

WE CARE !

A PASTORAL PROPOSAL THAT INVOLVES US DIRECTLY

A contribution by the participants in the Seminar “The Family: a resource to overcome the crisis” to assist the pastoral reflections of the Synod Fathers gathered for the IIIrd Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on “The pastoral challenges to the family in the context of evangelisation”.

As a Christian community, guided by our Lord Jesus Christ and illuminated by the Word of God:

1. We want to reflect on the impact of the financial, economic and social crisis on families today and how to relaunch an economy and society that are truly at the service of the common good.

Globalisation has entered the lives of our families and can be an opportunity, if guided by values, but can also represent a risk if its benefits are only enjoyed by a few and wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few, increasing the gap between rich and poor, the included and excluded, as has, unfortunately occurred over the last few decades. Growing inequality, the numerous lives and families left on the margins of the so-called global market urge us to examine the economic system and prevailing way of thinking with a critical eye, to seek new roads for a more human economy and society and, as Christians, to respond to the great pastoral challenge of inclusion.

The most widespread feeling today amongst families in difficulty throughout the world is one of powerlessness and solitude in the face of an overbearing and crushing socio-economic reality.

For this reason we are ready to dedicate our efforts, as a Christian community, not only to reducing the negative effects that the crisis has on families, but also to eliminate the underlying structural causes through evangelical courage and firm civil commitment.

2. We want to promote even further, through our prayers and actions, processes of peace and integral development, which appeal to governments and international institutions to work towards a more equal and peaceful world.

Forced migrations, as a result of wars and poverty, famine and environmental disasters, have brought grief and separation to untold families and a breakdown in their networks.

Our commitment to furthering peace and reconciliation must go hand in hand with providing a welcome, care and daily affection for refugee and immigrant families, and in particular the women and children traumatised by war and by extreme poverty and exploitation.

3. On the level on institutions, we want to promote still further constructive political action aimed at protecting shared rights and responsibilities, which requires nations to guarantee the right to build a family, by promoting housing and employment policies and other measures in support of young couples and families.

Ecclesial communities and religious congregations with unused property are also called upon to make a gesture of solidarity and to place these at the disposal of young couples in economic difficulty, who cannot get married as they have nowhere to live.

4. In a world and culture that have made us used to ignoring the weak and the elderly, we want to teach ourselves and our young to see old people not as a dead weight that steals life from the young, but as the pivot of the family, custodians of wisdom and of the memory of our roots, without which we cannot build a future.

In the prevailing mentality, anyone who is not productive is seen as a loser. But, in reality, many elderly people's pensions are used to support younger families afflicted by the crisis and unemployment, and the older generation often look after the young children.

Sometimes the elderly say that they are a "burden" because they are afraid that nobody cares for them or sees them as a resource. They are afraid of their own weakness and of life itself when it becomes difficult.

We want to learn to love our older and younger people more, to give them more space and a greater welcome into our communities. We are certain that in what appears as “weakness” in the elderly there is also a great strength that provides us, also, with an opportunity for friendship, to rediscover our roots, to grow in faith and to emerge from our egocentrism and reveal our best sentiments.

We want like to create paths of faith and solidarity that cross all the generations, and not sectorial or exclusive pastoral proposals. We are open to pastoral roads that encourage a mutual meeting, sharing and enriching of the young, of adults and of the elderly.

We also commit ourselves to strengthening within our parishes the network of protection and community support for families with grandparents and/or parents suffering from Alzheimer’s or other degenerative diseases. In particular, we want to be close to and to help families who live every day with relatives who have psychological illnesses and who feel abandoned in their suffering.

5. We know of the wealth of affection, creativity and faith that we receive from disabled children and adults and their families.

All too often, the parents of these children feel that they are alone in trying to manage their presents and futures, and live with the constant worry of what will happen when they are no longer there to protect their children. In ecclesial communities we are witnessing beautiful experiences with young people suffering from mental disabilities and their families. But sometimes these young people are not welcomed correctly into our pastoral activities, oratories and catechism lessons.

We would therefore like to involve ourselves more so as to make these young people a resource of love for our community, valuing their abilities and learning from them the joy of living and faith in our Lord Christ. We want to help their families in concrete terms to cope with the difficulties of daily life, fight for the right to a an active social life for their children and build community experiences that ensure they receive affection and care throughout their entire lives (family support, family homes in the dioceses, etc.).

6. We want to explore all the pastoral paths for restoring trust and hope in the mothers and fathers of today.

In a time of socioeconomic crisis and of a breakdown of values, the mediating role of the middle generation risks disappearing, crushed by unemployment and the disintegration of emotional bonds.

We want to accompany these parents in different ways, starting with helping them find a decent job as well as to create family networks and spaces for dialogue and shared experience.

A major pastoral challenge relating to families living in disadvantaged conditions and in uncertain emotional states is that of an education which starts from the experience of love as lived in the community. It is essential for us to strengthen pastoral actions in support of parents, understood as learning how to live and transmit love and solidarity even where emotional ties between adults have been severed.

The other great challenge is that of “inter-cultural” dialogue, We are called to reinterpret our own vision of the family in the light of the Gospel, by looking at the real situation of families today and building a constructive dialogue with contemporary cultures.

Parents today, and particularly single mothers or divorced couples, need to feel that they are understood, loved and supported in the journey through life, so as to be able to serve against as a link in the chain transmitting memories and values to their children.

7. In our pastoral work we would to pay greater attention to families who are victims of violence and various kinds of “aggression”.

Often, precisely because of their poverty, poorer families are obliged to entrust their children to unscrupulous individuals who promise to provide them with food, an education and a better future but who, in reality, reduce these children to a state of slavery.

Unfortunately, there have also been cases of children suffering and being removed from their families that have involved religious institutions.

We want to do our utmost to help poor families keep their children, and prevent their being removed from their parents' love because of the families' poverty.

One of the saddest symptoms of individualism is violence against women, mothers and daughters. This violence often explodes within the family and many women are killed every day all over the world. Sexual abuse of children is also widespread. and, behind many of these events lie hidden tales of solitude and poverty.

Our ecclesial community cannot remain indifferent in the face of such scandals and the calls for help, even when these are silent, of so many women and children.

8. Special attention must also be paid to immigrant families, and especially to their children who struggle to be reunited with their parents or enjoy full rights of citizenship in the countries to which they have emigrated. We want to make public opinion more aware and urge parliaments and governments to pass laws in favour of the full integration of immigrant families.

9. All over the world the families represent the main unit of society since they form a large protective network in times of economic and social difficulty and are a link in the chain transmitting a culture of solidarity and fraternity. In traditional societies, like in Asia and Africa, this role is very clear and strong and families, especially in villages, take care of each other and share the little they have for the good of the entire community. In the Bantu language of sub-Saharan Africa, there is an expression (which is also a philosophy) that perfectly expresses this community vision and is very close to our Christian experience: ubuntu, that is, "kindness towards the next man". And "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu", "I am because we are".

We want to learn from our brothers and sisters of the southern hemisphere how to experience these great values of sharing, hospitality, welcome, mutual assistance for the good of all in our communities, values which are also those of the Gospel.

10. Despite variations in our cultures and social situations, we are aware that many families today go through periods of enormous fatigue and suffering.

Whilst recognising the primary role of families in the teaching and transmission of values, we do not want to burden families in difficulty with tasks and responsibilities, thus rendering them even more fragile. So, just as we must urge political institution not to load families with responsibilities that are those of the collectivity and of the state as expressions of justice, we must not overload families in difficulty with religious duties, educational and pastoral tasks that risks excluding those who simply cannot cope. We would rather listen to these families and their needs, making room for encountering and comparing different realities, for inter-generational, inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue. Today more than ever we need to support these families along their path to rebuilding trust, relationships and hope through a network of friendship and community support.

11. Meeting today's families reveals a widespread poverty of emotional attachments, which turns into educational poverty and inability to form relationships in one's own life. Often the figure of a father or of adults to whom children can look up as a positive role model is lacking. These difficulties cross all barriers of faith, social and economic condition or birth nation.

Today there is a great need for relationships, for fatherhood and motherhood, but our ecclesial communities often seem afraid to experience and build such attachments and become communities of "motherhood". They tend to delegate the "maternal" role to others, a role which involves assuming responsibility and caring for others. Thus the parishes risk being like somewhat argumentative condominium associations where relationships are ignored and the priests themselves are hard to contact.

We know that we will succeed in conveying the Gospel's message of the beauty of the family only if we ourselves are a family, if our communities are families. Then it will be natural for us to be close to families, nobody excluded, and satisfy their need for relationships so as to build a network of friendship that is also a safety-net in times of uncertainty.

12. Today, as Christian communities, we must grasp the urgency of answering the following question: "Do we know how to be true builders of relationships, do

we know how to love one other and take care of each other, especially the weaker and more fragile? Do people truly capable of loving their neighbours and taking care of them really emerge from seminaries, Catholic schools, catechism and the various marriage preparation courses offered or simply people who have acquired theological principles and knowledge to a greater or lesser degree?”

We see ourselves as disciples of Christ insofar as we know how to live together and through the quality of our human relations, in particular to the poorest and weakest.

The ability to love and create positive attachments is not innate but is learnt and nurtured every day, following in the footsteps of Christ. It should be learnt in the family, in schools, in seminaries and should be the focal point in our parishes.

For this reason, we want to learn the teachings of Jesus, who did not teach about the pastoral family but himself built the family of the Gospel, which is, first and foremost, the family of the humble and of the poor, of those who listen and put into practice his words, and of his youngest brothers.

From Him we must learn the alphabet of love and mercy which enables us to make courageous choices and form friendships with all the families of today, with no exceptions.

The first great step towards this encounter with families in difficulty is represented by the children. The greatest pastoral challenge for our communities is to make space for them for love and human and spiritual growth. If we can speak the language of the young today, if we can make them love Christ not only in words but through beautiful and forceful experiences, then we shall easily reach their hearts and those of their distant parents.

13. We set off, therefore, on a path that also leads towards families wounded in their lives and in their affections or who do not enter our parish communities either for a sense of shame or because they feel themselves to be judged. We are thinking here of separated couples, the divorced and re-married and those living together outside marriage.

We would like to be, as Pope Francis has exhorted us, an “outgoing Church”, with “open doors”, “capable of healing wounds and warming the hearts of the

faithful”, of “slowing down, when necessary, to look people in the eye and listen to them” and “to accompany those left by the roadside”.¹

We hope that our pastors and theologians may find new exegetical, theological and pastoral directions so that these persons can always feel that they are an integral part of the community.

One of the roads to take is that of sharing the service of charity, an ethic commitment and solid assistance for the poorest and most defenceless. This experience will enable us to experience together with God and Jesus Christ the role of fathers and mothers of mercy and to feel that we are part of a community from which no one is excluded.

14. Lastly, we want to increase still further our awareness that “nobody is so rich that they can be given nothing, and nobody is so poor that they have nothing to give”.² This means that every family can experience the charity, hospitality and welcome towards the poor, even in the midst of life’s uncertainties. The mystery of the poor reveals that we are all poor and that poverty does not refer only to a few or to a group, but to all of us. The evangelical bliss of “blessed be the poor” makes us realise that we are blessed when we recognise our own poverty, the limits of our lives, and entrust ourselves to the Lord. “Here, by poverty, we mean above all freedom from things: going beyond the right to property, at least as has been perceived and applied until now; we mean justice that is finally and truly distributed and for the community. By poverty we certainly do not mean misery, and even less being miserable; we mean man being taken for his absolute worth and not for what he possesses”.³ Unfortunately, today, more than goods - which are for all - we lack a universal sense of the rights of every man to have at least the bare essentials. For this reason, poverty and the poor are a prophecy to which we must listen. We want to live poverty as sobriety in our family and community lives, to share our goods and our time with the less fortunate amongst us, to listen to what poor families can help us learn for the good of our lives and our road to faith.

We see examples in those elderly individuals who go to visit other less fortunate old people living in institutions, or amongst immigrant families who, despite their difficulties, keep alive a sense of hospitality and welcome, sharing

1 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, N. 46.

2 Dom Helder Camara.

3 Davide Maria TUROLDO, *Profezia della povertà*, p. 32.

the little they have and the treasures of their cultures with those who accompany them along their path.

15. The God of Life, in becoming one of us, experienced the life of a humble family, a simple, immigrant family in which he learnt to work with his hands, to make gestures of solidarity and to heal the wounds of the people of his time. He went towards families in difficulty, lived with them, ate and wept with them, took care of them like the good Samaritan. He sought out and lived also the lost sheep. He openly denounced injustice in defence of the weakest. And he never resigned himself to the “status quo” but since then has wrought that change which only love can bring about.

This is the Christian hope and the wish that we convey to our beloved Bishops, united in the Assembly of the Synod. May our Lord Christ inspire their thoughts, give them the courage of prophecy and the love to live in communion this stage on the journey of the Church, so important for all the families of the world.

(This message is a summary of the pastoral experiences and proposals shared by the participants of the seminar organised by Caritas Internationalis and the Pontifical Council for the Family, on 18th September 2014 at Palazzo San Calisto, in view of the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the Family).

Vatican City, 1st October 2014