

AN INTRODUCTION TO “FAMILIARIS CONSORTIO”

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Introduction

Familiaris Consortio is an Apostolic Exhortation by His Holiness Pope John Paul II. It is the result of his reflection on the Christian family, and the result of the Synod of Bishops which took place in Rome from 26th September to 25th October, 1980. The subject of this Synod was “The task of the Christian family in the world today.”

In this Synod there participated representatives of all the churches in the world: there were 41 bishops from Africa, 11 from North America, 40 from South America, 24 from Asia, 5 from Australia and Oceania, and 51 from Europe; in all 172. At the closing of the Synod the bishops presented 43 “propositiones” of great importance to the Holy Father and requested him to give a document to the whole Church.

The same took place in 1977 when John Paul II (then Cardinal) issued the exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*, and in 1974 Paul VI gave us the exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

Familiaris Consortio has been called by Mgr Tomko, general secretary of the Synod of Bishops, a short “summa” of the teaching of the Magisterium on the Christian family. In this short article I shall give a general idea of the Exhortation and some of its specific characteristics.

1. *The Magisterium of the Bishops and of the Pope*

This exhortation is a short “summa” in which the magisterium of the Church expounds in a global manner the teaching of the Church on the call and task of the Christian family in the world today. The familial pastoral work asks that we all make an analysis of this document, because every praxis requires that the doctrine and pastoral solutions are always done in the light of the theological principles.

We may say that this document is the desired result asked for by the Synod and the authoritative answer of the Pope. “At the close of their assembly, the Synod Fathers presented me with a long list of proposals in which they had gathered the fruits of their reflections, which had matured

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over intense days of work, and they asked me unanimously to be a spokesman before humanity of the Church's lively care for the family and to give suitable indications for renewed pastoral effort in this fundamental sector of the life of man and of the Church" (F.C. 2).⁽¹⁾

Hence we may say that the intuitions, experiences, problems and proposals came from the various local churches. Even the prospective of the Synod on the family was greater than the limits of every familial culture and model (a nuclear model). It was said in the Synod that even the sacrament of matrimony, which is the basis of the Christian family, is the one which accepts most the local culture, in the sense that the family remains a human reality even if it was raised to the dignity of an efficacious sign of salvation, of a sacrament.

This Exhortation is a witness of this variety when it dealt with the family in all its situations: families of migrants, families in the large towns which almost always end up emarginated, mixed marriages, of unbelievers, in the various situations of abnormal marriages. Another witness of universality is the part of the document which regards the phenomenon of culture:

"In conformity with her constant tradition, the Church receives from the various cultures everything that is able to express better the unsearchable riches of Christ. Only with the help of all the cultures will it be possible for these riches to be manifested ever more clearly" (F.C. 10).

The union of the Synod with the exhortation is an ecclesial phenomenon of great importance, because the document expresses the variety which was issued by the various local churches, as well as the unity of the orientation in the teaching and pastoral care. We may say that the exhortation is the result of the collegiality of bishops and of the primacy of the Pope. The exhortation is "apostolic" because it proposes the teaching and pastoral work of the successors of the Apostles: the Pope and the bishops in union with him. Mgr Tomko said that "the document expresses the faith of the Pope and of all the Church represented in the Synod in the values of the Christian family."

2. *The Organic Structure of the Document*

The analysis of the subjects which deal with the conjugal and the familial life is just, and leaves the desired fruit if we understand well the global and unitary vision of the document. What is the organic structure of the document? It is our duty to read the texts in the light of the general context which throws light on the subjects dealt with. It is an easy temptation that we understand and interpret a text out of its context, and thus we force it to say what it does not. This took place during the work of the Synod, when the press gave the impression that the synodal bishops were

1. Passages from *Familiaris Consortio* are taken from the English translation published in *L'Osservatore Romano*, weekly edition in English, 21 - 28 December 1981, pp.1 - 19.

preoccupied only with the problem of birth control and of the divorced who married again.

We begin by seeing the actual historical situation. In our times a lot of people spoke too much on "The death of the family." "At a moment of history in which the family is the object of numerous forces that seek to destroy it or in some way to deform it, and aware that the well-being of society and her own good are intimately tied to the good of the family, the Church perceives in a more urgent and compelling way her mission of proclaiming to all people the plan of God for marriage and the family" (F.C. 3).

The document is conscious also of the economic, social and political changes which changed the family. We are observing a *new familial culture*, a new way by which we are interpreting the value and the needs of married and of familial life. But Christians should not limit themselves only to the analysis of these changes, but of building man's and familial history in a more responsible way. The Pope advises Christians who not always "remain immune from the obscuring of certain fundamental values, nor set themselves up as the critical conscience of family culture and as active agents in the building of an authentic family humanism" (F.C. 7).

As a new culture of the family the Pope mentions divorce, exclusive civil marriage, the celebration of the sacrament of matrimony without a living faith, abnegation of the moral laws, which regulate the use of sex by man and Christian in marriage.

This expects from Christians *discernment* in the light of the teaching of the Gospel in order to interpret properly the reality of the family with all the positive and negative aspects. From discernment we reach *conversion* which is the change of mind and heart. This leads to the change of *structures*, so that we build an *authentic familial humanism*.

What is this truth which is the basis of this authentic familial humanism? This truth reflects itself in Jesus Christ, the centre of the history of man, and also of the history of the conjugal and familial community: Jesus Christ is the bride-groom who loves and who gives himself as the Saviour of humanity, and who gives himself to her as a bride-groom (cf F.C. 13). This is witnessed by the death of Christ who sealed by his blood the alliance between God and man. It is this love of Christ up to the end which shows the truth of marriage. Christ showed this truth written in the being of man when God created man husband and wife in order to give themselves to each other, and in this offer they realise in a concrete form their calling to love (cf F.C. 11).

This total love of the married, although it remains human, exceeds itself and becomes a living realisation of the charity of Christ when he gave himself on the cross. For this reason the Pope could present to the married Christians what took place on the cross. From this marriage, which is built on given love, issues and develops familial life which is *the first cell of society, domestic church*, because by means of baptism and of education in

faith it helps the persons become part of the family of God, and at the same time it helps the church enter the world. "The Church thus finds in the family, born from the sacrament, the cradle and the setting in which she can enter the human generations, and where these in their turn can enter the Church" (F.C. 15).

This truth should become history. Every project of God is a gift but also a task; while it adorns the family by certain values it loads it by a certain mission. In the essence of the family we find also what it should become: in the indicative we find also the subjunctive. This mission of hers consists in protecting, informing and bestowing love as a clear life of the love of God for man and of the love of Christ the Lord for his bride the Church, and a true fellowship in it (cf F.C. 17).

The document mentions four main works of the family:

- a) the foundation of a community of people,
- b) serving life,
- c) fellowship in the development of society,
- d) companionship in the life and mission of the Church.

a) *The foundation of a community of people.* Above every institution and function there is the person who gives value to marriage and family: the person respected and developed as an image of God in its unicity and unrepeatable history, in its calling to live the dialogue of love in the familial and conjugal nucleus (son, mother, father). The primary task of the family is to be a family, to live the true community of people respected by everybody.

b) *Serving life.* This is a task which has been remembered in a culture which became "anti-life mentality". Married people should be those who co-operate with God in the creation of a new human person. This task should be achieved in the respect of structures and of the fundamental dynamism of human sexuality which should speak the language of total and exclusive love; this task finds its perfection in the educative work.

c/d) *Companionship in the development of society and in the life and mission of the Church.* Above the familial horizon there is that of society and that of the Church. The family cannot be passive to the social forces, but it should also be active with them. From here springs the task of the family which takes part in the development of society and in the building of the Church. The family can achieve this task by being loyal to its identity as a community of people in a dialogue with God (sacraments, prayer, faith) and in a service of love towards everybody.

This truth asks for pastoral work from the part of the Church, which is urgently called to help all the families in order to recognise and live their calling and mission according to God's plan: this is the pastoral aim of the family in all its stages (preparation, a new couple, rearing children, aged). It should also be pastoral as it has as *protagonist the whole Church* (diocese, parish, family) and *addressing all the families*, especially those who are in difficult situations.

3. *What is there New in this Document?*

One has all the right to ask whether the document of the Holy Father has said anything new, not only in one particular thing but also as a general view. The Church has the duty to announce the Gospel, the Good News. The living and personal Gospel is Christ himself, the good news of God to all humanity of every time and place. It is the duty of the Church to enter in the depth of the plan of God on marriage and family. The document affirms that the diverse cultures of peoples help to express better the wealth and richness which is Christ. Thus history – the recognisance and the human and Christian experiences of marriage and the family – will be judged in the light of the Gospel itself in the light of Christ's teaching. Looking towards Christ does not mean to look towards the buried past which is over once and for all, but to look towards the past which makes part of the present and anticipates the future.

The Exhortation proposes the family as a *domestic Church* and shows the share of the family in its life and mission, the educative work of Christian parents as ministry. In this light there become clear those prophetic affirmations whose contents have not always been accepted. "Thus, in continuity with the living tradition of the ecclesial community throughout history, the recent Second Vatican Council and the magisterium of my predecessor Paul VI, expressed above all in the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, have handed on to our times a truly prophetic proclamation, which reaffirms and repropose with clarity the Church's teaching and norm, always old yet always new, regarding marriage and regarding the transmission of human life" (F.C. 29).

The Church is loyal towards truth which is Christ when it renders service to humanity and trusts it. "We believe that humanity of our time is capable of understanding how much this teaching accords with human reason" (*Humanae Vitae* 12).

Now we mention some particular points. There are new situations resulting from our times, and there are others which sprang up with a greater emphasis today: a) migrants' families, b) families of Christians who no longer practise their Christian faith. In this document, the Church studied the family in a global manner, whereas formerly the teaching of the magisterium was always on the theology of marriage. In this document there have been studied the pre-suppositions of the theology of the family. There is also new the method to recognise the signs of our times with what is positive and negative. Tasks more than duties have been presented as vocation, calling and answer. In all this we observe three particular lines:

- a) the familial line,
- b) the theologico-sacramental line,
- c) the personalist line.

a) *The familial line.* The document studied the family even if it is in union with the sacrament of marriage. So far, the Magisterium talked more on marriage than on the family, and when it talked on the family, it did so

on certain points and not in a global manner. In this exhortation we find organic, and almost complete, teaching on the family: the theologico-dogmatic aspect, the moral aspect, liturgical, spiritual, juridical, pastoral, ecclesial and socio-political aspect.

b) *The theologico-sacramental line.* The family is studied in the light of God's plan which we find in the being of man and woman, in the Revelation of the Word of God in the history of salvation and in theological reflection. The theology of the family develops the reflection on the identity of the family and on how it should be in a horizon of vocation and mission. The fulcrum of this theology is marriage.

"The sacrament of marriage is the specific source and original means of sanctification for Christian married couples and families. It takes up again and makes specific the sanctifying grace of Baptism. . . .

"The gift of Jesus Christ is not exhausted in the actual celebration of the sacrament of marriage, but rather accompanies the married couple throughout their lives" (F.C. 56).

Those which formerly used to be called the traditional duties of the married, today are considered as tasks in a context of vocation and mission. The document justifies the social task of the family in the light of the sacrament of marriage.

"The social role that belongs to every family pertains by a new and original right to the Christian family, which is based on the sacrament of marriage. By taking up the human reality of the love between husband and wife in all its implications, the sacrament gives to Christian couples and parents a power and a commitment to live their vocation as lay people and therefore to 'seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God' (*Lumen Gentium* 31).

"The social and political role is included in the kingly mission of service . . ." (F.C. 47). The mentioned social problems are: special love of the poor, of those who are suffering hunger, those who have nothing, the aged, the sick, the drugged and those who have no family to look after them.

c) *The personalist line.* While greater importance was given before to the institutional and functional aspect of the family, the document gives greater importance to the person that is the subject and the aim of the conjugal and familial nucleus. The *dignity* of the human person, as an image of God, becomes apparent, the *unicity* of every human person (everyone in the family has his role and his specific tasks according to this role), the *totality* of the human person (love embraces the body too and sexuality regards the whole of man and not only something biological), its *vocation* to live the dialogue of love in the conjugal and familial community, which leads to the social task.

The greatest task of the family is to be a community of people. "Its – the family – first task is to live with fidelity the reality of communion in a constant effort to develop an authentic community of persons" (F.C. 18).

Here becomes apparent the importance given to love. "The inner principle of that task, its permanent power and its final goal is love: without love the family is not a community of persons and, in the same way, *without love the family cannot live, grow and perfect itself as a community of persons*" (*loc. cit.*).

By personalism we do not understand subjectivism, but the objectivity of the plan of God which we find in the being of man and woman, and in the revealed Word of God. One can see this especially in the function which is related to the conception of life in a responsible way (cf F.C. 32).

"When there is a question of harmonizing conjugal love with the responsible transmission of life, the moral aspect of any procedure does not depend solely on sincere intentions or on an evaluation of motives. It must be determined by *objective standards*. These, *based on the nature of the human person and his or her acts*, preserve the full sense of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love." (*Gaudium et Spes* 51).

4. *Which Are the more Important Characteristics of the Document?*

We observe two specific characteristics in this Exhortation: to announce God's plan on marriage and the family, and to help the family in all its stages. The document does not halt on the problems which are menacing the family, but studies profoundly God's plan and the tasks of the family; it explains its identity – what it is – and its mission – what it should be. The Pope builds this identity on charity and the community. Man called for love and for the community can realise this call in the family.

The mission of the family is to be what it is – to live charity. Therefore the family receives the mission to protect, announce and bestow charity as a living share of God's love towards humanity and Christ's towards the Church as his Spouse.

The second characteristic is pastoral. The Church does not always announce God's plan and the moral norms, but it wants to help and follow the family in all its stages of life. The document expects from everyone who is undertaking married and familial life to be well prepared remotely in childhood and youth, proximately in espousals, and immediately in the last months before marriage. The Pope shows the need of giving a new significance, a new content and a new form to what is called the examination before marriage asked for by the law of the church (cf F.C. 66).

There are also some more specific characteristics:

a) *Union between marriage and family.* Marriage is the source and strength of the family, but it is the family which perfects the married as a couple and as parents. In this exhortation love is described as a giving, and we cannot separate love from life because life is the fruit and sign of love (cf F.C. 14).

b) *Union between individual and community.* Between the two

extremes of individualism and collectivism we find the family. This document looks at the family as a community of persons in which the person is unique and related to the other. Hence comes to the fore the fundamental call of man to give.

c) *Union between community and mission.* Members who form the family want to achieve a greater union between themselves. This charity wants to expand and reach all people besides the familial nucleus (cf F.C. 43).

d) *Union between rights and duties.* Grace offered to the couple in the sacrament of marriage asks for the task that from a "saved" community becomes a community which "saves" (cf F.C. 49). This work becomes apparent in the task of the family in the socio-political life and in the life of the Church. Thus, the unity between evangelisation and human promotion.

e) *Union between the order of creation and of redemption.* Here we see the physiognomy of the sacrament of matrimony. This union of the couple has been shown in the anthropological aspect which has been assumed in the Christian one.

"This conjugal communion sinks its roots in the natural complementarity that exists between man and woman, and is nurtured through the personal willingness of the spouses to share their entire life-project, what they have and what they are: for this reason such communion is the fruit and the sign of a profoundly human need. But in the Lord Christ, God takes up this human need, confirms it, purifies it and elevates it, leading it to perfection through the sacrament of Matrimony" (F.C. 19).

f) *Union between truth and history.* This is most evident in the ethical part which regards the conception of children (cf F.C. 33), and in that pastoral in difficult situations (cf F.C. 77 – 85).

Conclusion

Here we conclude our study of *Familiaris Consortio*. After a short introduction we saw what the Magisterium of the bishops and the Pope teaches on the family. Then we discussed what is the organic structure of the document and what new issues it presents. Finally, by quotations and references, we saw what are its more salient characteristics.