



2016

Editorial: Families

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Recommended Citation

Ross, Susan; Cahill, Lisa; Borgman, Erik; and Nadar, Sarojini. Editorial: Families. *Concilium*, 2016, 2: 7-10, 2016. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, Theology: Faculty Publications and Other Works,

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Editorial

On January 2, 2016, local television stations and newspapers in Chicago announced, as is their usual practice, the birth of the first baby born in the metropolitan area in the new year. This year, a 15 year-old unmarried Hispanic girl gave birth to a daughter at 12:01 a.m. in a suburban hospital. Her delighted parents spoke of their joy and dedication to helping raise their new grandchild; the mother was shown gazing lovingly at her new baby, while also declaring her intention to finish high school and to become a police officer. It is doubtful that fifty years ago, this family's situation would have been celebrated as it is today, but the situation of families around the world in 2016 has changed enormously in the last few decades. Having a child 'out of wedlock' is no longer seen as a scandalous situation. Same-sex couples with their children sit alongside 'traditional' heterosexual couples in many churches. Families struggle to survive in complex global economic and political situations. This issue of *Concilium* aims to highlight the diversity of issues that confront families in the present.

'The family' is often identified as the 'domestic church.' We learn to become Christians in our families. As Catholic teaching has always maintained, parents model the relationship of Christ and the Church and children are the embodiment of their parents' love.¹ Family experiences, for good or for ill, shape us into the persons we become. But families are increasingly complex and face challenges for which there are no easy answers, either from the Church or from society.

The 2014 Extraordinary Synod on the Family and the 2015 Synod were notable for their new openness to discussion and to hearing about families through the questionnaires that were distributed in advance and the documentation that was made widely available. Yet despite the complex range of issues faced by families and the diversity of cultures in which families struggle to live, most of the Synod discussions were about divorce and remarriage, the admission of remarried (but not annulled) Catholics, cohabitation, and same-sex marriage. Underlying these discussions were deeper concerns about the synodal processes, the directions taken by Pope

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Francis, and geographical and generational divides in the church. Thomas Reese, SJ, was an observer at the 2015 Synod and offers his reflections on the month-long meeting in October 2015 in the Theological Forum. The concerns of families around the world are more broad-ranging than these issues, important as they are for many in the global north.

The title of this issue, ‘Families,’ is deliberately plural. There is no one model for ‘the’ family, as the articles vividly demonstrate. From the extended families of the global south to the nuclear families of the global north, families come in many shapes and sizes. If there is anything that unites these diverse families, it is that the social, political, and economic realities of the world have had a profound effect on them. Our authors represent a diversity of contexts and challenges. It is, therefore, difficult to separate out theological issues from their contexts, but certain issues emerge.

One thread that runs through many of the essays, notably those of D’Angelo, Cruz, Orobator, Suarez, Rakoczy and Mapasure, and Simeone, is that of gender. While many magisterial documents pertaining to the family emphasize the enduring importance of motherhood, the ‘feminine genius’ possessed by women, and the example of Mary, the mother of Jesus, the realities of women’s lives rarely correspond to the idealized picture of maternal love that is presented in official church writings. In addition, it is worth saying here – and so we repeat what many Vatican observers have noted – that while some thirty women were invited to be auditors at the 2015 Synod meetings, women had no vote in Synod deliberations. The one layperson with a vote was a professed brother, a celibate male. The painful reality of women’s lack of voice in the church, at the same time Pope Francis calls for a ‘more incisive presence of women in the church’, is a continuing and festering sore on the Body of Christ.

The complexities of women’s lives and the realities of women’s oppression are well in evidence in the world. Perhaps because of more advanced communication media, we are more aware of women’s situations than ever before. Child marriages and forced marriages are still very much the norm in some areas of the world and women’s inability to make choices regarding their sexuality, as the essays by Rakoczy/Mapasure and Orobator demonstrate, is still all too common. Even where women have new economic opportunities, as Cruz’s essay shows, women are still vulnerable to sexual abuse.

Given these situations, a new theology of gender and sexuality is

needed. But it is not just the situation that calls for a rethinking these central categories. As D'Angelo's essay shows, and as is evident in even a cursory reading of the Hebrew scriptures, the idealized family of Christmas cards and Vatican documents is not even reflected in these sacred writings, where the messiness and sinfulness of human life is more than obvious. How are the families of the slums of Buenos Aires, of the migrant workers from the Philippines who now live separated from their children, and of African-American families still suffering the effects of systemic racism, to find models for living a fully Christian life? Changes in gender roles, as Domenico Simeone notes, affect both women and men and suggest new ways of being in relationships that can have a positive impact on families and their communities.

This brings us to a second issue that emerges from these essays, and that is also connected with gender and the issues from the Synod: the consequences of a hierarchical, patriarchal church and society for families. Many of the essays in this volume comment on the ways that ecclesial structures are ill-equipped to respond adequately to the challenges affecting contemporary families. If the family is the 'domestic church,' what models of relationship and leadership are offered to families seeking guidance in a complex world? Married women in Africa who find themselves struggling with fidelity, HIV, economic shifts – to name only a few challenges – look to the Church and see an all-male, celibate leadership that does not seem to consider the complications of their situation, especially regarding the official teaching on birth control. Interestingly, it is the very poor women in the slums of Buenos Aires, discussed in Suarez's essay, who experience a much more inclusive church through their interactions with the women religious who live among them.

Christophe Ringer, in writing about the issues affecting African-American families, points to the importance of the 'common good,' and a sense of community that is too often missing in contemporary life, especially in the global north. Such a communal sense of responsibility can, on the one hand, bring the resources of the church community to assist families in times of need and on the other, model for families, and the church, relationships of mutuality. And as Darlene Weaver observes, adoptive families offer the church a model of community that reaches beyond biological relationships.

We are very much aware of the many issues that are not covered in this issue – the situations of divorced and remarried couples wishing to

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stay in communion with the Church, the challenges that same-sex couples and their families (parents, children, relatives) face, the issue of domestic violence and its devastating impact on families. Our effort is to highlight the diversity of families, to challenge the idea that there can be just one approach to meeting the needs of families, and to plead for sensitivity on the part of all the church to support and celebrate the different families that constitute the global church.

The Theological Forum for this issue includes three essays on same-sex marriage and one essay on the complexity of gender identity in Islam. Julie Clague writes about the Irish vote in Spring 2015, which received substantial support from the overwhelmingly Catholic Irish population. Jeannine Gramick, a longtime activist in ministry to Lesbian and Gay Catholics, writes about the U.S. Supreme Court decision in June 2015 which dismantled the legal opposition to same-sex marriage. And Paulinus Odozor, a native of Nigeria who teaches at the University of Notre Dame in the U.S. comments on the significance of the movement to legalize same-sex marriage. Ludovic-Muhamaed Zahed challenges ideas about the role of same-sex relationships in Islam to argue for a much more complex history. And as noted above, Thomas Reese, who attended the 2015 Synod on the Family, shares his observations on the month-long meeting.

We are indebted to those who helped bring this issue to fruition. Special thanks are due to Joshua King, Ph.D. student; Professor Miguel Diaz, John Courtney Murray, SJ, Chair of Public Service, and Professor Edmondo Lupieri, John Cardinal Cody Chair, all of Loyola University, Chicago, for their assistance in the editorial process. We also thank Felix Wilfred, Gianluca Montaldi, and Dean Emilie Townes of Vanderbilt University, USA, for their suggestions for the issue.

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Notes

1. See Stephen Pope, ed., 'Catholic Families: Carrying Faith Forward', *C21 Resources*, Spring 2015. This issue contains a number of helpful articles about U.S. families, including Hispanic families, multigenerational families, remarriage, and same-sex marriage.