

THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY*

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays the family, and especially the Christian family, endures a whole series of challenges. People often forget that the family is an institution that was founded by God, thus gaining a sacred character, and are promoted ideas according to which the rules of the Christian family and the “canon” of the social values are ignored. We may assert that today we are living in a “dictatorship of indecency”, in which the Christian wisdom is considered either a weakness, either an archaic attitude, while indecency with all its forms is considered a modern and actual attitude. Family and marriage are regarded more and more as a dissoluble collusion, noticing an attempt to relativize them and to question their significance and importance, for man and generally for life, by promoting new and so-called modern forms of “free cohabitation”. Undoubtedly these are highly actual issues which need an ample and thorough analysis.

Keywords: family; marriage; religion; God; love; responsibility;

INTRODUCTION

Family is a divine institution founded by God ever since the creation of man. Considering its institution by God, family has a sacred character, highlighted by the fact that its prototype is the very Divine Family, the Holy Trinity, whose foundation is the faultless love, unity, communion and equality of its Persons. By this assertion we underline that family is the most important institution which was put in the service of life, all the other institutions that play a role in sustaining and promoting man’s life being subordinated to it, both under the aspect of their origins, and especially considering their role and mission. We do not wish to minimize whatsoever the contribution of the other institutions in supporting and promoting life, but we wish to stress that from the perspective of the importance, role and specificity, the family is by far superior, for it is the place where the human person is created and developed.

From sociological perspective, the transformation of an individual into a person is „*the family’s first accomplishment*”¹. In other words, family is a true cradle of life, it is the place where man’s life is kneaded, born and developed. At the origin of life stands „*family as nucleus of the society, while at the basis of the family stands marriage*”².

* Errata: The text represents translated version of the study in Romanian entitled (Familia creștină și rolul ei pentru păstrarea demnității umane și a sfințeniei vieții) which was printed in “Teologie, Slujire, Cultură”, Editura Bibliotheca, Târgoviște, 2016, pp. 272-285. The online version of the corrected article can be found <https://www.ifiasa.com/ifijisr-8-june-2018>. Published online: June 2018; updated: 02 May 2022.

¹Nicolae Mărginean, *Psihologia persoanei*, Sibiu, 1944, p. 262;

²Pr. Prof. PhD. Dumitru Abrudan, Pr. Prof. Emilian Cornițescu, *Arheologia Biblică*, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române (IBMBOR), Sibiu, 2002, p. 114;

1. A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE FAMILY

We must underline the fact that from the perspective of the Christian teachings, family, sociologically named “the cell” of the society, involves two aspects, a biological one and a moral one. In biological perspective, family must be considered “the first cell” of society, for a race in which marriage and family suffer severe attacks under the aspect of their signification and role for man, is sooner or later destined to disappear. As for the moral aspect, *„family is in truth considered a «cell» of the society, because inside the family are build the basics of education, inside the family begins the «carving» of the Christian soul, the family is the most competent component of a society which can practice this supreme «art», which is education”*³.

Man, created by God after His image (Genesis 1, 27), is by the very nature of his creation destined to life in communion, as is also stressed by the Holy Bible, that *„it is not good for the man to be alone, so I will make a helper suitable for him”* (Genesis 2, 18). Considering that man is created after God’s image and the Persons of the Holy Trinity form, through love, a complete unity, consequently man as „image of God” is a complete unity, because *„his human unity is not accomplished in the ununiformed personal duality, but in the man and woman complementarity”*⁴. The unity of the family is thus demonstrated by the fact that it has God as prototype, the One in Being, on the one hand, and on the other by the very manner in which man was created, for the Holy Bible says: *„And Adam said: this is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, for she was taken out of man. This is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife and they become one flesh”* (Genesis 2, 23-24). Therefore, man and woman express two existence modalities of man. Man was created *„as duality to exist in relation, because taken individually he does not feel complete, he seeks the other for fulfillment and creation”*⁵.

If man is created *„in God’s image”*, if we consider the fact that at the foundation of the Holy Trinity stands love, man himself being a fruit of God’s love, then we see that it is necessary for man to experience this love in his family life, in which reflects the community image of the Trinity God. God has created man, calling him to existence through love, He called him in the same time to love, for **God is love** (1 John 4, 8) and He is, in Himself, the mystery of love and of love’s personal communion. For man this is a gift and in the same time a responsibility to live in love for God and to settle it at the foundation of his family and life. By creating man in this personal and complementary duality, man and woman, God has inscribed in him the vocation and in the same time the appropriate capacity and responsibility for love and communion. Love and communion are thus the basic innate vocation for each human being.

God arranges family setting love at its foundation so that man should be safe from egoism and to make him able give to his fellow, to help him and to be helped by him when he is in need. God arranged family in order to associate man to His continuous creation of life, creation which He blesses in heaven: *„Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth and subdue it”* (Genesis 1, 28).

The first family was founded in Heaven, having as priest and witness God Himself. In the paradisiac form, family undoubtedly knew the most beautiful period of its existence.

³Pr. Lect. Phd. Nicolae Achimescu, *Familia creștină între tradiție și modernitate. Considerații teologico-sociologice*, in *Familia creștină azi*, Ed. Trinitas, Iași, 1995, p. 120;

⁴Pr. Prof. Phd. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă, vol. III*, Ed. IBMBOR, București, 1978, p. 180;

⁵Pr. Constantin Galeriu, *Taina nunții*, in *Studii Teologice*, XII (1960) no. 7-8, p. 489;

The thing that characterized the first family was collaboration, respect and understanding, but with the fall in sin the state of the family and the spiritual equilibrium of man was shaken, with repercussions upon the familial life. Up until the falling into sin, the husbands lived in a complete harmony, but afterwards the situation suffered significant changes.

The first change is shown by God the Creator, when He says: „*Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you*” (Genesis 3, 16). These words show us that the order placed by God at the foundation of family suffers modifications, the woman being already placed in a certain condition of dependence to man. Consequently, the man no longer saw in woman the help offered by God, but a slave who was often despised, and the children, who by definition are considered a gift of God, who amplify the community image of God within the family, forming along with their father and mother a true human trinity, were sometimes seen as mere objects. In the case of some serious mistakes the father could punish his children with death, but this right of life and death over his children could be exerted only under the control of the citadel’s elders (Deuteronomy 21, 19-23). Even if such exaggerations were not unusual even in the Old Testament, we must nevertheless show that the Hebrews considered family, marriage, as a symbol of the union between God and His people (Ezekiel 16, 8).

This reality endured until the apparition of the Savior Christ into this world, Who „*re-strengthened the bond of marriage between man and woman and raised it from the order of nature to the order of grace*”⁶. Messiah restored the religious character of marriage, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, who purified and ennobled the conjugal love. He begun his redeemer work into this world by honoring marriage with His presence at the wedding in the Cana of Galilee. (John 2, 2-11) „*there fulfilling the first miracle with His power which is beyond nature, giving to the couple who was getting married to drink from the wine of enthusiastic love poured by Him through His Grace, desiring by this to show that from honoring and praising marriage begins the raising of human life.*”⁷. In this manner Messiah underlines the very important role played by family in man’s life and becoming. Moreover, we must stress that Messiah Himself has spent the greatest part of His life in the family, with love and obedience to His parents.

In another register, very often when he preaches the new teaching, Messiah uses the image of the family, using aspects from the family life. Thus, the Holy Bible displays parables that were spoken by Jesus Christ in which the subject is the family: the parable of the two sons send by their father to work in the vineyard – Matthew 21, 28-31; the parable of the father who gives good presents to his sons – Lucas 11, 11-13; the parable of the prodigal son – Lucas 15, 11-32; the parable of the bad workers – Matthew 21, 33-41; the parable of the emperor’s son wedding – Matthew 22, 1-13; the parable about the great dinner – Lucas 14, 16-24 etc.

Alongside the wedding from Cana in Galilee, when Christ, by His very presence at this wedding and by the fulfilled miracle, „*has blessed marriage taking it under His protection*”⁸, raising it to the tank of mystery, in which, upon the humans’ decision and desire spills the blessing and gift of God who make their connection solid and their love constructing, the Holy Bible also offer other moments that speak about families and marriages as complementary realities.

⁶Pr. Prof. PhD. Dumitru Stăniloae, *op.cit.*, p. 183;

⁷*Ibidem*, p. 182;

⁸Pr. Prof. Vasile Mihoc, *Căsătoria și familia în lumina Sfintei Scripturi. Nașterea de prunci, scop principal al căsătoriei*, in Mitropolia Ardealului, XXX (1985), no. 9-10, p. 584;

In His teachings, Jesus Christ show us that family based on marriage is a part of the order of creation and, consequently, re-establishing the primordial family's unity and indissolubility is indispensable. Thus, in the Preach from the mountain, Jesus Christ speaks clearly about the indissoluble character of marriage, when He asserts: „*It has been said: «Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce». But I tell you anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery*” (Matthew 5, 31-32), by this showing that no other reason is sufficient to break marriage.

It is a well-known fact that in the days of Jesus Christ breaking a marriage was a controversial issue, given the fact that the Hebrews had, back in those days, two exegetic schools of Bible interpretation, the one of Hillel, who was a liberal interpret of the Scriptures, and the one of Shammai, a rigid and formalist interpret. In this context, the Pharisees, consecrated enemies of Our Lord Christ, seeking to tempt Him in wrong assertions, addressed to Him the following question: „*Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?*” (Matthew 19, 3). Messiah asserts firmly both the unity and indissolubility of marriage, as a fact of life for man and woman, received from God from the very creation: „*Haven't you read, he replied, that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female? And said for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate*” (Matthew 19, 3-6). Believing that his answer interferes with the law of Moses, the Pharisees ask Him again: „*Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce and send her away?*” (Matthew 19, 7). Messiah once again underlines that man is not allowed to leave his woman, nor the woman her man, and answers: „*Because of your hardness of heart ... but from the beginning it was not so*” (Matthew 19, 8). From here we conclude that the Hebrews have received this concession regarding the un-bonding of marriage in order to avoid greater wrongdoings.

Therefore, the words of Christ demonstrate that the decomposition of a family by breaking marriage is not according God's will. The only accepted reason for breaking marriage, as we have seen once again mentioned in the Preach from the mountain and resumed here is the riot: „*I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery*” (Matthew 19, 9). So, according to Christ's words, there is no other reason to un-bond a marriage except adultery. „*Lust breaks the spiritual connection between man and woman, and all the divorce does is to officialise an already created situation*”⁹.

This teaching is also undertaken by the Saint Apostle Paul who, at his turn, defends the unity and indissolubility of marriage, showing that alongside adultery, physical death leads to breaking a marriage: „*Do you not know, brothers – for I speak to those who know the Law – that the Law has authority upon someone only as long as that person lives? For the married woman is bound, by law, to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies she is released from the law that binds her to him. So then, if she has sexual relations with another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress if she marries another man*” (Romans 7, 1-3). We find it is important to underline the fact that, according

⁹. Pr. Lect. Mihai Vizitiu, *Familia în învățătura Mântuitorului și a Sfinților Apostoli*, in vol. *Familia creștină azi*, Ed. Trinitas, Iași, 1995, p. 30;

to the aforementioned words, at first sight Messiah left the impression that man enjoys a primacy compared to the woman, but we must stress the fact that God's new teaching presents woman as being equal to man, for they are both bearers of God's image. Unlike the pagan world, in which man was the despot of the family, having absolute powers upon his wife and children, in the Christian family „*the husbands become equal before God*”¹⁰. Therefore, by the words: „*Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her, and if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery*” (Mark 10, 11-12), Jesus Christ was stressing not only the indissolubility of marriage, but also the complete equality of the two husbands¹¹, a truth that was also underlined by the Saint Apostle Paul, who said: „*nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ*” (Galatians 3, 28). Still, the family is not made only of husband and wife, but also of children, about which the orthodox teaching say they are a gift from God. Family is the place where it is continued the creation of man and, generally, of life. Christianity itself „*is the religion that started from the cradle of a child and from breast of a mother*”¹². The words spoken by God to the very first humans „*Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it*” (Genesis 1, 28) have an eternal character for the family's meaning and mission. By bringing children to this world, the Christian family fulfills this calling of God, while in another register „*a family with children is a more complete reflection of the Holy Trinity's communion and love*”¹³. So, apart from being seen as a gift from God, children represent in the same time God's blessing that spills upon the family, that bring parents together and consolidate the unity of the familial home. „*For parents children are a powerful motivation ... to as many virtues as possible, and a strong shield against the temptations from outside. The presence of children exerts the most efficient moral censure upon the parents' behavior*”¹⁴.

It is no wonder that Messiah, speaking about gaining the kingdom from the skies, establishes innocence as a prior condition and, as example of innocence He mentions children: „*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you: who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it*” (Mark 10, 14-15). Even more than that, the Lord Christ, as a loving Father, offers us in a gesture filled with kindness, a true and vivid lesson of love towards children: „*And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them*” (Mark 10, 16). If a family wishes to be loved by God, both parents and children have to maintain an atmosphere of peace and good understanding, thanking God for everything „*in psalms, praises and canticles*” (Colossians 3, 14).

2. FAMILY MEMBERS: ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

In the same time, Christ tells us which are the responsibilities of the family members, to themselves and to each other. The parents have the obligation to take care of their children, offering them only good and useful things (Matthew 7, 9-11), praying to God for them (John 4, 47). At their turn, the children owe their parents honor, obedience and

¹⁰Eugenia Safta Romano, *Arhetipuri Juridice în Biblie*, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 1997, p. 142;

¹¹See Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilia despre căsătorie – Comentariu la Epistola către Efeseni*, trans. Marcel Hancheș, in *Altarul Banatului*, no. 1-3, 2002, p. 75;

¹²Vasile Coman, Bishop of Oradia, *Scrieri de Teologie Liturgică și Pastorală*, Ed. Episcopiei Ortodoxe Române a Oradiei, Oradea, 1983, p. 383;

¹³Pr. Lect. Mihai Vizitiu, *op.cit.*, p. 32;

¹⁴Constantin Pavel, *Familia preotului*, in *Glasul Bisericii*, IX (1960), no. 1-2, p. 81;

compliance after the word of God, „*Honor your father and mother...*” (Matthew 15, 4), having as model Jesus Christ Himself, who was „*obedient to His parents*” (Luke 2, 51).

From another perspective, we have to underline the fact that the children can be true teachers to their parents, showing them the manner in which people, our fellows, have to be loved in the most complete and disinterested manner. Last, but not least we have to say that the parents' love for their children is a model of true love.

The families without children lack the possibility of completely understand life and man's meaning onto this earth, while on the other hand, those who do not have children don't have the possibility of ever understanding the love of God for humans, for „*children are miraculous guides who take us again into this world, forcing us to get to know it better and better teaching us an alphabet of emotions, of the first feelings, of the huge fantasy, of the purity and candor, the power to discover the world with fresh eyes*”¹⁵.

Starting from these truths about family, which the Church preaches from the beginnings of its existence, we arrive in contemporaneity and without any great effort we see that the conjugal life has changed, has “modernized”, inasmuch as it hardly if ever report to the Christian moral laws. To this reality equally contributes the immoral literature, some tendentious commercials and the permanent process by which they try to confuse the moral values, considered outdated and off the map, all these leading to what we may name the de-personalization of man, which has many faucets.

At the family level we may speak about a certain „compulsion” to libertinism, in which the rules of the Christian family and the „canon” of the social values are ignored. We might even say that we live in a “dictatorship of indecency”, in which the Christian wisdom is considered either a weakness or an ancient attitude, while indecency of any kind is considered a virtue. More and more, family and marriage are regarded as an annulable agreement, trying to relativize and to question their significance and importance, for man and generally for life, by promoting new forms of so-called „free cohabitation”. This is the reason why, under the pressure of such ideas and principles, in many European states, and lately in our country, marriage is considered a „compelling monogamy”, „a feature of the body”, „a medieval age order”, or a „feudal structure”, going so far as to consider family and marriage as a result of the „churchly repressions”¹⁶.

There are in Europe some currents that have begun to be felt also in our country, which propose this so-called “free” “cohabitation” as an alternative to the family, as the connection between man and woman for a certain period of time, excluding the Mystery of the Weeding and which seeks to be a public relation, with the pretension of some social and even moral legitimacy. What are the propositions made, some time ago, by some of the Romanian politicians, who wanted the recognition and the promotion by the state of a consensual relation validated by a notary public, having as main argumentation the avoidance of the judicial consequences and the costs of divorce, and the disappointments caused by a failed marriage, none other than such alternatives for family?

These so-called „free cohabitations”, at which some add the relations or marriages on probation, with no social engagement, beyond the fact that they are in flagrant contradiction with the teachings of the Church and the Christian moral, they transform into a sort of „marriage object” inside which the two partners only „probate” each other, this type of relation excluding any kind of personal communion, because it lacks love and responsibility, and these last ones cannot be probated, for they are or they are not. More and

¹⁵*** *Tratat de Teologie Morală, vol.II*, Ed. IBMBOR, București, 1979, p. 292;

¹⁶Pr. Lect. PhD. Nicolae Achimescu, *op. cit.*, p. 125;

more frequently, marriage and implicitly family are understood as simple contracts that the modern man doesn't need, which is why in the countries that are considered evolved, they renounce more and more frequently and easily to marriage.

To all these elements, modern man also adds another conception about life and family known under the name of „philosophy of happiness”, according to which man is bound to be happy, demarche in which family is understood as one of the means of making man happy. The slogan of this „philosophy” is „*You have to be happy, otherwise you have missed the opportunity to live*”¹⁷. According to this conception marriage is justified as long as the two are happy, if not, when husbands are no longer happy, they can break up and are free to seek happiness elsewhere. Obviously, such a mentality leads to a degradation of all that marriage and family represents from the perspective of the Christian teachings.

All these underline the fact that the contemporary man no longer believes in the holiness of the bond between man and woman and, all the more so, no longer believes in the mystery that God creates at the wedding service, which makes living in the family to be deprived of its spiritual foundation. Man will be truly happy only when he will rediscover the sacred character of the relation between man and woman within the family, understood as „*a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church*” (Ephesians 5, 32), a relation which involves faith and conjugal fidelity.

CONCLUSIONS

The Orthodox Church has granted and still grants a major importance to the Christian marriage and family, because on them depend not only the destiny of two people, but the destiny of human community. We must firmly believe that family is based on the Holy Mystery of the Weeding, a mystery that makes the family to become the holy shrine in which is lived love and are lived, altogether, the Christian virtues, through which man gains happiness here on earth, next to his fellows, and grows for the Kingdom of God. Not arbitrarily certain theologians speak about marriage as being „*a conjugal sacerdotium*”¹⁸.

Marriage, as the beginning of a family, is based not only on the inner need of living in community, but also on the communion between God and the mankind that He loves. For this reason, the Church gives to family the priority before any other kind of human communion. From theological and ecclesial perspective, the role of the family can never be questioned. Marriage and family must be considered, first and foremost, in connection to the common life of the Church, the family being the Church's icon (*ecclesia domestica*) and the icon of the Christ's love for mankind, as Saint Apostle Paul makes it clear for us: „*Husbands, you're your wives, just as Christ loved the church and have himself up for her to make her holy*” (Ephesians 5, 25-26).

Consequently, the Christian family has the mission to become, first of all, a profound community of life and love, from which by no means can wisdom and responsibility miss, and which will find complete fulfilment in God's Kingdom. In the same time, the Christian family must preserve, discover and transmit its faith and love, as a vivid reflection and real participation to God's love for mankind and Jesus Christ's love for His Church. By doing so, the Christian family will have actively fulfilled a fundamental mission.

¹⁷*Ibidem*, p. 126;

¹⁸Paul Evdokimov, *Taina Iubirii. Sfințenia unirii conjugale în lumina tradiției ortodoxe*, trans. Gabriela Moldoveanu, Asociația medicală creștină Christiana, București, 1994, p. 53;

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