

REDISCOVERING FAMILY TIES IN A POSTMODERN WORLD: CANON LAW AND THE PASTORAL ACTION OF THE CHURCH IN THE FACE OF POSTMODERNITY'S CHALLENGES

Montserrat Gas-Aixendri¹

ABSTRACT

The present-day 'hypermodern' society believes that the concept of family can be erased. However, the contemporary human being continues to bear a veiled nostalgia for ties, which is apparent in many of the postmodern cultural products (such as cinema, art, literature, etc.). These natural ties restore the unconditionality of family relationships as the only security against the contradictions and uncertainties of the world and serve as an antidote to postmodern chaos. Today's men and women try to recover the relational essence of the family in order to learn to build family ties that constitute us as human beings and are vital resources in the educational process. Therefore, it is essential to know what family ties are, how they are constituted, and at the same time understand the real difficulties we face today to be able to live these ties fully so that family becomes a 'point of resistance' against ideologies characterised by individualism and technocracy. The wisdom of the Church, through its Law and its pastoral experience, has throughout history shown the truth about family, which is based on the capacity of the human heart to love unconditionally. Even today, the Law and the pastoral of the Church should be able to accompany men and women in need of rediscovering the true essence of family, with proposals that consider the current cultural context.

KEYWORDS

Canon Law
family relationships
postmodern culture
family law
Catholic Church

1 | International PhD in Law and PhD in Canon Law, Full Professor, Institute for Advanced Family Studies, Childcare & Family Policies Joaquim Molins Figueras Chair; International University of Catalonia, Spain; mgas@uic.es; ORCID: 0000-0003-0297-8048.



1. Familial relationality in the face of postmodern disembodiment

The cover of the December 2020 issue of *The New Yorker* depicts the image of a post-modern young woman against the backdrop of the pandemic, with all the characteristics and contradictions of Western culture. A solitary young woman is seen holding a mobile phone in her left hand and seated at her desk on which a computer screen and bottles of anxiolytic medication can be noticed. The contrast between the chaos of 'real' life – represented by the accumulated wine bottles in the kitchen, litter on the floor, and medications on the desk – and the seemingly carefree attitude towards the video call screen are noteworthy. The illustration is titled 'Love Life' denoting an affection for life. However, in contrast to this attitude, a 2019 YouGov survey shows that 22% of the millennials have no friends, thus confirming the profound loneliness experienced by contemporary individuals. The consequences of this condition have led some governments to establish Ministries of Loneliness in an attempt to mitigate the social repercussions of the pandemic (countries such as the United Kingdom and Japan).² Furthermore, we now see how robots are employed to care for older adults, as exemplified by the Zora robot,³ and the emergence of companies offering the service of renting a person who would silently listen to a client.

This cultural landscape was eloquently described by Carlo Caffarra, who used the famous verse from the *Aeneid*, *rari nantes in gurgite vasto* (I, 18), to refer to marriage and the family in the Western world, stating that 'we have the pieces, but we no longer have the building'.⁴ In the same discourse, he pointed out that the primary cause for this situation is the process of *de-biologisation* in postmodern society. This process disregards the biologically determined nature of an individual, disconnects the person from their bodily reality, and neglects the reality of their unity. The process of *de-biologisation* is directly linked to the abandonment of natural law.⁵ *De-biologisation* entails, among other things, a forgetting of the relational structure of the human person. Therefore, it is now imperative to rediscover the fundamental aspects of the human being as inherently relational and familial.

2 | In 2018, the United Kingdom established this ministry in response to the fact that 9 million Britons feel lonely 'always or almost always': See the official webpage: Loneliness minister: "It's more important than ever to take action", 2021. In 2021, Japan followed suit in response to the rising suicide rates and the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic: Japan Appoints Minister of Loneliness, Can He Solve the Loneliness Problem?, 2021.

3 | Satariano, Peltier and Kostyukov, 2018.

4 | Caffarra, 2015, p. 22.

5 | The process of *de-biologisation* involves erasing or removing biological explanations or influences from certain phenomena and is intricately connected to the rejection or disregard of natural law. It implies moving away from explanations or interpretations based on biological factors and instead considering other factors or frameworks (such as cultural, environmental, or psychological factors). Natural law refers to a set of ethical principles or rules inherent in nature and discoverable through reason. These principles provide the basis for moral judgement and social order. Rejecting the biological dimension of human beings leads to questioning or abandoning the notion of inherent moral order in the universe. For example, one of the goals of J. Butler, a proponent of gender ideology, was to denaturalise gender to turn it into a purely cultural product, subject to the will of individuals (Butler, 2005).

2. Family relationships are constitutive, not just functional

Every human comes into existence through the relationship between a man and a woman. In our genetic heritage lies the foundation of personal growth: every child born carries something very valuable, which is absolute trust in those to whom he/she has been entrusted. Every child entering the world seeks and deserves the best possible treatment from their parents, not from others who may hypothetically be 'more perfect'; children love their parents just as they are.⁶ The absolute unconditional love demanded by a newborn finds its response in what it means to be a parent. Much more than providing care and education, being a parent means accepting that one's entire being and life become the conditions for another's growth. That is the power of being a parent.⁷

To carry out this task of humanisation, nature provides us with the greatest resource: the committed love between a man and a woman, capable of generating life and containing the paternal and maternal codes necessary for our constitution and personalisation.⁸ What is inscribed in our human genetic code from birth unfolds through family relationships, through the bonds that shape and educate us, not as a theory, but in real life. Through shared life within the family, we learn that unconditional love is possible between imperfect and limited individuals. Family bonds give us the opportunity to learn, without unnecessary drama, that every human relationship also involves differences, and that conflict is not a pathology but a path to learning how to love better.⁹

In the context of family, relationality may serve the purpose of satisfying biological needs, as observed in some animals. However, in the case of human beings, this coexistence is essential for the process of humanisation. The inherent deficiencies and immaturity with which we are born can be addressed only through the care provided by parents over an extended period, giving rise to intimate bonds. The unique aspect of this care is the interaction that nurtures the spiritual dimension of the human being. As a network of relationships, the family not only serves to introduce us to culture and society but also shapes and defines us. Each individual achieves the full realisation of their identity within the family, where the bonds between its members facilitate the development and growth of the individual in all aspects, biological to cultural.¹⁰

The relationships established within the family sphere are not merely functional but also constitutive. We become more human through the tasks associated with child-rearing and the socialisation that accompanies our vulnerability. It is through these sometimes-mundane tasks that we forge the bonds of intimacy that personalise us. First, intrafamily relationships bring forth a fundamental aspect of personal identity: the question of origins. Understanding our origins is essential to knowing who we are. Every journey of identity growth stems from a relationship, from the proposition of another, through what is known as 'recognition bonds' as studied in attachment theory.¹¹

6 | Ceriotti, 2019, p. 30.

7 | Maioli, 2006, p. 63.

8 | Ibid., p. 81.

9 | Ceriotti, 2019, p. 69.

10 | Maioli, 2006, p. 42.

11 | Polaino, 2004, pp. 74 ff.

3. How are bonds established?

Family is the 'school of life', which educates one through life itself, through one's relationships with its members.¹² It educates both the contingent (what happens to individuals from external sources) and what is chosen, or how one lives the contingent events. Family education emanates from the very core of family itself. Relationships educate for as long as they endure, be it in a positive or negative manner. Within the family, education or its absence is always observable; it is not a neutral entity in shaping individuals. Although the foundation of family bonds lies in kinship, blood ties, and generations, when these elements are absent, as in the case of adoption, this framework can still be constructed, which, in any case, is based on and assimilated into the essence of being a family. This also explains the degradation of family's reality, of specific families that break apart even when initially formed under all conditions when interpersonal relationships are abandoned and not nurtured: it is then understandable that they slowly and tacitly deteriorate.

Relationships in this sphere need to be close; family relationships are intimate and touch upon the deepest aspects of individuals. Any form of communication, even if it is purely informational, carries a level of intimacy because it is filled with emotional significance. In this space that we know as 'home,' what we recognise as trust is essential. Trust, understood as firm and secure expectation, is necessary because it relates to the need to be unconditionally accepted and loved.

Family bonds, capable of facilitating the humanisation of individuals, are deeply encoded in our genetics. However, precisely because human nature is characterised by freedom, it is essential that we also desire this to be true. It requires taking actions and establishing habits that strengthen these bonds. The family serves as the most profound connection to reality, demanding the sharing of time and intimate space; it is, in essence, a shared life. Almost all aspects of family life revolve around rituals: waking the children, preparing meals, setting the table; every task of 'daily management' becomes a family custom (shared time). Intimately sharing the family space is what gives rise to the concept of 'home,' a place where people are cared for through love. Human 'radical' vulnerability, in the context of family relationships, becomes an opportunity and a pathway to understand love. It is not merely a place of functionality but also one of drama: an opening to life and an adventure of life.¹³

It is important to emphasise in this context that the family is not a closed system. Each individual has a vocation, a calling to a personal life. Love involves the joy of witnessing mutual growth, creating a framework of stability. Ultimately, family bonds emerge from the family's actions and habits through which intimacy is shared, communication happens, care is given, and celebrations are enjoyed.¹⁴

12 | Catechism of the Catholic Church, pp. 2221 ff.

13 | Yepes and Aranguren, 2014, p. 90.

14 | Ceriotti, 2019, pp. 143 ff.

4. Family relationships and the postmodern culture

Family is an integral part of all cultures because it aligns with human nature, although it takes on different forms in each because it is also an inseparable cultural reality. Nature and culture are two intimately related concepts that cannot exist independently. In recent years, many studies have analysed how the reality of 'being a family' is experienced in Western culture today, often focusing only on aspects that hinder families from unfolding all their natural potential.

To fully understand this reality, one must comprehend family in its entirety, and above all, first perceive its riches and strengths because, to propose possible 'solutions' for families to develop their authentic vocation, we need to rely on these strengths, which undoubtedly exist in our western culture as well. It is important to recognise that family is intrinsic to the human being; it has the strength of truth and is not merely a cultural construct. Every human being has the need and capacity to love within the family.

As mentioned initially, the *de-biologisation* characterising postmodernity disregards the biological determination of the individual, separating the person from their bodily reality and forgetting its unity. Before this paradigm shift occurred, the genome of marriage and family was constituted by the relationship between two different relationships: the relationship of reciprocity (spousal) and the intergenerational relationship (parenthood).¹⁵ These three relationships were intrapersonal, meaning, they were rooted in the person. They were not reduced to biological data but embraced and integrated into the entirety of the person. The body is a personal body, and the person is a bodily person.¹⁶ As Hadjadj points out, the crisis of the crisis is present here, and perhaps it is only a matter of supporting the natural unfolding that occurs.¹⁷ Our culture, and each of us, continues to yearn for unconditional bonds, even though ideologies may sometimes blind us.

Second, one of the characteristics of our culture in relation to family, compared to previous generations, is that young parents, especially fathers, are more involved in the upbringing of their children. It is common to see greater participation from fathers who feel a strong sense of responsibility towards their children and a genuine desire to be a good parent. We have shifted from the concept of the father as the 'breadwinner' to the father who 'plays with his children.' This shift is driven by a sense of playfulness and the pursuit of happiness. Another interesting feature is the blurring of lines between motherhood and fatherhood. Fathers are becoming 'more like mothers.' Additionally, young people are open to truth and generally lack prejudices. They eagerly seek truth and value the experiences of others.

When analysing the difficulties in our society in manifesting the family nature of human beings, we perceive a strong component of individualism that can be quite aggressive. The epidemic of individualism today is rooted in relationships where others are seen as instruments for one's own well-being. It is a relationship in which the other person loses their contribution and becomes an object. The 'self' becomes the sole measure of life. Others either adapt to me or become enemies, including children or spouses. Authors

15 | Donati, 2014.

16 | Caffarra, 2015, p. 23.

17 | Hadjadj, 2020, p. 20.

like Lipovetsky describe the contemporary citizen as ‘hyper-individualistic’.¹⁸ Even volunteerism appears as a form of ‘solidary individualism,’ seeking to help others as a way to help oneself.¹⁹ The dominant culture has tried to exalt the autonomy of ‘non-belonging’ and the individual origin of each person, but the reality is that we all belong to a lineage. Even if only biologically, we come from others.

In contemporary society, individuals often eschew reason as their guiding principle, yielding instead to the superficiality of sentimentality or ‘emotional pornography,’ in what some have termed the ‘tyranny of happiness.’ The pursuit of happiness, construed as well-being, is seen as the sole driving force of existence.

Another note that characterises our era and complicates family relationships is that we no longer believe in ‘forever.’ We desire unconditional love but do not believe it is possible. We perceive human relationships, especially marital relationships, as having a kind of ‘planned obsolescence.’ Consequently, family bonds are fragile. The difficulties and conflicts inherent in all human relationships are seen as signs of failure, and a lack of trust in both others and oneself is observed when it comes to forming bonds because they are perceived as utopian. Today, humans are not the measure. Social systems, habits, and ways of life operate as if there were no inherent human nature, no purpose in common human nature. For example, the ideal worker is often portrayed as single, flexible, without fixed working hours, capable of geographical changes, etc. and children are clearly seen as obstacles.

Another forgotten aspect is the consideration that obstacles and difficulties in relationships are pathological, forgetting that they are inherent in any human relationship.²⁰

We have also overlooked how bonds are formed. Our smartphones allow us to be physically present, but we are constantly mentally and emotionally absent. We sit with our families at the dining table, each immersed in a separate world, merely living ‘together.’ Technology changes not only what we do but also who we are. We deny each other full attention; we are together in solitude. The problem is that this way of relating to others and to our own selves affects our capacity for reflection, which is the foundation for maturity. We are alone but afraid of intimacy. Social networks, social robots, etc. give us the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship or love.

5. The Church’s Law promoting family relationships

Family law, which justly governs family relationships, originated in classical times, built upon a society inspired by Christian principles and within a context of mutual interaction and symbiosis between canon law (*ius canonicum*) and civil law (*ius civile*). Over time, a progressive emphasis has been observed on the personalist dimension of family

18 | Gilles Lipovetsky Conferencia: Ciudadanía política: pluralismo y democracia en la era de la hipermodernidad, 2018: ‘Without faith, skeptical of politics, and shaped by social media, they focus on a sort of hyper-individualism, aspiring to a good education because they consider it the wealth of tomorrow’. See also Lipovetsky, 2000.

19 | Béjar, 2006.

20 | Gas-Aixendri and Lacorte Tierz, 2015, p. 299.

relationships. This has led to a gradual improvement of the legal system, with more attention paid to the well-being of the family community and its members.²¹ As is well known, a proper and systematically organised canonical family law has not been fully developed²² because family relationships have primarily been considered relevant within the realm of internal morality, philosophy, and pastoral matters rather than as legal relationships regulated by law. Moreover, with the separation of secular civil family law, canonical law has tended to acknowledge the secular competence in the so-called purely civil effects of marriage and family relationships.²³

Civil family law has openly moved away from the anthropological paradigm of the natural family. As Pope Francis has pointed out, 'there is a legal deconstruction of the family taking place in many countries, which tends to adopt forms based almost exclusively on the paradigm of the autonomy of the will'.²⁴ This is particularly evident in the field of parentage, with the development of assisted reproductive technologies and fully realised in the concept of surrogacy, where the all-powerful and arbitrary will seeks to completely replace blood ties.²⁵ The cultural relativisation of the concept of nature, especially driven by gender ideology on the one hand and legal positivism on the other, presents today's women and men with a reality that is paradoxically unreal. It is a distorted view that contradicts the deepest aspirations of the human heart.²⁶ These aspects have recently been addressed by the Holy See in the Declaration *Dignitas infinita*.²⁷

In the ecclesial sphere, since the second half of the 20th century, significant progress has been made in understanding the concepts of marriage and family from the perspectives of anthropology and theology. One of the most relevant expressions of these advancements is Saint John Paul II's Theology of the Body, which is, so to speak, 'waiting to be fully explored.' The juridical expression of marriage in the canonical context continues to be one of the strongholds – perhaps the only one – that normatively reflects God's familial design for human beings. The elements that structure it as a relationship of justice do not derive from an externally imposed law (historical, cultural, or circumstantial reasons) but from an unwritten natural normativity. Therefore, considering the juridical dimension of canonical marriage is intimately linked to its character as a natural institution.²⁸

By reducing marriage to the realm of measurable utilitarian criteria, we have lost sight of the fact that all marital and family life is internally vivified by interpersonal giving and love.²⁹ The loss of this spousal dimension of marital life has decisively contributed to the secularisation (in recent times, one could speak of 'profanation') of marriage and the family. This process of secularisation, initiated by contractual privatisation, has been further radicalised through a legalistic mentality in which family law is viewed as

21 | Zuanazzi, 2019, p. 99.

22 | Molano, 2000, pp. 793–804.

23 | Cc. 1059, 1671 §2; 1672 CIC.

24 | Pope Francis, 2016, p. 53.

25 | See Fernández-Arrojo, 2020, pp. 98–136.

26 | Caffarra, 2015, p. 27. The same idea is expressed in the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, 2014, pp. 11, 33.

27 | Declaration 'Dignitas Infinita' on Human Dignity, 2024.

28 | Gas-Aixendri, 2017, p. 4.

29 | About the contraposition on personalism and utilitarianism, see Pope John Paul II, 1994, pp. 9–15.

a mosaic of 'facts' that receive legitimacy through state recognition. The legality of the family appears to hinge on the act of recognition: hence, the family and various family relationships, when considered in themselves, are reduced to the level of mere factual circumstances, which constitutes a new form of 'profanation' of this sacred institution.

In this work, we wish to emphasise the significant protective role played by Church Law in family relationships. In fact, by configuring the legal structure of marriage and the family, it establishes the key components of the system, among which we can mention the following:

1. Blood and freedom are the two essential ingredients of every family system: on the one hand are the biological ties of blood, and on the other are the legal ties created by freedom.³⁰
2. Marriage, understood as the unconditional giving and acceptance of the persons of the spouses in their dimension as spouses, is the foundational principle of the family and the component that signifies the legitimacy of family relationships.³¹
3. Family is not just for a select few who are 'perfect'; it is for everyone. Therefore, it is essential to distinguish between difficulty and incapacity. The difficulties and conflicts inherent in all human relationships may lead to the breakdown of marital coexistence, but they are not necessarily a cause for the nullity of marriage.
4. Understanding the marital bond as the first, foundational family relationship serves as the key to interpreting all other relationships within the family.
5. Marital commitment is based on the consensual principle,³² rooted in marital love, with its inherent goods: unity and fidelity, openness to procreation, and finally, indissolubility, which is the flip side of the coin of the unconditional nature of marital love.³³

Among these aspects, we highlight two as particularly relevant in order to draw some conclusions in the realm of the Church's legal and pastoral action.

- a) Understanding the marital bond as the primary family relationship, which is foundational and key to interpreting all other relationships within the family: The marital bond appears as a purely contractual reality external to personal and family reality (i.e. biographical), which hinders the possibility of considering the marital relationship as intrinsically familial.³⁴ The familial consideration of the marital bond reinforces the idea – implicit in the entire canonical tradition – that married men and women belong to each other reciprocally and become the first relatives, as the identity of the spouse constitutes a biographical co-identity.³⁵ This idea is still uncontroversial in other family relationships because it is believed that, once established, the family relationship persists independently of the will of the parties involved in the relationship. The notion of 'ex-family member

30 | See Moreno, 1994, where interesting advances in anthropological research related to kinship systems are presented.

31 | See c. 1057 § 2 CIC.

32 | See c. 1057 § 1 CIC.

33 | See cc. 1056, 1134 CIC.

34 | Carreras, 2000, pp. 419–434.

35 | Viladrich, 2001.

- '- ex-father, ex-son, ex-sister—has not yet gained traction in the Western context, while the notion of 'ex-husband' or 'ex-wife' has come to be accepted because it is believed that these relationships do not reach the most intimate levels of a person, as explained above.³⁶
- b) Indissolubility, as the flip side of the coin of the unconditional nature characteristic of marital love: Indissolubility is not an extrinsic property of marital love but an intrinsic component of the unconditional love between spouses, which is reflected in and serves as the foundation for the unconditional nature of other family relationships.³⁷ The stability and duration of the parental bond serve as a reference point and support for children, not only when they are young but throughout their life. United parents continue to be role models for children who are already spouses. In contrast, marital breakup entails the collapse of the entire structure of family relationships. However, some elements of it may still be maintained, which are undoubtedly valuable.

Considering this truth has direct consequences in the realm of the Church's action, both in family pastoral work and in the understanding of marriage annulment processes. The idea that the annulment process is a kind of 'remedy' for marital failures should be abandoned. Thus, facilitating avenues for annulment and expanding efforts in this direction should not be seen as a pastoral action. The Church should accompany those in situations of failure but should do so based on the truth about marriage and the real situation of such individuals.³⁸

6. Proposals for the future

The elements of canonical matrimonial law have been and continue to be fundamental in safeguarding family relationships. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a genuine canonical family law that goes beyond the foundational relationship, which is marriage, to include all the richness of the Church's wisdom on other family relationships: parental and filial, fraternal relationships, and family education as a sphere of personal growth that encompasses all dimensions, including the spiritual. Parallely, it is essential to find new paths and formulas to propose pastoral action that highlights the beauty of family relationships in all their facets.

The efforts of Pope Francis in recent years, following the impetus of the two Synods on the Family, to reach out to families who have experienced failure are commendable.³⁹ The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia* offers a compassionate and realistic view of the challenges facing families in the contemporary world, while emphasising the fundamental role of the Church in accompanying, supporting, and strengthening families in all their forms and circumstances. The apostolic exhortation encourages a comprehensive and merciful pastoral perspective towards families, acknowledging the complexity of

36 | Carreras, 2000, pp. 419–434.

37 | Gas-Aixendri, 2002, pp. 335–344.

38 | On this issue, see Pérez-Soba, 2015.

39 | Pope Francis, 2016, pp. 291 ff.

their situations and challenges. It highlights the importance of communication, dialogue, and active listening within families as a means to strengthen family bonds and resolve conflicts. Recognising the diversity of family situations in today's world, it promotes an inclusive pastoral approach that accompanies all families, regardless of their situation or structure. Delicate issues such as divorce, single-parent families, and couples in irregular situations are addressed, urging the Church to welcome and accompany these families rather than judge them. Additionally, it underscores the importance of sexual education within the family and the need for comprehensive formation that promotes the human and spiritual development of family members. The recent responses from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith are a good example of the discipline's approach to the reality of families.⁴⁰

A concrete and practical initiative would be to develop pastoral and legal services within dioceses.⁴¹ The mission of these services would be to provide information, counseling, and mediation to couples in a crisis or separated individuals. Some may see this only as preparation for a potential annulment process. However, Pope Francis envisions it as a much broader form of accompaniment:⁴² a form that can help overcome marital crises and heal the wounds of those who have experienced failure, even if the marriage is not annulled.⁴³ A broader and more profound view of the possibilities of these services can be the development of positive pastoral care, not just preventive and restorative – pastoral care that accompanies couples from marriage preparation and continues to support them throughout their lives.

The starting point for understanding the importance of family accompaniment/support is understanding the nature of families in Western culture. Our diagnostic attempt has identified a trend showing the creation of highly individualised societies, where we struggle to come together, comprehend the significance of family bonds, and recognise the need to strengthen them. However, we tend to be non-reflective and seek immediate responses and actions when conflicts arise; moreover, in a world dominated by the idea of success, we interpret every crisis as an irreparable sign of failure. Lastly, today, we increasingly tend to 'reason with emotions' rather than with intellectual faculties.

With these underlying facts, family life can become quite complex, and helping from the outside is not easy. Until a few years ago, we believed that providing families with training would be sufficient to offer them assistance: giving them ideas about how the family should be and how things should be done, in a style that we could describe as 'directive.' Perhaps we forgot that education is not only about giving or receiving information. Comprehensive education requires having the freedom that allows each person, each family, to discover their unique role. Of course, education in this sense is still necessary, but it has become insufficient. We must learn to convey the beauty of the family in a different way, with a different methodology and style, in accordance with the culture in which we live, which, as mentioned earlier, has undergone radical changes in recent decades.

40 | See Fernández, 2023a; Fernández, 2023b.

41 | Apostolic Tribunal of the Roman Rota, 2016, p. 13.

42 | Pope Francis, 2013, p. 169.

43 | This is how various authors understand it; some dioceses such as Milan and Bergamo have implemented it. See Tocto Meza, 2018, pp. 220–221.

Pope Francis, from the beginning of his pontificate, has emphasised the need to be close to families in a practical and realistic way. Educating individuals within the family today requires not only transmission of knowledge but also guidance that supports individuals with closeness. What does it mean to accompany? Etymologically, to accompany means 'to share bread,' that is, space and time with another person. It signifies the intertwining of daily life's elements in the construction of an existence. Ultimately, to accompany means to share life.⁴⁴ Accompaniment is a concept that needs further exploration, but some aspects that are essential must be emphasised:

- a) Accompaniment requires being where families are. Therefore, accompaniment must happen in the places where families meet, where they act, and where they are located.
- b) Accompaniment means establishing a personal relationship. Accompaniment has a strong anthropological value. It is not simply about performing the role of a personal advisor. Accompaniment implies establishing a bond. Accompaniment can never happen without becoming vulnerable. As such, a bond is based on trust. Trust cannot be imposed; it is up to us to create the conditions that make trust possible.
- c) Accompaniment does not mean directing or replacing the decision-making process by solving others' problems. It is to accompany the individual because there is a path, a journey to be taken together. Accompaniment is about revealing the beauty that is attractive. Accompaniment is also about helping discover the resources that families can draw on to address their difficulties. Until recently, we believed that it was enough to assist families by offering them 'training,' forgetting that education also largely involves promoting individual freedom by proposing realistic and relatable models.
- d) Accompaniment is necessary not only in times of crisis. It should be considered a preventive aid in conflict situations. Nevertheless, moments when difficulties intensify may arise when a family is going through particularly challenging circumstances. Accompanying in this context requires starting with the premise that a crisis is not necessarily an irreparable failure. Crises are undoubtedly a threat; but they can also become a challenge and an opportunity for renewal, to discover new facets in individuals and relationships.
- e) Finally, it is important to emphasise that accompaniment is *a task of closeness* that requires specific training but is not necessarily a therapeutic action. Occasionally, some form of intervention may be necessary, but it may not be suitable for most of the difficulties that all families encounter eventually.

Based on everything we have discussed thus far, it is evident that the pastoral action of the Church (including all initiatives stemming from this institution as such and its various entities: parishes, associations, movements, and other ecclesial realities) is a privileged sphere for accompanying families. We must be aware that the trust and spiritual strength represented by this realm of accompaniment have immeasurable potential. Accompaniment is not merely a noble idea but an operational reality born from the very nature of the Church, which is 'a family that accompanies families'. The Church also possesses genuine wisdom about family life and needs to use it to accompany those who wish

44 | Pérez-Soba, 2022, p. 17.

to embark on the journey of forming a family or who have already done so. Those of us who consider ourselves living members of the Church bear the responsibility to learn how to accompany in this context.

Pastoral structures are often perceived as service-providing structures rather than structures for accompanying individuals. Hence, a change of mindset is required to understand that the fundamental mission to which the Church is called is to accompany us on the journey of life, just as Jesus accompanied the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Accompaniment should be integral to the entirety of the Church's actions.⁴⁵

As believers, we need spaces to share faith and life, including family life. In Catechumenal itineraries, it is stated that 'it is not so much about transmitting information as it is about guiding, assisting, and being close to couples on a journey to be undertaken together. In reference to accompaniment, concepts such as 'gradualness,' 'welcome,' 'support,' 'witness,' 'being present,' and the creation of an 'atmosphere of friendship and trust' are also used. It is evident that we must delve deeper into and, above all, demonstrate in practice what it means to accompany within the Church.⁴⁶

It is increasingly imperative to focus on what is commonly referred to as remote preparation for marriage, specifically the education of young individuals. Pérez Soba raises a question regarding why youth pastoral care is not regarded as authentic family pastoral care. There is a critical need to instil the virtue of love in young people. A question then arises: How and where is love learned? As previously emphasised, completing the circle of understanding, love is cultivated within the family, often regarded as the domestic Church. This becomes particularly evident when the family actively embodies the love that reflects God's love for each individual.

Accompanying families is not just a 'good idea' but an operational reality that arises from the vitality of the Church and its nature as a 'family.'⁴⁷ Accompanying means creating relationships, a difficult task, especially in an increasingly individualised social context. More than an action, it is above all an attitude. The Church possesses authentic wisdom about the family and must apply it to accompany those who wish to embark on building a family and those who have already begun their family project.

We should not lose hope that the family, understood in this way, responds to the aspirations of human beings today. We would like to conclude by recalling the proposal that was made in this same forum some years ago (I believe there is no other recipe): to showcase the beauty of unconditional family love, to educate people on the capacity to love unconditionally, and to accompany families in all their life moments.⁴⁸ This is why we need not only 'ideologues' and 'theorists' of family but also embodiments of family truth: an immersion in real models of families that accompany other families.

45 | To accompany is not to solve problems. Jesus did not come to solve problems but rather to create them, in the sense that the Christian existence, in a certain way, means complicating one's life. Pérez-Soba, 2022, p. 17.

46 | Dicastery for laity, family and life, Catechumenal itineraries for married life. Pastoral guidelines for particular Churches [Itinerari catecumenali per la vita matrimoniale. Orientamenti pastorali per le Chiese particolari] 2022, p. 20.

47 | Pérez-Soba, 2022, p. 88.

48 | Gas-Aixendri and Lacorte Tierz, 2015, pp. 287–308.

7. Conclusions

To address the current situation of the family in many places, with its strengths and weaknesses, it is necessary to undertake a comprehensive and organised pastoral action that involves all members of the Church to support families, especially those facing difficulties. Most likely, this is the most significant challenge for the Church in our times, as it involves 're-building' an institution (the family) that is fundamental for the future of our civilisation.⁴⁹ While it is necessary to involve all sectors of civil society, the Church, however, bears a particular responsibility in this endeavour due to its role in teaching the 'truth of the principle,' confirming the 'principles of moral order that arise from human nature itself'.⁵⁰

Despite clear signs of crisis, the desire for family remains alive, especially among young people, and many families respond with generosity, joy, and faith to their vocation, despite the obstacles, misunderstandings, and sufferings.⁵¹ We must be aware that those who work in favour of the family are swimming against the tide today. Counterculture, as defined by Theodore Roszak, consists of those social structures and tendencies that oppose the ones established in a society. In this context, the family represents a countercultural element, that is, a resistance to the significant forces of postmodernity, which include lack of commitment, relational poverty, loneliness, and self-referentiality. However, we must consider that counterculture entails creating a new culture, and therefore, it presupposes a positive attitude, being convinced that our proposal regarding the family aligns with the one of most authentic desires of human beings: 'to love and be loved.'

49 | We intentionally use this expression, in contrast to the 'deconstruction' advocated by gender ideology.

50 | Second Vatican Council, 1965, p. 14.

51 | General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, 2014, pp. 1–2.

Bibliography

- Apostolic Tribunal of the Roman Rota (2016) 'Subsidium for the application of the M.p. Mitis Iudex Dominus Iesus' *Vatican City*, January 2016 [Online]. Available at: <http://www.rotaromana.va/content/dam/rotaromana/documenti/Sussidio/Subsidium%2C%20english.pdf> (Accessed: 15 October 2024).
- Béjar, H. (2006) *El mal samaritano*. Anagrama: Madrid.
- Biemans, W. (2022) 'An Ambitious and Challenging New Document: Catechumenal Itineraries for Married Life: Pastoral Guidelines for Particular Churches', *Marriage, Families & Spirituality*, 28(2), pp. 285–290; <https://doi.org/10.2143/INT.28.2.3291377>.
- Caffarra, C. (2015) 'Fede e cultura di fronte al matrimonio' in Franceschi, H. (ed.) *Matrimonio e famiglia. La questione antropologica*. Rome: Edizioni Santa Croce.
- Carreras, J. (2000) 'La naturaleza familiar del vínculo conyugal' in Viladrich, P.J. (ed.) *El matrimonio y su expresión canónica ante el III milenio*. Pamplona: Ediciones Universidad de Navarra, pp. 419–434.
- Cerioti, M. (2019) *La familia imperfecta, cómo convertir los problemas en retos*. Madrid: Rialp.
- Declaration "Dignitas Infinita" on Human Dignity (2024) *Vatican City*, 2 April [Online]. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20240402_dignitas-infinita_en.html (Accessed: 16 October 2024).
- Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life (2022) 'Catechumenal Itineraries for Married Life Pastoral Guidelines for Local Churches' *Vatican City*, 2022 [Online]. Available at: https://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/dam/laityfamilylife/amoris-laetitia/OrientamentiCatecumenatomatrimoniale/Catechumenal%20Pathways_ENG.pdf (Accessed: 16 October 2024).
- Donati, P. (2014) *La familia, el genoma de la sociedad*. Madrid: Rialp.
- Fernández, V.M.C. (2023a) 'Dicasterium pro doctrina fidei. Answers to Several Questions from His Excellency, the Most Reverend José Negri, Bishop of Santo Amaro, Brazil, Regarding Participation in the Sacraments of Baptism and Matrimony by Transgender Persons and Homosexual Persons', *Vatican City*, 31 October [Online]. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_20231031-documento-mons-negri_en.html (Accessed: 14 April 2024).
- Fernández, V.M.C. (2023b) 'Dicasterium pro doctrina fidei. Letter to His Excellency, the Most Reverend Ramón Alfredo de la Cruz Baldera, Bishop of the Diocese of San Francisco de Macoris (Dominican Republic) Regarding Access to Eucharistic Communion for Single Mothers', *Vatican City*, 13 December [Online]. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20231213_risposta-madri-single_en.html (Accessed: 14 April 2024).

- Fernández-Arrojo, M. (2020) 'El impacto de las técnicas de reproducción asistida en el derecho de filiación en España. Desafíos y contradicciones ante el interés superior del menor', *Jus. Rivista di Scienze Giuridiche*, 2020/3, pp. 98–136.
- Gas-Aixendri, M. (2002) 'Essenza del matrimonio e indissolubilità del vincolo coniugale', *Ius Ecclesiae*, 14, pp. 335–341.
- Gas-Aixendri, M., Lacorte Tierz, P. (2015) 'La famiglia quale realtà originaria: mostrare, educare, accompagnare' in Franceschi, H. (ed.) *Matrimonio e famiglia*. Rome: EDUSC, pp. 287–308.
- Gas-Aixendri, M. (2017) 'La dimensión jurídica del matrimonio canónico a la luz del magisterio reciente. Observaciones a propósito de la reforma del proceso de nulidad realizada por el Motu Proprio Mitis Iudex', *Ius Canonicum*, 57(113), pp. 105–128; <https://doi.org/10.15581/016.113.001>.
- General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops (2014) 'Relatio synodi' *Vatican City*, 4 October [Online]. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20141018_relatio-synodi-familia_en.html (Accessed: 6 October 2024).
- Gilles Lipovetsky *Conferencia: Ciudadanía política: pluralismo y democracia en la era de la hipermodernidad* (2018) *Cortv Presenta*, 20 October [Online]. Available at: <https://www.excelsior.com.mx/expresiones/gilles-lipovetsky-disecciona-al-ciudadano-hipermoderno/1273054> (Accessed: 16 October 2024).
- Hadjadj, F. (2020) *Por qué dar la vida a un mortal*. Madrid: Rialp.
- Japan Appoints Minister of Loneliness, Can He Solve the Loneliness Problem?* (2021) OMF United Kingdom, 17 August [Online]. Available at: <https://omf.org/us/japan-appoints-minister-of-loneliness-can-he-solve-the-loneliness-problem/> (Accessed: 14 April 2024).
- Lipovetsky, G. (2002) *La era del vacío. Ensayos sobre el individualismo contemporáneo*. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Loneliness minister: "It's more important than ever to take action"* (2021) *Gov.uk*, 17 June [Online]. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/loneliness-minister-its-more-important-than-ever-to-take-action> (Accessed: 14 April 2024).
- Maioli, V.M. (2006) *Padres e hijos. La relación que nos constituye*. Madrid: Ediciones Encuentro.
- Moreno, A. (1994) *Sangre y libertad*. Madrid: Rialp.
- Pérez-Soba, J.J. (2015) *¿Qué acompañamiento abre a una esperanza? Las prácticas pastorales con los divorciados vueltos a casar*. Burgos: Monte Carmelo.
- Polaino-Lorente, A. (2004) *Familia y autoestima*. Madrid: Ariel.

- Pope Francis (2013) *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium*. Vatican City: Liberia Editrice Vaticana; https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (Accessed: 14 April 2024).
- Pope Francis (2016) *Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation Amoris laetitia*. Vatican City: Liberia Editrice Vaticana [Online]. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html (Accessed: 14 April 2024).
- Pope John Paul II (1994) *Letter to Families*. Vatican City: Liberia Editrice Vaticana [Online]. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_02021994_families.html (Accessed: 14 April 2024).
- Satariano, A., Peltier, E., Kostyukov, D. (2018) 'Meet Zora, the Robot Caregiver', *The New York Times*, 23 November [Online]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/11/23/technology/robot-nurse-zora.html> (Accessed: 10 November 2024).
- Second Vatican Council (1965) 'Declaration on Religious Freedom. Dignitatis humanae' Vatican City, 7 December [Online]. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html (Accessed: 16 October 2024).
- Talavera, J.C. (2018) 'Gilles Lipovetsky disecciona al ciudadano hipermoderno', *Excelsior*, 21 October [Online]. Available at: <https://www.excelsior.com.mx/expresiones/gilles-lipovetsky-disecciona-al-ciudadano-hipermoderno/1273054> (Accessed: 16 October 2024).
- Tocto-Meza, E. (2018) 'Naturaleza canónica de la Investigación Prejudicial o Pastoral', *Cuadernos Doctorales de la Facultad de Derecho Canónico*, 28, pp. 159–250.
- Viladrich, P.J. (2001) *El ser conyugal*. Madrid: Rialp.
- Yepes, R., Aranguren, J. (2014) *Fundamentos de Antropología*. Pamplona: EUNSA.
- Zuanazzi, I. (2019) 'La relazione genitoriale all'interno del diritto canonico di famiglia' in González Alonso, A., Abascal Martínez, J. (eds.) *L'autorità genitoriale, limite o diritto dei figli?*. Rome: EDUSC, pp. 97–150.