

FAMILIES AND POVERTY: A PASTORAL CHALLENGE

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Caritas Internationalis and the Pontifical Council for the Family wished to hold this day of reflection on the Family and Poverty in the context of the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the Family which will begin in a few days' time. A few months ago the two Dicasteries invited Caritas organisations and local Church Commissions for the Family to reflect together on this perspective, which might elude the reflection on themes regarding the family. The topicality, and indeed the urgency, of this issue has caught everyone's attention, partly due to the economic crisis that has affected the whole world over the last few years. *Instrumentum Laboris* notes the burden that poverty conditions place on families. The document states: "The responses and observations widely and insistently refer to the economic hardships endured by families as well as the lack of material resources, poverty and the struggle for subsistence. This widespread phenomenon is not limited to developing countries only, but is also mentioned in responses and observations from Europe and North America. In such cases of extreme and increasing poverty, the family has to struggle for subsistence, a struggle to which the family has to devote most of its energy" (73).

A second line of reflection regards the commitment families should have to poorer families, or in any case to the poor. This perspective regards all families, not just Christian ones. The family, every family, is called on to offer charity, hospitality and welcome to the poor. Faced with the possible reluctance of many people, Dom Helder Camara liked to respond: "No one is so rich as to be unable to receive anything, and no one is so poor as to have nothing to give". He was echoing what Raoul Follereau had said previously: "No one is so poor as to have nothing to offer other people, nor so rich as to have no need of other people". Having noted the difficulties that poverty imposes on families, *Instrumentum laboris* adds: "Some observations call for the Church to raise a strong prophetic voice concerning poverty which puts a strain on family life. A Church which is 'poor and for the poor' must not fail to make her voice heard in this area" (73).

"A poor family for the poor"

I believe some prior reflection is necessary to provide a context for these brief reflections. In summary I would say that the statement by Pope Francis should be extended to the family: “a poor Church for the poor”; so also “a poor family for the poor”. Of course I'm referring to Christian families, but not exclusively. I say this because, in the situation we find ourselves in, it seems vital to acquire a spiritual view to read and understand the "mystery" present in the poor, which for believers has the face of Christ, and for non-believers the face of the "other" to be loved, welcomed and helped.

I'd like to borrow the words of Father Davide Maria Turoldo, who in the 1980s noted that: “Today, in this odd and uncertain time, a period in which wealth is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few, and destitution and hunger are spreading throughout the world... With the prospect of things getting worse and worse. I wish we all subscribed to the theory, currently also shared by scientists, that we should make poverty the value that inspires the economy. Otherwise, it's increasingly certain there are no solutions” (*Profezia della povertà*, p. 29). He went on: “Disgrace – namely the loss of grace – lies in denying poverty, rather than welcoming it, and wanting to get out of it by ourselves, or pretending we aren't part of it or that we've got out of it. Indeed, poverty is an essential dimension of humankind. And the poor remind us of this.” Hence the prophetic strength of the poor! And if they become marginalised, and why we don't want to see them and above all don't want to listen to them.

The mystery of the poor reveals that we are all poor and therefore poverty not only regards a particular person or group, the so-called excluded, but rather everyone, including families. The evangelical beatitude, “Blessed are the poor!”, is like a flash of lightning that illuminates all of history, even though it dazzles and quickly disappears from sight. The beatitude makes us realise that if truly we are all poor, only those who recognise it, only those who do not deny this truth of their being, and only those who aren't desperately seeking and possessing wealth, money and self-sufficiency, are blessed. In this light, poverty isn't someone's disgrace, but rather everyone's grace. And in this context I'd like to establish as a high spiritual and humanistic value that poverty be considered as moderation and above all freedom from the slavery of consumerism.

In the same vein Turoldo clarifies: “Here poverty means above all freedom from things; eradication of greed; going beyond the right of property, at least as it has been conceived and managed until now; justice that is at last distributive and collective. Poverty certainly doesn't mean destitution, and even less wretchedness: it means that people should be measured in terms of their absolute value and not for what they own” (*ibid*, p.32). Today, unfortunately, more than goods – of which there are enough for everyone – the universal sense of the right of each person to have at least necessary items is lacking. Therefore, poverty and the poor are a prophecy to be heeded. And

this "is also true in the negative sense of prophecy; namely, for example, that peace on earth cannot exist until there's not even one humiliated and offended person in the world. But this means that to be the Church of the poor – at least the Church – would need to be poor itself; just being the Church of the poor would not suffice. Either it is or it isn't. And indeed it isn't. Or at least the way it is doesn't convince or persuade anyone" (*ibid*, p.33).

Father Turoldo would vaunt the strength of these words that Pope Francis has etched in *Evangelii Gaudium*: "For the Church, the option for the poor is primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one. This divine preference has consequences for the faith life of all Christians, since we are called to have 'this mind... which was in Jesus Christ' (Phil 2:5). This is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us... We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the centre of the Church's pilgrim way" (EG 198).

Poverty and the family: a challenge still to be met

An initial reflection regards the imbalances generated in families by the worsening of poverty situations. We all know that poverty regarding the family manifests itself with many faces. Above all it should be pointed out that the "family-poverty" relationship squares with the rapid changes affecting both elements: on the one hand, the obvious and significant changes in family forms, the growing fragility of bonds between couples and with parents, and changes in values, lifestyles and personal relationships; and on the other, the increasing socio-economic inequality that affects vast areas of the planet and above all poses completely new challenges. In particular poverty is still solidly determined by an "unfair exchange" between nations and parts of the world (the traditional opposition between the global North and South), which now pervades almost all national entities. No country can boast being unaffected by substantial poverty within its borders, and growing social and economic inequality seems to be an ineradicable factor in globalisation processes, including in countries that profit from them. In all cities and countries poverty permeates the whole of society and creates internal imbalances. The demon of "profit at any cost" and "unbridled consumerism" ravages both the rich North and the poor South.

This dynamic is clearly apparent in the so-called "emerging countries" (both the BRICS countries and other less important nations also affected by sharp rises in per capita GDP, such as Vietnam and Singapore, or Poland in the European context), where greater overall well-being only marginally succeeds in preventing growing inequality. In other words, overall the country gets

richer, but this doesn't mean that everyone gets richer; indeed, it's easier for the rich to become even richer, and for the poor to be left even further behind. The widening gap between poverty and wealth is now broadly acknowledged.

Faced with these macroeconomic trends, family networks – often the last protection resource for many marginalised people – struggle, are put to the test and sometimes broken apart by social marginalisation and the overall vulnerability the social and economic system subjects them to. Sometimes family ties don't last, thus generating additional social vulnerability, requests for assistance, educational fragility and financial poverty. In the vast majority of cases, for example, the separation of spouses, in addition to relational pain and difficulties, generates substantial financial impoverishment for both partners, and for any children they may have.

Family and poverty, in other words, confront each other and sometimes clash, with differing outcomes. In some cases families resist, partly due to their capacity to adapt and react, but also due to possible support from the social system (public and private social and welfare policies, as well as informal solidarity initiatives, self-help networks, and actions by volunteers). In other cases, however, family weaknesses generate, boost and exacerbate the challenges of an economic system that ever more frequently exposes a growing number of people to the risk of poverty, marginalisation, isolation and destitution.

If we look at more advanced societies we can already see the tragic consequences of the crisis of the family in human, social, economic and demographic terms. The family is the place of life where the experience of generous and responsible procreation of new human beings, unique and unrepeatable, is perpetuated. The absence of the natural passage from one generation to the next is leading to rapid aging of the population in the Western world, with tragic political, social, economic and cultural consequences. The demographic winter in Western countries already severely taxes welfare systems, penalises development opportunities and leads to intergenerational unfairness, blocking of social mobility, unfulfilled democracy and gerontocracy, which all need to be overcome. And these trends appear to affect various countries with so-called "advanced economies".

The responsibilities of the common good of families

Faced with this situation I believe that families should be called on to assume a new awareness and a new responsibility. I'd like to borrow the words of the prophetic appeal from Pope John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio*: "The social role of families is called upon to find expression also in the form of political intervention: families should be the first to take steps to see that the

laws and institutions of the State not only do not offend but support and positively defend the rights and duties of the family. Along these lines, families should grow in awareness of being 'protagonists' of what is known as 'family politics' and assume responsibility for transforming society; otherwise families will be the first victims of the evils that they have done no more than note with indifference" (no. 44).

Therefore it's vital to build aggregative social agents (associations, families together...). Thus families can join together with other families, either for improvement within the family or "to create more family in society", we might say. Associated families can become collective social agents, either to help each other out (services, relations, experiences of sharing and mutual help, purchasing groups), or to have more say and weight in building a society that is more suitable for families.

The family, as a place of education regarding the common good, builds society: it's the first place for welcoming others, and enhancement and recognition of individual differences, especially gender distinctions (male and female) and relations between different generations (parents, children, previous generations...). The family is a privileged place for learning about "good diversity", as within it radical human diversities exist and are tried out: the difference between the sexes and the difference between generations.

The real challenge of welcome, from this perspective, is therefore to love others in terms of their difference from us, indeed, "*precisely because*" they are different from us. Let's be clear, diversities don't necessarily generate good bonds. On the contrary, what's diverse, different from ourselves, often generates unfamiliarity, a threatening feeling, fear of the enemy: even between a man and a woman violence, oppression and exploitation may arise, just as between generations the law of survival of the fittest may hold sway. In this sense the family may be defined as the natural most effective tool – a kind of "cultural workshop" – for reconciling radical human differences. In the family diversity is dealt with, becomes good and is reconciled, inasmuch as its capable of building a *tie*, a connection between people. Obviously all of this supposes that anyone involved is polite, trained and correct if necessary.

If this reflection is extended to relations outside the family, one realises that welcoming diversity, a theme that is currently very complex and controversial, also requires a process of education and recognition within families. Only families capable of recognising and valuing the diversity of the people within themselves will be able to educate citizens who can appreciate and welcome diversity as a value to be promoted, rather than as a threat to be countered. This is true for multiculturalism, welcoming the disabled, social integration of the marginalised, and welcoming

abandoned children through fostering and adoption, as well as for all the diversities that are currently often excluded rather than integrated.

The family strengthens its capacity to have "good relations" and open them up to other people, considering itself as a "good life" environment to be shared with others. Such experiences are common. For example, there are families that experience this dimension through national and international adoption of children, and looking after relatives in difficulty or their own elderly parents, but also more simply in their everyday lives by receiving other children in their homes in the afternoon so they can do their homework, or maintaining helping and neighbourly mutual support relations. All of this is rooted in the awareness, albeit not reflected on, that the supportive capacity of a family grows while being put into practice. And what Jesus says is experienced: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

In the complex and often controversial aspect of welcome, probably only families capable of recognising and valuing the diversity of the people within themselves will be able to educate citizens who can appreciate and welcome diversity as a value to be promoted, rather than as a threat to be countered. This is true for multiculturalism, welcoming the disabled, social integration of the marginalised, and for all the diversities that are currently often excluded rather than integrated. For example, the family may be a virtuous cultural agent for mediation and intercultural reciprocity, with regard to the presence of immigrants.

Beyond the crisis, the responsibility of witness

There's another dimension to be emphasised that is closely linked to the previous one. While the first had a more distinctly political character, the second may be placed on the level of aware charity that has an equal political strength of transformation. Indeed, I would say that the first would be much more effective if the second is clearly apparent. Here we might recall the traditional "justice and charity" binomial. For my part I believe that *simul stabunt, simul cadent*, in concise fashion the two terms are inseparable, and it would never be possible to build a society that doesn't envisage these two dimensions.

Each family has to rediscover the supremacy of loving the poor. Jesus put on notice those who withdraw within family ties in a kind of selfish familism. We said at the beginning "a poor family for the poor". I believe that in a hyper-individualistic and consumerist society like the one we live in families are called on to rediscover the preferential love we should all have for the poor. Pope Francis told this story: "A mother once told me – in the other diocese – that she wanted to teach this to her children and she told them to help and feed those who were hungry. She had three.

And one day at lunch – the dad was out working, she was there with her three young children, 7, 5 and 4 years old, more or less – and there came a knock at the door: there was a man who asked for something to eat. And the mama told him: 'Wait a moment'. She went back inside and told her children: 'There's a man there asking for something to eat, what can we do?' 'Let's give him something, Mama, let's give him something!'. Each of them had a beefsteak and fried potatoes on their plate. 'Very well' – the mother said – 'let's take half from each of you, and we'll give him half of the beefsteak from each of you'. 'Oh, no, Mom, that's not right!'. 'That's how it is, you have to give some of yours!'. And this is how this mom taught her children to give food from their *own plate*. This is a fine example that really helped me. 'But I don't have any leftovers...'. 'Give some of your own!'. This is what Mother Church teaches us. And you, so many moms who are here, you know what you have to do to teach your children the reason for sharing their things with those in need. Mother Church teaches us to be close to those who are sick. So many saints served Jesus in this manner! And so many simple men and women, every day, practice this work of mercy in a hospital ward, or in a rest home, or in their own home, assisting a sick person” (Wednesday 10 September 2014).

Families are called on to demonstrate the supremacy of freely offered love to themselves and the whole of society. And this occurs precisely through attention to the vulnerable which, moreover, is learnt – or should be learnt – in families. And this is even more important if we find ourselves in a society in which the "structures of sin" that sustain apparently indisputable and invincible mechanisms appear to be ever stronger. Each person, and therefore each family, has an inner strength, a potential that no tyranny is able to eradicate or hush up, not even by reducing it to the silence of poverty, social exclusion and destitution. The "power of the poor", namely of those who don't idolise profit and consumption but believe in love, is incredible. And this is demonstrated by so many families who strive to realise love with a strength that changes hearts and makes the lives of the most vulnerable more human. In the words and deeds of many families that have become witnesses of love the strength of change, including of society, is manifested.

In this time of crisis they risk succumbing to the temptation to withdraw into themselves, perhaps saying that they already have many internal problems. And this is undoubtedly true. But please note – as I've already mentioned – that no family is so poor that it's unable to help someone else. It's vital to implement a bolder practice of charity. Undoubtedly this new dynamism of love requested from families calls for a conversion of the heart and also a change in lifestyles, and therefore a quest for moderation, openness, solidarity, witness and above all love freely offered to the most vulnerable. And inevitably, faced with the word poverty, we ask ourselves questions (and act) having to measure ourselves against (and having to adapt to) two opposed meanings: the

poverty to be eradicated, the great and sharable goal of governments and international organisations (sometimes more rhetorical than concrete), and the "poverty" presented in the Gospel. The examples of Francis of Assisi and Francis of Rome are before our eyes. It's a great challenge for every family, especially for every Christian family. The early period of Christianity – and we shouldn't forget that at the beginning Christian preaching relied on the family network – should return and still be alive today.

Pope Francis wrote: "When Saint Paul approached the apostles in Jerusalem to discern whether he was 'running or had run in vain' (Gal 2:2), the key criterion of authenticity which they presented was that he should not forget the poor (cf. Gal 2:10). This important principle, namely that the Pauline communities should not succumb to the self-centred lifestyle of the pagans, remains timely today, when a new self-centred paganism is growing. We may not always be able to reflect adequately the beauty of the Gospel, but there is one sign which we should never lack: the option for those who are least, those whom society discards [...] For the Church, the option for the poor is primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one (*Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 195,198).