The Family as a Relational Good

The Challenge of Love

All surveys conducted at national and international levels show that the family is at the top of the scale of people's values under every latitude. People claim that the family is the most important thing in their lives. However, when one tries to clarify what is meant by 'family', one enters a field of great uncertainties and contingencies as to the affective, cognitive and symbolic references that the idea and the experience of the family brings with it. In all cases, the challenge is how to think and live the love between family members. It is therefore a question of specifying, understanding and evaluating the different answers to this challenge that emerge today in people's life-worlds. What is the ideal of the family? And what is its reality? In the gap between everyday experience and the desired ideal of a beautiful family lies the challenge of love.

We are all aware that the family is undergoing profound social and cultural transformations that must be understood and valued in their scope and in their consequences. If we consider the deep and rapid changes that the family faces today all over the world, due to the processes of modernization and globalization, it seems necessary to ask ourselves some basic questions that push us to rethink the fundamentals of the family and its reasons for existence in the present society and in the near future: "*why the family, and what for?*". What are the roots of the family as a natural society and to what extent can culture change them? What reasons support the necessity and the goodness of the family beyond the changes in its social functions?

The plenary intends to answer these questions. It is intended to assess the phenomenology of the family in the contemporary world from the point of view of the social sciences and social policies, in order to offer the Catholic social doctrine in-depth elements of knowledge about the current

situation and, as far as possible, the near future on a global level.

By referring to the analysis of social facts, the conference will reflect on the family on the horizon of its ontological being and in the perspective of exercising its primary tasks. It is a question of understanding how the family can today humanize the person in a society that is not always friendly with the family. The purpose of the Plenary is not to draw up a general descriptive report (there are plenty of them, at national and international level), but to focus on the lines of thought and action that can best support the family in the world of tomorrow. On the one hand, we need to clarify the deeper meaning of the family's existence – family *ontology*, from the social, philosophical and theological viewpoints – and, on the other, to evaluate the *practical implications* for a better family promotion – social legislation, policies, and good practices in family services – in the perspective of an integral human ecology. In order to survive, our society needs 'family friendly' policies. It is still a question of implementing article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ("Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution. Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses. The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State"). To implement these human rights concerning the family, it seems appropriate to deepen the meaning of family relationships, couple dynamics and intergenerational relationships in present societies, taking into account the fact that they are necessary for the humanization of people, but also strongly contingent on the life course of people. The target is to make the family flourish as the primary relational good of society. To say that the family is a relational good means to affirm that the destiny and happiness of people depend on the fact that they share their family relationships as their fundamental common good.

Modern social sciences have shown that family changes decide the most profound and significant changes in society. *Every new society is the fruit of new family models*. In the apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (AL), Pope Francis proposes a realistic approach to the theme of the family. He invites us to see the family not as an abstract ideal, but as a "craft" task (AL 16) which must be approached with tenderness (AL 28), considering that the Word of God "is not shown as a sequence of abstract theses, but as a traveling companion also for families who are in crisis or experiencing some pain, and indicate the destination of the journey" (AL 22). He writes: "anthropological-cultural change, that today influences all aspects of life and requires an analytic and diversified approach, does not permit us to limit ourselves to practices in pastoral ministry and mission that reflect forms and models of the past. We must be informed and impassioned interpreters of the wisdom of faith in a context in which individuals are less well supported than in the past by social structures, and in their emotional and family life. With the clear purpose of remaining faithful to the teaching of Christ, we must therefore look, with the intellect of love and with wise realism, at the reality of the family today in all its complexity, with its lights and its shadows" (AL 32).

Thinking the family as a relational good, and practicing it as such, can be a way to build a new ‘good society.’

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