NBBS, Navotas City

Philippines

delfocanceran@gmail.com