

**SHEPHERDING FAMILIES IN ASIA:
Contemporary Challenges and Responses for
Bishops, Priests and Lay Leaders
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**Salesian Retreat House in Hua Hin, Thailand
by
FABC Office of Clergy and Office of Laity and Family**

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I. SITUATION ON CURRENT CHALLENGES TO THE PASTORAL CARE OF FAMILIES IN ASIA

- *Bishop Mylo Vergara*

The Final Report of the Synod of Bishops to the Holy Father, Pope Francis, disseminated in October 2015 says, “The Church starts from the real-life situations of today's families, all in need of mercy, beginning with those who suffer most. With the Merciful Heart of Jesus, the Church must draw near and guide the weakest of her members, who are experiencing a wounded or lost love, by restoring confidence and hope, as the beacon light of a port or a torch carried in the crowd, to illuminate those who have lost their way or find themselves in the midst of a storm.”¹

And so I am privileged to begin our 4-day conference with providing you with the real-life situations of today's families. I have been tasked to share a situationer on families, specifically in Asia, and to help us understand the current challenges that these families face on marriage and family life. This is indeed a good way to begin our seminar proper that seeks to facilitate our reflection processes on how to care for the family and, as our beloved Pope has been commending to us in these past years, to devise sound plans and strategies that will aim to strengthen Christian families.

My situationer is based on a survey on the Family and on Family Ministry conducted by the Office of the Laity and Family of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference (FABC) in November 2015, of which some of you have been respondents to the survey.

The main objectives of the survey are:

1. To describe the challenges faced by families in our dioceses/countries;

¹Synod of Bishops: XIV Ordinary General Assembly, “The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World: The Final Report of the Synod of Bishops to the Holy Father, Pope Francis” (24 October 2015), #55; available from http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20151026_relazione-finale-xiv-assemblea_en.html (accessed 89 May 2016).

2. To find out what pastoral care, programs, faith formation & support is provided for families;
3. To look at the content and duration of marriage preparation programs; and
4. To understand how family ministry is understood

9 out of 19 FABC members belonging to 8 countries in Asia participated in the survey. These are: Bangladesh, India (CBCI), Malaysia (East and West), Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam. Respondents are of two types or levels. In Bangladesh, India, the Philippines, Thailand and Sri Lanka, the respondents were a group or team of resource persons from the Bishops' Conference Family Office/National Office. We therefore assume that for these countries, the responses received refer to the entire country. On the other hand, Diocesan Directors for Family Apostolate were the respondents for Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam.

In the survey, it is assumed that the respondents were referring mainly to Catholic families within their geographical area of ministry.

Given that only 9 out of 19 or 47% of FABC members participated in the survey, the results could not be used to make a thorough analysis, much more offer any conclusions on the situation of families in Asia. This presentation provides information only on the data coming from 8 countries and 9 FABC members.

The results of the survey are as follows.

ON TYPES OF FAMILIES AND THE CHALLENGES THEY FACE

There were 19 types of families identified in the survey questionnaire which include families with more than six children, childless couples, families with interreligious/inter-cultural spouses, among others. Almost all types of families listed in the survey were present in 8-9 participating FABC members (Sri Lanka sent responses from 3 different persons). Only refugee families and those affected by war were indicated by 3 respondents.

Type of family	No. of respondents
Families with more than six children	10
Childless couples	10
Families with inter-religious/inter-cultural spouses	11
Couples in the first five years of marriage with very young children	11
Families with school going children	10
Families with mentally/physically challenged children or spouses	10
Families with elderly frail members	11
Families with teens or adolescent	11
Single parent families	10
Families experiencing poverty	11
Families separated by Migration - in both sending and receiving countries	11
Families who no longer practice their faith	10
Refugee families and those affected by war	3
Families with spouses who are divorced and remarried	11
Families with members who are in prison or in exile	9
Families with spouses unemployed and in debt	10
Families who have suffered the loss of one or more of its members	9
Couples with children who have never married but live together	10
Multi-generational families living under one roof	8

Interestingly, East Malaysia and the Philippines added other types of families presenting their countries such as families whose elderly have been abandoned by their children, and street children for the Philippines, and families with widow/widower as well as whose children are converted to other faith, i.e., Islam for East Malaysia.

Philippines	East Malaysia
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Families whose elderly have been abandoned by their children ▪ Street children ▪ Families with members with same-sex attraction (SSA) ▪ Families with members who are politicians and legislators ▪ Families living with abuse (e.g., physical, psychological, sexual, incest, etc.) ▪ Families that experienced abortion ▪ Families with members working at night (e.g., call center agents) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Families with widow/widower ▪ Families whose children are converted to other faith – Islam ▪ Families with members who are alcoholics/gamblers ▪ Abandoned children

There are many challenges that families face. These may be categorized in 7 themes or issues, namely: (1) Mixed and interfaith marriages, (2) Marriage problems and conflicts, (3) Need for catechism and faith formation for parents and children, (4) Poverty, (5) Migration, (6) Lack of prayer life or practice of the faith, and (7) Deterioration of family relationships.

1. Mixed marriages/Inter-faith marriages

Mixed marriages are increasing as shared specifically by Vietnam, India, and Bangladesh. But five out of the nine members reported problems that arise due to inter-faith marriages, where some Catholic spouses eventually convert to other religions. Thailand reported that the faith of Catholic spouses in mixed marriages is not strong enough. There are cases in West Malaysia where the husband is a non-believer, and the wife often does not have the freedom to practice her faith nor raise their children in her faith.

2. Marriage problems/conflicts

Six members reported problems faced by couples in their marriage such as broken marriages and families/marital discord in the Philippines and East Malaysia, “live in” relationships, difficulties in understanding God’s plan for marriage and living it out in Singapore, increasing divorce cases, and conflicts in young couples with young children in Sri Lanka. India articulated the lack of marriage preparation for couples. To address marital conflicts, Western Malaysia’s response is to strengthen marriages through better marriage preparation courses and enrichment programs.

3. Need for catechism and faith formation for parents and children

The need for catechism and faith formation for adults, parents and entire families was reported by five members. Bangladesh and Singapore shared that help is needed by parents in the formation of their children in the light of the Catholic faith. In East Malaysia, the failure of the public education system resulted in parents opting to send their children to private schools where faith formation is not prioritized. The need to work for long hours in West Malaysia hampered faith formation. As response to these challenges, East and West Malaysia set up cafes during catechism classes to attract the parents in faith formation.

For Thailand, the respondent expressed the need for adult catechism programs at the parish level and also articulated the need to strengthen Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC) programs at the national and diocese levels. Thailand recommended that more training programs for lay leaders at the diocese level be provided to support and strengthen existing lay movements and organizations in parish communities.

4. Poverty

Poverty is a problem reported by four members. In East Malaysia, some families fall into debt because of economic hardships, aggravated by addictions and gambling. To alleviate poverty, the Philippines reported that it provides livelihood programs, skills training, and scholarships to poor families.

5. Migration

Difficulties faced by families due to migration were shared by three members. The Philippines set up chaplaincies in different countries to address this problem.

6. Lack of prayer life or practice of the faith

Malaysia (East and West) and Singapore reported on the lack of faith knowledge, prayer life and practice of the faith by individuals and families.

7. Deterioration of family relationships

The deterioration of family relationships, specifically for West Malaysia, is largely attributed to work demands, influence of social media and stress in education. To respond to this dismal situation, it organized activities for families. One respondent from Sri Lanka shared that the 30-year long conflict between their government and the LTTE cadres has taken its toll on thousands of families. More than the houses that were destroyed, the killings and disappearances of family members and loss of livelihood have affected the homes, yet little attention is given to building real “homes”.

8. Other problems

It may be worthy to note other problems expressed in the survey. East Malaysia shared the situation of single parents, who seem unable to effectively care for their children and have less time for them. Abortion is also a problem in Vietnam, as well as issues in the social, political, economic and cultural lives of the people being under Communist rule. Vices in families, such as alcoholism and gambling and addiction were reported by India and East Malaysia, respectively.

West Malaysia expressed that there seems to be a negative perception of the Church which is seen as judgmental, uncompromising and too strict on issues such as separation, divorce, same-sex attraction, cohabitation and re-marriages. The Church is described as “becoming more irrelevant to families in crisis”.

PROGRAMS OFFERED TO SUPPORT FAMILIES

To respond to the foregoing challenges, the programs offered to support families may be classified in three main stages: (1) Pre-marriage, (2) Early years of marriage, and (3) During marriage.

1. Preparations for Marriage

Marriage preparation programs are conducted in all respondent-countries. Singapore and India conduct *Catholic Engaged Encounters* (CEE)², a compulsory stay-in weekend for couples. India also sponsors retreats for couples. The preparation for the Philippines is called Pre-Cana Engaged Encounter. In East Malaysia, pre-marriage courses are done two to three times a year. They also conduct convalidation³ talks for couples twice a year. In West Malaysia, CHOICE⁴ programs are available, where young single adults are provided the opportunity to meet like-minded people and reflect on the various relationships in their lives (e.g., friends, family, Church). As for Vietnam and Thailand, books on Catholic marriage formation in the local languages are distributed to parish priests and to would-be couples to serve as guidelines. In Singapore, Natural Family Programs (NFP) are implemented. The Couples for Christ lay organization also provides support to couples.

² Catholic Engaged Encounter (CEE) – an international marriage preparation course approved by the Catholic Church worldwide (<http://www.ceespore.sg/faq.php>).

³Convalidation - The Church very much wants to assist these couples who later want to enter into valid Catholic marriage, and it offers them pastoral and spiritual support as they need it. When these couples are ready and free to do so, they celebrate what is called a *convalidation*, from the Latin word meaning “to firm up” or “to strengthen.” This is sometimes referred to as the blessing of a marriage (<http://togetherforlifeonline.com/wedding/convalidation/>).

⁴ CHOICE is a weekend experience, to give young single adults the opportunity to meet like-minded people, and be able to look at the various relationships in our lives e.g. family, friends, Church etc., in a relaxed and informal environment. (<http://www.choicekl.org/The%20weekend.htm>).

Thailand noted that there is no catechism provided to the faithful after receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation, which leads to weakened faith for Catholics preparing for inter-faith marriages.

2. Early Years of Marriage

In the early years of marriage, assistance from six FABC members comes in the form of marriage enrichment/encounter seminars. Singapore shared that it provides Couple Empowerment, Natural Family Planning and Christian life programs. As a next step to marriage encounters, it also sponsors Marriage Retorno activities. In East Malaysia and India, marriage renewal programs are provided. Post-Cana counselling sessions are conducted in Sri Lanka. In India, wedding anniversaries of couples are celebrated, parish family cells are activated and rallies participated in by couples are organized. Vietnam calls all the faithful to recite morning and evening prayers together and encourages couples to join lay family groups. Thailand also uses this strategy and encourages couples to join groups such as Focolare, Christian Family movement, Family Renewal and Couples for Christ. Bangladesh reported that it conducts regular programs to support couples in the early years of marriage.

3. During Marriage

Programs during marriage are classified further as follows: (3.1) Parenting and family life programs, (3.2) Assistance to poor and displaced families, (3.3) Programs for raising literacy/ education levels, (3.4) Programs for improving the economic situation of rural and urban families, (3.5) Family catechesis and faith formation, and (3.6) Support groups for dysfunctional family members

3.1. Parenting and Family Life Programs

All respondents reported the existence of parenting and Family Life programs in their parish communities. Vietnam, for instance, conveys its programs through homilies and sermons of priests, and the conduct of retreats during Advent and Lent. With other members, seminars on parenting and family life are conducted at the national and diocese levels. Sample courses offered are Joyful

Parenting and Scream-Free Parenting in Singapore, and Effective Parenting in the Philippines.

- Joyful Parenting (Singapore)
- Effective Parenting (Philippines)
- Scream-free Parenting (Singapore)
- Dare to Discipline with Love (Singapore)
- The Birds and the Bees (Singapore)
- Kids for Christ (Singapore)
- Christian Parenting for Kids (West Malaysia)
- Parenting Teens (West Malaysia)
- No Apologies Abstinence Program (West Malaysia)
- Made for More (Singapore)
- Building Bonds that Last (Singapore)
- Health Talks (West Malaysia)

Other courses offered include Marriage Enrichment and Renewal in the Philippines, and Natural Family Planning and Christian Family and Social Movement in Singapore.

- Marriage Enrichment (Philippines)
- Marriage Renewal (Philippines)
- Natural Family Planning (Singapore)
- Christian Family and Social Movement (Singapore)
- Senior Citizens Group (West Malaysia)
- Peninsula Family Life Movement (PFLM) programs (West Malaysia)

In East Malaysia, marriage sponsors journey together with newly married couples, through prayer and communication, until the couples adapt to married life.

3.2. Assistance to poor and displaced Families

Except for India, all countries reported providing assistance to poor and displaced families. It is usually coordinated with other church and lay agencies such as the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, and the social action offices at the national and diocese levels, particularly in Thailand.

- Society of St. Vincent de Paul (Thailand, East and West Malaysia, Singapore, Bangladesh)

- Social Action Offices at the national and diocese levels (Thailand)
- Peninsula Office for Human Development (POHD) (West Malaysia)
- Lay organizations such as Catholic Welfare Council (CWC), Montfort Care, and Family Life Society (FLS) to promote the well-being of families (Singapore)
- Caritas and other charity based organizations of the church (Bangladesh)
- Form special teams to address needs of the poor-visitation, counseling, contribute food to lighten their burden (West Malaysia)

In the Philippines, livelihood programs and skills training are provided to poor families and displaced families. To assist children, it also has a street children ministry. In Vietnam, the kind of assistance depends on the conditions in each location. Some contributions in the form of cash are given to affected families (e.g., fire victims, members needing medical treatment) during BEC visits conducted by priests in the case of East Malaysia.

3.3. Programs for Raising Literacy/Education levels

Examples of programs offered to raise literacy/education levels in communities are scholarships (Philippines, Vietnam) and alternative learning systems (Philippines). In West Malaysia, the Diocesan Office of Human Development conducts literacy programs. In East Malaysia, a parish runs a community learning center jointly with the Indonesian consulate which provides classes for primary students (also open to all migrant children). Bangladesh reported that it also conducts literacy programs.

Thailand and Singapore's literacy/education programs are provided by other institutions such as: St. Gabriel, St. Paul de Chartres, La Salle, etc. (Thailand); Morning Star, Montfort Care and Infant Jesus Children's Centres (IJCC) for children and youth (Singapore).

3.4. Programs for Improving the Economic Situation of Rural and Urban families

In improving the economic situation of rural and urban families, Vietnam and the Philippines reported receiving assistance from Caritas. In Thailand, the Confraternity for Christian Doctrine (CCD)⁵ provides classes to children studying in non-Catholic schools. Livelihood programs and skills training are provided in the Philippines. In West Malaysia, urban and rural families are assisted by the Diocesan Office of Human Development. Singapore reported that the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, CWC and Montfort Care also extend assistance to urban and rural families in their country. As for Bangladesh, credit unions and NGOs help families at the diocesan and parish levels.

3.5. Family Catechesis and Faith Formation

For faith formation, catechism classes are provided in West Malaysia for students. They also conduct Sunday school from pre-school to confirmation. The Family Project, Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)⁶ and CHOICE are some of the programs provided. In India, faith formation usually comes in the form of sessions for couples, and sermons. Bangladesh offers regular family catechesis in almost all dioceses. This is also true for Singapore which runs the “Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS)” program. As for East Malaysia, formation talks on family issues are conducted every 2-3 months. In the Philippines, there is the Family Rosary Devotion, Parish Renewal Experience (PREX) and Neo-Catechumenate. Vietnam shared that faith formation was provided through common pastoral letters.

3.6. Support groups for dysfunctional family members

Programs to support families with problematic members come in the form of: organization of grief support groups (West Malaysia); services provided by the Bereavement Family Ministry (Philippines); establishment of Parish Family cells in some dioceses (India); counselling (Singapore, East Malaysia); crisis

⁵ CCD – another name for catechism classes.

⁶ RCIA – Vatican document of 1972 which refers to the journey initiation of those who are going to be baptized.

intervention, marriage encounter, Retrouvaille⁷ (life line for marriages) Philippines; monthly marriage/family blessing for all couples together with children in the church after Eucharistic celebration (East Malaysia); and parish level Family Day in cooperation with other groups or ministry in the church focusing on family relationship (East Malaysia).

3.7. Other Services

Other services mentioned are: services from the Deaf Ministry at the diocese level (West Malaysia), Focolare Movement (West Malaysia), Pregnancy Crisis Service (Singapore), Rachel's Vineyard Healing Renewing Marriages (Singapore), assistance to families of overseas workers (Philippines), Basic Ecclesial Communities or BECs (Philippines), and Senior Citizen and Single Parent programs (East Malaysia).

ON MARRIAGE PREPARATION

1. Remote marriage preparation

Remote marriage preparation begins in early childhood and includes all family and environmental factors that influence and prepare the person in positive and negative ways for marriage. The respondents shared the following components of remote marriage preparation in their countries. Vietnam and Singapore described remote preparation of marriage as the early preparation of individuals for marriage as they live with their families – how they are taught about marriage, family life and human love as a sharing and sign of Christ's love for His church. In Thailand and the Philippines, parish level programs covering Catholic teachings are implemented. In the Philippines, for instance, the Family Life and Youth Ministries help in the remote preparation of marriage. Other countries such as Malaysia (East and West), India and Bangladesh conduct talks on marriage and the family to help in the early preparation for marriage. East Malaysia, for instance, initiates talks on healthy relationships

⁷Retrouvaille - A live-in weekend and post weekend program for married couples (<http://www.retrouvaille.org/>) – especially those facing difficulties in their marriage and who are contemplating separation or divorce. There is much individual and couple therapy and formation sessions.

between boys and girls, special talk for engaged couples and sacredness of marriage and the importance of chastity.

- Healthy relationship between boys and girls (East Malaysia)
- Special Talk for engaged couples (East Malaysia)
- Sacredness of marriage and the importance of chastity (East Malaysia)
- Catechesis on marriage and the family (West Malaysia, Bangladesh)
- Compulsory MPC twice a year
- Belonging to a family (India)
- Understanding my Body, sexuality, sensuality (India)
- Getting married (India)
- Marriage in God's Plan (India)
- You and Media (India)
- Exemplary family life and sharing in the families (Bangladesh)
- Strong family bonds (Bangladesh)
- Ideal Parenting (Bangladesh)

The FABC survey also asked members to describe the process of preparing couples who want to get married in the Church. The general flow described by the respondents are as follows: 1) The couple goes to the parish office, fills out a pre-nuptial inquiry form, submits the requirements for marriage, and schedules the wedding date; 2) The couple meets with the parish priest who conducts the canonical interview or provides counseling if needed; 3) Marriage banns are then displayed in the church for three months; 4) Couples undergo a pre-marriage seminar/ pre-Cana course; and finally 5) the actual marriage ceremony is conducted.

2. Immediate preparation for marriage

With regard to the curriculum provided to couples during the **immediate preparation for marriage**, the meaning and vocation of marriage and family is usually expounded. Among the topics discussed are love as a decision, "we are sharer's of God's love", and affection and intimacy in marriage

- Love as a decision (Singapore)
- We are sharer's of God's love (Philippines)

- Affection and intimacy in marriage (East Malaysia)
- Building bonds and discovering needs (India)
- Called to oneness through sexuality/intimacy (India)
- Mutual consent in marriage (Bangladesh)
- Importance of courting (Bangladesh)
- Differences between man and a woman (Philippines)
- Basic qualities of couples as husbands and wife (Bangladesh)
- Responsible parenthood/raising children (Thailand, Bangladesh)
- Natural Family Planning (Bangladesh)
- Communication in Marriage (Singapore, Philippines, East Malaysia)
- Forgiveness (Singapore)
- Sharing of experiences of couples (Bangladesh)
- Requirements for Catholic Marriage (Vietnam)

The number of hours to complete the marriage preparation course varies for every FABC member. The shortest is 12 hours (East Malaysia) and the longest can extend to 15 days (India).

- 30-50 hours in 3 to 4 months (Vietnam)
- 16 hours for Pre-Marriage Seminar (Thailand)
- 30-32 hours for MPC excluding interviews counseling and investigation (depending on parish priest) (Thailand)
- 30 hours (Singapore)
- 3 days and 2 hours (Philippines)
- 3 hours for NFP plus 9 hours for other topics (East Malaysia)
- 24 hours (West Malaysia)
- Suggested 14 hours; 2-3 days parish level while others 1 week to 15 days (India)
- 1 week course; in some places more than a week and minimum of 10 hours (Bangladesh)

Couples are also given counselling (Singapore, East Malaysia, India and Bangladesh), mentoring (Singapore and West Malaysia), discernment and reflection sessions before marriage (Philippines) and crisis intervention sessions (Philippines). In

West Malaysia, couples are paired with another couple and they pray together.

3. Strengthening family ties

To strengthen family ties, the following were shared by respondents: family visits, Family Rosary Ministry, mother's/father's day, and Couples Shango (clubs) in different parishes for Bangladesh; celebration of wedding anniversaries, gathering on the Feast of the Holy Family and formation of Fathers'/Mothers' Associations for Vietnam.

When asked how Small Christian Communities (SCCs) or BECs support newly married couples and young families, the BECs in the Philippines and Thailand⁸ provide the venue for sharing, prayer, support and inspiration to families. In Bangladesh, some SCCs/BECs are present, but are not very active. The BECs in West Malaysia are not functional. No BECs/SCCs are present at all in Vietnam and Singapore.

Follow up programs for couples who are newly married are similar to the support programs mentioned above. In addition, membership in family and life organizations is encouraged, while parenting programs and marriage enrichment programs are provided. In East Malaysia, members of the family and life ministry observe couples/families to identify those who are in crisis and who need assistance.

FINALLY, ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE SYNODS ON THE FAMILY

The FABC Survey inquired about the experiences and learning from the Synod questionnaires and processes. Most of the respondents said that the Synods provided them with a better understanding of the situation of families and the need to respond to the challenges that families face. The Synods also gave a deeper awareness of the Church's teachings on marriage and family life and the need to prioritize the family ministry.

⁸Thailand's answer on the BECs can be seen in the Synod portion of the survey.

As to the understanding of “pastoral care of the family”, the respondents understood it as: an indispensable part of the Church’s work; a mission of giving care, guiding, shepherding and accompanying families for the sanctification of life which includes discernment and integration.

Survey respondents offered suggestions to enhance the pastoral care of families in their communities. Many articulated the need to strengthen formation and capacity building programs for couples and families. For instance, these include values and moral formation, and education of young people to learn the proper use of modern technologies and media for Bangladesh, catechesis education for Singapore, strengthening marriage preparations in its remote, proximate and post-marriage stages for Singapore and Bangladesh, and healing seminars for Thailand. The formation of ministers to assist families in parishes, including the development of counsellors to aid families in crisis in the case of Vietnam and Thailand needs to be prioritized. Respondents also felt the need to reach out to more families in difficult situations/problematic families, even to those who are “unchurched”.

Several FABC members also expressed plans to revive the Charismatic movement, establish parish family cells, and increase the number of priests, religious and lay apostles who can aid in pastoral ministry. Other possible programs include: conduct of regular family visits, meet families after the mass, family prayer meeting/gathering/reunions and bible sharing, and encourage couples to “take” more children.

When asked what more can be done to make families effective and co-responsible in the evangelizing mission of the Church, the respondents expressed the importance of the following: capacity building and formation of priests in the pastoral care of the family (Vietnam), establishment of a family institute to provide training for lay leaders (Thailand), catechism for adults (Thailand), promotion of parish-based family programs and services to encourage participation of families in church activities (Singapore), more families and couples to assist in pastoral accompaniment (Philippines), visitation of families and providing them with news from the Church (West Malaysia),

more interactions with people from other faiths/sharing of faith (Bangladesh), support of parish family cells (India), setting up of guilds and formation of interest based groups instead of BECs (West Malaysia), and provision of financial support to missionaries where possible (Bangladesh). Respondents from East and West Malaysia said that there must be “Conversion of the Heart”.

Let me end with some words from Pope Francis: “Faithful to Christ’s teaching we look to the reality of family today in all its complexity, with both its lights and shadows... Anthropological and cultural changes in our times influence all aspects of life and call for an analytic and diversified approach.” (*Amoris Laetitia* no. 32)

II. PASTORAL PERSPECTIVES FOR FAMILIES IN ASIA, IN THE LIGHT OF THE RECENT GENERAL AND EXTRAORDINARY SYNODS

- Fr. Francis Gustilo, SDB and Mr. Frank Padilla

PREMISES

The task given me by the Organizing Committee of the FABC Office of the Clergy and the FABC Office of the Laity and the Family consists in reporting the theological underpinnings stated by the *Relatio Finalis Synodi* of both the General and Extraordinary Synods of Bishops on the Family held in Rome in October 2015 and 2014 respectively. However, last 8th of April 2016, the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis on Love in the Family, *Amoris Laetitia*, has been published by the Vatican. A Philippine edition made by the Daughters of St Paul has come off the press on the 29th of April. Similarly a Study-Edition has been produced by Word and Life Publications under the tutelage of Fr Salvatore Putzu SDB last 3rd of May. With these primary sources made available, my task became more ample, and given a short time-frame, this paper allows me to give merely a first reflection of what I imagine will be a series of seminars and symposia treating the given subject matter more thoroughly.

I see my task as just one part (2) of a trilogy: (1) His Excellency Bishop Mylo Hubert Vergara D.D. gave yesterday a situationer

on Families in Asia today and (3) Brother Frank A. Padilla, Founder of Couples for Christ, Foundation for Family and Life, tomorrow will report on his thirty-five year experience of pastoral accompaniment of married couples. Thus, we may notice a see-judge-act trilogy, Bishop Mylo's being the see-moment, mine the judge-moment and Brother Frank's the act-moment.

THEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Anthropology

Understandably the theological hinge of the Church's reflection on Marriage and the Family takes on the biblical image of its origins found in the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis. However, Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation does not stop here but remarkably connects this image to the ultimate human condition in the Book of Revelation when Jesus Christ the Lamb of God and His Bride the Church celebrate their wedding par excellence.

In some way, both Synods and the *Amoris Laetitia* of Pope Francis takes on St John Paul II's commentary of the Book of Genesis in his famous five-year catechesis on Marriage and the Family and now named as the Theology of the Body. This theology has three important assertions.

Firstly, the human person finds his distinguishing creaturehood from the rest of God's creation in his Original Solitude. He names all the animals and finds no fitting companion from among them. In his condition the human person finds himself all alone, the only one, no one like him. In this solitude humanity recognizes his true dignity, his distinction as the only image and likeness of God, that is, about his dominion over the animals in the land, the birds in the air and the fishes in the sea. He finds his remarkable distinction from the rest of creation in his capacity to collaborate and cooperate with God's own handiwork. Psalm 8, verses 6 to 9, put this very well:

6 Yet you have made them little less than a god, crowned them with glory and honor. 7 You have given them rule over the works of your hands, put all things at their feet: 8 All sheep and oxen, even the beasts of the field, 9 The birds of

the air, the fish of the sea, and whatever swims the paths of the seas.

Secondly, from this distinguishing experience of being alone, the human person passes to the realization of his Original Unity when God put him to sleep and from his side - and not from soil - God shapes his fitting companion. The moment he opens his eyes from that deep slumber, the man remarks with great wonder - as found in Genesis chapter 2, verse 23:

23 ... "This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; This one shall be called 'woman,' for out of 'her man' this one has been taken."

Then the biblical author makes this concluding statement in the next verse:

24 That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body.

Humanity is made up of male and female; they are two distinct genders and yet they form a unity of persons. The female is no less than the male, nor the man greater than the woman because already before this gender-separation, they were in one flesh, of one bone. There is not only unity between them but also common equality and shared dignity.

Thirdly, both man and woman found themselves in their Original Nakedness as shown in Genesis 2:25:

25 The man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame.

Humanity discovers yet another essential quality of theirs; they are not their clothes, neither their implements nor their possessions. Their nakedness-without-shame shows that their self-worth consists in who they are and not in what they have.

Thus, original Solitude, original Unity and original Nakedness comprise God's Original Plan for humanity according to St John Paul II. All three qualities begin the history of humanity and remains essentially true to this very day.

With the seduction of the Evil One in chapter three of Genesis enters the insidious deception of humanity in reference to these origins and his relationship with his Creator. God is presented by the serpent as man-woman's rival, as One who usurps "the fullest freedom" of man and submits him like a slave of his created world. He cannot even touch the fruit that is so desirable in taste and so delightful for the eyes. The taking-of-the-fruit in the middle of the garden is the ultimate statement of humanity not to be under the imposition of his Creator but to be a god himself - though not definitely in His image and likeness anymore.

The true God is a friend who visits man and woman in their blissful garden; now they both fear the presence of this God. The true God offers them a share in a life of giving - life-giving and self-giving; now the man blames his wife-companion for their present shameful condition.

It is to this broken human condition that God's love is revealed all the more when He sent to the world His only Son who became man, shared the condition of human poverty, and even took the burden of humanity's sinfulness upon Himself. It is to Jesus the Christ and the Son of God that all humanity is to be converted in order to be renewed so as to respond once again to the Original Plan - the Plan that intends man-and-woman to be one, and which path leads them both to be one with God.

Trinity

Man and woman are originally called to be one with God, not just to share their earthly life together but to share the divine life of their Origins. Jesus Christ in sharing our humanity offers us again to share in His divinity. The divine love is characteristic only of God, the three persons in one God. This divine love is a communion of persons consisting of their diverse and personal ways of self-giving love. The Father empties Himself completely to His only Son. He does not keep anything for Himself as much as He empties everything that He is for His own Beloved Son. That is why he is Father and has no other proper name. His uniqueness consists in His distinguishing relationship with His

truest image, His Son from all eternity. His love is distinctly called paternal.

The only Son loves His Father in return; not that He returns everything the Father gives Him but that He too empties himself in order to receive completely and wholly everything the Father offers - all that the Father wills and plans to do the Son accepts. He empties himself of anything that would hinder or lessen the complete acceptance of the Father's desires, including His will to die to all broken humanity! This love is called distinctly filial.

Thus, it is this self-emptying love between the Father and the Son, this utmost giving of self between the Father and the Son that is kindred to both and so is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit who comes from both the Father and the Son is exactly this distinct and unique type of loving - self-emptying, and therefore, life-giving. *For greater love than this no man has, that a man gives his life for his friend!* (John 15:13). It is this self-emptying love between the three divine persons that husband and wife are called to be image and likeness. Similarly, the indissoluble union between husband and wife should mirror this indissoluble union of the Blessed Trinity as well as God's indissoluble love for humanity in the incarnation of His Son.

Ecclesiology

This trinitarian union is the origin and exemplar of the human union in marriage. In the Last Supper Christ's love-to-the-utmost for his disciples (cfr John 13:2a) begins the full revelation of this self-emptying love He has for his bride the Church. The fourth evangelist, the disciple Jesus loved, attests in that unforgettable Calvary scene (John 19:31-34):

31 Now since it was preparation day, in order that the bodies might not remain on the cross on the sabbath, for the sabbath day of that week was a solemn one, the Jews asked Pilate that their legs be broken and they be taken down.

32 So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and then of the other one who was crucified with Jesus.

33 But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs, 34 but one soldier thrust his lance into his side, and immediately blood and water flowed out. 35 An eyewitness has testified, and his testimony is true; he knows that he is speaking the truth, so that you also may (come to) believe.

The bride, the Church, like woman in the original plan of God, comes from the pierced side of the Bridegroom, the Lamb. From within the divine-human nature of the Saving Lord comes both the divine-human reality that is the Church: Body of Christ, new People of God. This divine-human incarnate union that is Jesus the Christ is now a saving reality in the incarnational existence of the Church through her Sacraments. In a particular way it is meant for the increase of humanity as well as for the Church through her great Sacrament of Marriage. From the baptismal womb of the Church comes new children of God and society. But these children come from Christian fathers and mothers who recognize the gift of life from God as well as its sacredness, dignity and self-worth. Only by the testimony of Christian married couples does the original plan of God is brought about in human history today. They bear in their marital union and in its fruitfulness of life God's desire for the eternal union with all of mankind.

God desires the life of men not their extinction. It is a desire that has no end but this can only come about when humanity is fully united with His Son. For this reason, His Son sends forth his disciples to proclaim this good news of His Father's love to all nations. His disciples are those who believe in His word which Word is His new commandment of love.

Jesus reiterates this kind of love in his Last Supper discourse, a dying man's farewell to his intimate friends. Jesus states in three consecutive chapters, John 13-14-15 and I quote below respectively:

34 I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. 35 This

is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

23 ... "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him.

9 As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. 11 "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. 12 This is my commandment: love one another as I love you.

Where, if not in Holy Matrimony and in family life, is this self-giving and self-sacrificing love found! Pope Francis in fact dedicates a whole chapter in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, making a lengthy commentary on the great Pauline hymn of love (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). He exhorts married couples to live daily the different qualities of this love: patient, at the service of others, not jealous, not boastful, not rude, not irritable or resentful but a love that forgives, rejoices with others, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things.

CONCLUSION

There is no better fitting conclusion to this discussion of the theological underpinnings of Marriage, Family and Life found in the two *Relatio finalis* of the Synods of 2014 and 2015 than to quote two paragraphs (121-122) of the Holy Father's exhortation on Love in the Family:

121. Marriage is a precious sign, for "when a man and a woman celebrate the sacrament of marriage, God is, as it were, 'mirrored' in them; he impresses in them his own features and the indelible character of his love. Marriage is the icon of God's love for us. Indeed, God is also communion: the three Persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit live eternally in perfect unity. And this is precisely the mystery of marriage: God makes of the two spouses one single existence" (Francis I, Catechesis 2 April

2014). *This has concrete daily consequences, because the spouses, "in virtue of the sacrament, are invested with a true and proper mission, so that, starting with the simple ordinary things of life they can make visible the love with which Christ loves his Church and continues to give his life for her"* (Francis I, *Catechesis* 2 April 2014).

122. *We should not however confuse different levels: there is no need to lay upon two limited persons the tremendous burden of having to reproduce perfectly the union existing between Christ and his Church, for marriage as a sign entails "a dynamic process..., one which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God"* (John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, n.9).

LEGEND FOR THE SIDE REFERENCES

RF14 *Relatio finalis synodi 2014*

RF15 *Relatio finalis synodi 2015*

AL *Amoris Laetitia*

III. THE FAMILY AND EVANGELIZATION

- Mr. Frank Padilla

I come from a family of 10 siblings, and my wife from a family of 14. We could have had two-dozen children, but unfortunately, from the first and subsequently, my wife delivered by caesarian section. So we only have 5. And we are grandparents of 11. We are most blessed. The scriptural prescription for family blessing is 3 generations—yourself, your children, and your children’s children— actually resonates in Asia, where many families, especially in the rural areas may have grandparents and grandchildren remaining together in a family setting.

Three generations is also an important key in helping ensure the passing on of the faith from generation to generation. It would not only be parents who pass on the faith to their children, but grandparents can be a great help as well. Their pastoral wisdom born of years of experience would be invaluable. Further, the more benevolent grandparents, versus the more disciplinary parents, help ensure acceptance by children.

Dark winds coming

The III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops that transpired in October 2014 was called by Pope Francis to discuss “The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization.” The Ordinary Assembly of the Synod followed the next year in October 2015. Now Pope Francis has already issued his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. Curiously, much has been said about the family but not much about evangelization. But the two are critically connected, and indeed, the pastoral challenges to the family ought to be considered in the context of evangelization.

Much has been said and taught, is being said and taught, and will be said and taught about the family. And rightly so, because the well-being of the family, the basic unit of society, is most crucial. The teachings of our Church on the family are formidable. Through the years they have provided the pathway to protecting and strengthening families, to guiding parents in the care of their children, to building homes that are true environments for meaningful interaction.

But today, the family is under intense assault. Today the family is being assaulted as never before. Today, especially in the West, we see the disintegration of family life. And with a globalized and digitally interconnected world, the dark winds in the West have been blowing over to Asia.

Threats to and assaults on the family

While many threats to the family were discussed in the two assemblies of the Synod of Bishops, the contentious issues had to do with the area of sexuality. These issues were about couples living in without benefit of marriage, about divorce and remarriage, and about same-sex unions. Many couples today just live together rather than get married. Many couples divorce rather than live out their life-long commitment. And today many couples are of the same sex! These are fueled by the rapid advances in sexual liberation, radical feminism and gender ideology.

What weakens and even threatens the very existence of the family? There are many serious issues, such as war, poverty, migration, consumerism, overseas employment, and so on. These threaten the family from without. But the real threat is from

within. It is the assault on the very meaning of family. It is moving to a situation where the traditional family is no longer indispensable. It is a situation where the very definition of the family has been changed. No longer is the family a father and a mother and their children. Now many fathers are missing, children live with stepparents after parental divorce and remarriage, and parents are of the same sex.

The threats against marriage and the family are about personal morality, about assaults on God's design for the family, about no longer living out the very faith we profess!

The assault on the family is not just a sociological development in the naturally changing environment of the times. It actually is a deliberate and diabolical attack by the forces of darkness against the plan and design of God. Where God designed marriage to be between a man and a woman, now it can be between two men or two women. Where God designed man and wife to be one, now divorce has split that unity. Where God designed married couples to be fertile and to multiply, now many couples do not want children, preferring cats or dogs as pets. Where God intended the marriage to produce new life, that life is being aborted.

Reconsidering our focus

And so even more fundamental to pastoral care for the family is the preservation of the family! If families disintegrate, there will be nothing to pastorally care for!

Here is the reality we face: today's liberal, progressive, modernist society has no more use for the family. Though many families in Asia are still traditional, this is being rapidly eroded. The errors of the West are being exported to Asia. With Western entertainment promoting decadent values, with the pervasive influence of the Internet and social media, with our young people eagerly embracing Western culture, with liberal Western governments forcing diversity and LGBT ideology on us, the Asian family is under grave threat.

And we are ill-equipped to face and counter the threat.

We need a radical paradigm shift. We need to reconsider our focus. While teachings and formation programs on the family will and must continue, we must not neglect, as we might be neglecting, what is more fundamental. What is the best way to

shepherd families? It is for the family to know the Chief Shepherd.

Christ the Chief Shepherd

The problem with Catholics today is that the Chief Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ, is not truly known by many if not most Catholics. They know *about* him, but they do not know him. Thus they act like sheep without a shepherd. No wonder that the lost sheep are the 99 and not the 1.

At the root of the problem is the lack of vibrant faith in Jesus. We can talk or try to teach families about the ideal family life, about husband-wife relationships, about parenting, about the proper home environment, but if the right foundation is not there, it is all for naught. There is only one foundation, and that is Christ. What is needed is personal conversion, a transformation of hearts, a *metanoia*. People need to meet and know Christ.

Who is this Christ? It is Jesus who is the Messiah. It is he who went to the cross to suffer and die for us, in order to win for us our salvation. It is he who is a friend, who continues, through his Holy Spirit, to walk with us, and guide us, and strengthen us. It is he who is our hope, the one we can truly trust in.

How do people meet Christ? This happens through the work of evangelization. This is the proclamation of the good news of salvation in Jesus. It is intended to bring people to know the living Jesus. From there it becomes a matter of living the new life that Jesus brings. It is to live Christ.

Salvation is all about fullness in Christ. We experience salvation in the here and now, even as we look to making it to eternal life in heaven. As such, salvation affects all areas of life, including family life. Vibrant Christian family life cannot happen apart from the salvation and liberation that Jesus brings.

Here is the reality: all, and I stress *all*, the problems in world (war, poverty, social injustice, environmental degradation, political corruption, etc) cannot be resolved without personal conversion. All the good that needs to happen in families cannot happen without personal conversion. All husband-wife relationship techniques, couple or family retreats, 7 or 10 steps to a happier marriage, and so on, will do some initial good, but without Christ firmly in the center, will ultimately not be able to withstand assault.

Let us face it: Christ is simply not in the center of the family lives of many Catholics today.

The way of shepherding families according to the word of God

Let us consider then how to shepherd families. Let us look to God's instruction book, the Bible. Here we see that given the voluminous content of the Bible, there is relatively not that much that pertains directly to marriage, family life or raising children. What the Bible has tons of instruction on is about personal spirituality. This after all is at the core of what it means to be a Christian. If one is a good Christian, one who lives the way of Christ, then he/she will well be on the way to having a good marriage and family life. The specific teachings then become just supplements to the basic foundation.

But let us see specific instructions that relate to marriage and family, but rely on the foundation of spirituality and faith.

Looking at Paul's letter to the Ephesians, this is what we read: "Children, obey your parents," but Paul follows that up with "in the Lord, for this is right." (v.6:1). Obedience to parents is within the context of God's design for the family, with parents entrusted by Him for the care of *His* children. Parents are stewards of God's care. Now parents need to know that as well. They instruct, raise and discipline their children not according to the world's wisdom but according to God's. And so Paul tells fathers (and mothers) to "bring them up with the training and instruction of the Lord." (v.6:4b).

Paul says the same things to the Colossians as he gives instructions on the Christian family. "Wives, be subordinate to your husbands, *as is proper in the Lord.*" (v.3:18). According to God's design, the husband is the head of the family, with the wife as his helpmate. It does not mean the husband is more intelligent, or wiser, or earns more money. It is just God's design for unity in the family. When radical feminists reject this divine wisdom, then the stage is set for a struggle for power and influence and headship, ultimately leading to strife and division, and to the breakdown of the marriage. Husbands, of course, are in turn to love their wives (v.3:19). If they understand the true meaning of Christian love, which is unconditional and self-sacrificial, then there will be no room for tyranny or abuse of their headship.

Look at what Paul says about children in relation to parents. "Children, obey your parents in everything, *for this is pleasing to the Lord.*" (v.3:20). Obeying parents is obeying God who puts parents in charge of His children. Parents who live Christ are able to raise their children according to God's ways.

Look at that great teaching of Paul to the Ephesians on husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:21-33. Everything he says is founded on divine wisdom, on God's ways and design, on living Christ. Mutual subordination is "out of reverence for Christ." Subordination of the wife to the husband is subordination "as to the Lord." The headship of the husband is "just as Christ is head of the church." The love of husbands for their wives is just "as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her." It is self-sacrificial. Paul sums up marriage this way: "This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church."

To understand and live out the right relationship between husband and wife is to understand and live out our proper relationship with God. To work at and to shepherd the family is to look to the flock of God, which is the Church, and to learn how she relates to the Chief Shepherd.

Challenges to the family and evangelization

So how do we shepherd families in Asia? We get Catholics to **meet Christ** and to **live Christ**. For that to happen, we have to **share Christ**. This is the work of evangelization. In the work of our Church that is a missionary Church, in the path to Christ and to heaven that is for all peoples, the missing first step is the proclamation of the gospel. If the very first step is missing, then how can we expect much else to happen, including the strength and vibrancy of our families?

We have many different cultures in Asia. We have different expressions of family life. But there is only one Christ and only one Christianity. There is only one Savior, who won salvation for all.

The pastoral challenges to the family are indeed to be considered in the context of evangelization. In today's world, and this will happen more and more in Asia, we face a new paganism. Today there would be very many Catholics who are now baptized pagans. How can they ever live out God's lofty design for Christian marriage and family unless they are re-converted,

and they experience transformation in Christ? How can marriage survive, and thrive, without Christ in the center? How can parents instruct their children apart from faith in Jesus? How can children avoid the negative influences of their peers, of the liberal school environment, of the pervasive influence of the Internet, of the dominant secularist culture that is all around them? How can families resist the culture of death without living out the culture of life centered on the One who is the way, the truth and the life?

Meet, live and share Christ

Our Catholics, including parents and children, need to *meet Christ*, the Chief Shepherd, and have a deep intimate personal relationship with Jesus as friend and as teacher. Our Catholics need to *live Christ*, to becoming not just good people, but true disciples who are striving for holiness and discipleship, who are willing to deny self, embrace the cross, and follow Jesus wholeheartedly. We as Church then need to *share Christ*, so that our Catholics can meet Christ and live Christ.

Otherwise we cannot overcome the challenges in marriage and family life.

Our call is to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth. This is a call to do the work of massive evangelization. This is so that renewal will not just be in our nuclear families, but in the whole world. Then bad people can change for the better, and we will all live in a safer and more peaceful society.

Given the tsunami of evil that is overwhelming the whole world, I do fear for the future of my grandchildren. We as Church must act now.

IV. THE EXPECTATIONS OF THE FAMILY FROM THEIR BISHOPS, PRIESTS AND FAMILY APOSTOLATE LEADERS IN THE PARISH COMMUNITY

Mr. and Mrs. Chan Chee Seung

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, Your Excellencies, Dear Bishops, Rev Fathers and guests, greetings from myself, Chee Seung Chan and my wife, Francisca, coming from Hong Kong. We are most honored to present the following contents with the topic "*Expectations of the family from their Bishops, Priests and Family Apostolate Leaders in the parish community*"

Within our layman organization “Couple Co-creation Society, Hong Kong” we formed a special group and discussed on the theme launched by the Holy Father, Pope Francis, “Pastoral Challenges to The Family in The Context Of Evangelization”. We try to consolidate some related points here for your references, and then we will present a few cases of our Hong Kong couples and with their real stories and how they tackled the issues they came across.

Our discussion, came up with some findings pertaining to critical situations in the family today which may obstruct a person’s encounter with Christ:

- Family is not opened to God and to let God be with them in their daily life.
- Family that is not filled with love and support would hinder members encounter with Christ as we believe that where there is love, there is God.
- Education and coaching of family members on the teaching of Christ is insufficient.
- Education of couples on the meaning of marriage and its relationship with God is insufficient.
- Support of the family as a small Church is not enough.

To a certain extent the crises of faith which people experience and may affect family life are:

- Support of the family from Diocese is not enough. When people face difficulties in family life, they are not able to get help from the Church.
- Training of pastoral people for supporting people on ground level may not be enough. It is quite common that pastoral people are seldom in contact with those who do not actively participate in Church activities.
- If people are in crises of faith, they may feel abandoned and empty, and they may lose power of love, and this would have adverse effect on getting along with people when the first conflict may happen in their family.

- Teaching and training for spiritual life is not emphasized and the relationship with God is not deep and personalized, therefore people may not experience personal growth in the family.
- Couples who do not live the teachings and values of Christ, may have more difficulties in family life.

The following real cases were written by the lay couples themselves telling their own stories and more or less reflected some of the above findings:

Case 1. Autism Parenting

The wife: I do not have much knowledge about marriage and how a family should grow before I stepped into a marriage life. Though I am baptized already, my spiritual life is very weak. I do not turn to God for guidance and help. The marital relationship is poor and my family is in lack of love and peace. The two children are the victims of my marriage.

I can describe that my marital condition is always in a 'cold war'. We could be silent to each other for weeks. We do not even talk about the kids. We do not discuss the way to bring up our children and how to get consensus in the different ways of teaching. Under such a family environment, my two boys have difficulty in studying and knowing the direction for their life. Even though we may go out for dinner, the atmosphere is not peaceful. My elder son even finds it difficult to face society and withdraws into his world of computer games. They cannot learn from positive ways through their parents and we cannot be their model as how to live a Catholic life according to the teaching of Jesus Christ.

Yet God's love never leaves me alone and it is waiting for my return. With God's almighty and great love, He brought us to some groups so that we may learn how to communicate as a couple. We learn to listen and to share. With the incidents that happened to my son, I learned to pray to God and surrender to God. We also joined some religious retreats that taught us to invite God to be the head of our family and always pray to the Holy Spirit for His guidance and help. With the help from Holy Spirit, I am able and willing to be open to change myself and not asking others to change. This is how my marriage and family life was refreshed. Now we are practicing how to be God's children and follow God's word from the Bible and how to hear from God. All the workshops were referred to us from my friends. I did not get any help from the church and it is my own fault because I did not join any

groups of the church. And also I did not notice any posters in my church showing any activities for couples.

Thus I would suggest the Dioceses should support the local churches as follows:

- *To have workshops to encourage church members to strengthen their spiritual life so as to be more familiar with God and close to God. To strengthen the couples to invite God to be the head of their family and practice family prayer.*
- *To organize more talks about marriage, such as the difference of man and woman in characteristics, ways of response and expression, the influence of one's original family, upbringing of children for the young adults so as to prepare them before they would consider getting married. Though it is mandatory for couples to have pre-marriage counseling if they want to get married in the Church, it would be a bit late as by then everything is already fixed.*

Due to the limited resources of manpower and others, it may be difficult for the Church to organize many activities. There are different groups operating different workshops for married couples, engaged couples, and young adults. After understanding their missions, the church could facilitate the dissemination of information and encourage church members to join them so that more people could benefit from the cultivation and support the couples group in the church.

I have been the Chairperson of the Diocese Commission for the Marriage and Families for 4 years, and understand that it is not easy to have all the educational activities, like workshops, talks or organized supporting groups to reach out to lay persons. The wife "did not get any help from the church" and even said that "did not turn to God for guidance and help", I ask myself, how can the diocese pastoral work reach out to people who need help? Of course, we know that God would not give up on any of us, not on her and her family. Should we only pray to the Holy Spirit? Or, if the pastoral work of daily religious life could actually involve all lay persons as they are part of the family, so they can be aware of what is happening in the family and they will be listened to and have mutual assistance while they are in need.

My understanding on this case is that poor communication between the couple affects the development of children, and is

mainly due to insufficient training on personal growth and pre-marriage education. Mainly due to their faith and prayers, this couple was re-born in their marriage. God sent them their friends as their angels guiding their marriage path, as they were not familiar with the pastoral resources when they needed assistance on their family and marriage. It would be much better if the pastors in the church could build up a closer and better relationship with couples. Then, when there is a need for help in the marriage, they would ask for advice and support from their pastors.

Case 2 Divorce

The wife: We were married in 1986, and commenced our married life happily and our son was born 2 years later, then, our daughter born in 1990. The four years between 1990 and 1994 were the blossom years for my husband in his career, along with a lot of business activities outside of office hours. Gradually, home was only a place for rest. I felt quite lonely and sad about the situation and appealed for help from priests in the church. It was a pity that things went from bad to worse as outside attractions increased. My husband would not listen any more to religious advice. I started complaining to God in my daily prayers, asking why the Lord gave me such difficulties in my married life!

Then, my husband faced the failure of his business in the next six years, and it was a complete disaster. His business closed up, friends left, and he stayed alone at home all day unhappily. On the other hand, my career was on a rising trend making a lot of money and I became the main financial support of the family. That made my husband feel inferior with discontent. I tried very hard to seek help from counselors, priests, to improve our marriage relationship, even attended a one-year couples training course. However, all efforts did not bring any achievement.

After more than ten years struggling in such a difficult marriage relationship, I decided to drop out of this marriage and proposed divorce in 2003. I thought that I would be free after running away from this troublesome marriage. I prayed to God for the rebirth of my life in this atmosphere of freedom!

Starting from 2004 I was quite happy after dropping off the burden of my marriage!

As time went by, I found that I was still deeply in love with my ex-husband. The divorce in the civil government only ended the marriage

in law, but not the original love! Since my husband had a new girl friend, obviously we would not have a chance to be reunited. I lived in a situation of helplessness, confusion, and was depressed. I accused God of torturing me with such a feeling that I cannot give up the past marriage!

During these days, friends in Couple Co-creation Society gave me a lot of support by listening to me and accompanying me whenever I was in need.

A Miracle and blessings happened while I joined a pilgrimage trip to Medjugorje in 2010. I said the rosary to the Holy Mother, crying and crying, the tears opened the locks in my heart, and released the anger down deep there, to forgive my husband completely. The resentment in my heart for twenty years was released, and I regained the energy of love. I started trying to reconnect with my husband by mailing him Rosary beads and information leaflets. My prayers were with patience, love and no complaints.

At the same time, he parted from his girlfriend. He also said the Rosary and prayed to the Holy mother for the reunification of our marriage and family.

I looked for guidance from a priest, about my situation at such a stage. He said: "Re-marrying after a civil divorce is a sin of adultery, not acceptable". I did not have any pastoral support but I was only told that it was a sin! I was neglected! I did not ask the church for help any more!

Fortunately, on another occasion, I talked to another priest who told me that God is Love, and understands the painful feelings in hearts, and is full of forgiveness for our sins.

In 2013, my husband and I reunited and rebuilt our family together with our kids. We say the Rosary and pray together every evening. We re-attend the Couple Training course! We started our marriage once again under the blessings of God !

In 2015, we did all the necessary procedures with the civil government for a legal marriage once again. Then, we made our marriage vows once again after twenty-nine years.

We thank God for all these blessings!

My reflection on this case is that we need to build up our strong faith in God. We should trust that He will not give up on any of us. He sent the priest to her to show His love to a "sinful" woman

who executed a civil divorce and tried to get married again. Now, every time when I hear that the couple is going to give testimonial sharing on their sacramental marriage, I do show respect for this “sinful” woman, and of course I praise God for His great love to all of us.

Their marriage was falling apart before the intervention of the “secular” attractions, and could be reborn only due to the loyalty of the voice of love deep down in her heart. God is not giving up another “sinful” woman who divorced. The teaching of the church’s law made her more disappointed, as the mutual support group (Couple Co-creation Society, training workshops) didn’t help too much. Only the maintenance of the relationship with God could lead to the miracle that happened.

Case No. 3 Nullified marriage

The wife says: “I pray that God may grant me the grace to give this story of my own. It is never easy to look into all the mistakes I have made, out of ignorance and foolishness. But I believe where there is weakness there is strength from God, who transforms all misfortunes into blessings.

Baptized at the age of sixteen, I was richly nourished with the spiritual writings of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. Religious life was attractive to me. Before the age of 20, I applied to enter a religious group and was accepted. But upon the protest of my father, I became scared and doubted and I withdrew. That was indeed the most critical moment in my life. Ever since childhood, I had lived a life in complete compliance to rules and regulations.

Throughout my life, there has been a yearning in me, which could never be satisfied with any material possessions or accomplishments, or comforts of any kind. The call, the vocation, was there, and still is, within my very nature. Withdrawal might be a mistake.

If only I could have some guidance, or a group of friends with whom I could pray together, I believe everything would have come out in a different way.

Some men showed interest in me, and yet none of them succeeded in getting my hand. I got tired of my father. My elder brother, who was two years older than me, was also not in good terms with me. In those days I was never talked nicely in the family.

I considered that Holy Mary's virginity is what God loved most. But living a religious life seemed to be out of my reach. I also doubted if I could make a good nun. I had relatively poor self-esteem. However, I could not stay at home unmarried. I need someone to take me away from my father and my elder brother.

I wanted a "married" life like that of Mary and Joseph. I considered this to be the most beautiful relationship in the world.

I discussed it with a young man, one who liked me sincerely, and yet I just wanted him to be my brother. For the benefit and protection of this "gentleman", I am not going to reveal the details of all that had happened between us. But since I myself suggested that we might get married and live a life like that of Mary and Joseph, he was happy to prepare for the marriage.

I remembered clearly how I conversed with God when I was there, standing in front of the altar, saying the marriage vow that I was supposed to say. I told God that He knew what was in my mind.

My "husband" was greatly disappointed that I was not a real wife to him. I could not understand why he was so disappointed, and he could not understand why I was so firm.

I was exceedingly upset when I found my active life in the parish would not allow me to have a divorce later on. It seemed to be my fate to stay with someone, whom I could neither take as a husband nor be taken as a sister. Anger was always the main issue between us.

A word from the Bible struck me one day. Marriage is meant to have offspring. Just for the sake of compliance I permitted myself to be given a child. A few years later, on the request of my son who wanted a brother, I again permitted myself to be given another child, also a son.

The over twenty years of marriage was a nightmare to the whole family. I was always the source of all emotional unbalance for my partner, and this led to all kinds of ambivalence and complications in the web of father-son and sibling relationship.

We were helped in the direction of true union. My intellect did try to achieve a union, but deep within me, I could not find the love and passion for the man I was with. If love was the basis of marriage, my passion for God was much stronger.

I learnt to pray. I learnt to meditate. I spent much time praying and meditating. Then I found myself awake one day. I realized what a great mistake I had made.

I realized my sin. I sinned for misusing marriage as a means of escape from my father and my brother. I sinned for binding a man to a vow which was not ethical. I sinned for bringing two boys to the world without providing them a warm, welcoming and loving family life. I was the source of all battles yet without realizing it myself. I was trapped as badly as anyone else in the family. We were all in a situation which no one around us could understand. There should come a time to set us free.

Our "fake" marriage was listened to. However, it had taken five years for it to be nullified. The two boys were by then 13 and 18. I am really sorry that they had to grow up in a family which was unsettled and without ground.

My sons' Dad got a real marriage finally.

My life after the divorce and "nullity" statement had never been easy. I supported my sons' living, and I had to face all hardships of life by myself. I had to learn to be independent and resilient.

Having gone through all these stages of my life, I have the following understanding:

Spiritual: Knowledge and prayer

The main problem in my life, as in life of all others, lies in ignorance and inability to encounter God in prayer – what the church community needs is the right form of prayer to experience God Himself, not in intellectual thoughts and ideas, but in the deepest cabin of the heart, in the spiritual field of existence.

It is time for the Church to find out the essence of the prayer that Jesus did and taught – what did Jesus do in the mountain?

Not only priests and religious groups, everyone in the church community should be given this teaching of how to pray– knowing how to communicate with God and enjoy being with God.

The incapability of understanding faith and love in practical life as a teenager and a young girl in her 20's lead to immature decisions and a downturn of life development – therefore nurturing a loving soul is more important than cultivating intellect – when there is love, there will be right decisions and good developments of life.

Pastoral: Guidance and care

There is a need for attention from the Church on the problems young people face – study, work, relationship, marriage, addictions, illnesses, personality disorder, mental deficiency etc.

There have been insufficient resources, capabilities, time and effort from family members and church authorities alike to deal with all the life problems mentioned above.

As a result, faith is more like just spending a Sunday morning, or an intellectual achievement in knowing some answers from the Bible than experience of being understood, loved and supported; and mercy is hardly felt by many.

Group: Support and sharing

The support of a group and the sharing of knowledge and prayer are important for all individuals.

Societal: Resources

Help to guide the younger generation as mentioned above.

Personal: Achievement and development

The teaching of the Church should help the younger generations know the right goals of life.

My reflection on this case is that I really need some more time to meditate on the following: “nurturing a loving soul is more important than cultivating intellect – when there is love, there will be right decisions and good developments of life”.

Ignorance of the meaning of marriage caused a tragedy in answering a calling from God. And the misuse of “marriage” as a way to run away from the original family made the mistake go on for years and caused a broken family. The wife is telling us that the importance of “family education” should start very early and be offered the teenagers.

Case No. 4 Gambling and divorce

The wife: We were married in 1991, not too long after the marriage I found that my husband was addicted to gambling. He fell into bankruptcy in four years. In order not to get me and our son involved in his debts, he declared divorce from me. We did all the arrangements with the government according to the law, and did not know that we

should do anything with the church and were not aware that divorce was not allowed in the church.

I was baptized when I was a baby, and only went to church on Sundays. After the tragedy of the marriage, I did not know what kind of assistance I could get from the parish except that I could go to the Marriage Advisory Council for counseling. Anyway, I thought I should go further learning about my faith, hoping to get strength from this area and look for forgiveness. I joined workshops on personal growth and sought for marriage counseling.

Even though we were separated, I still want my son to keep in contact with his father, thus I arranged their meeting every week. I hated my ex-husband, but when I saw his disastrous situation, I had a feeling of pity on him. Actually we were both suffering in such a breakup in marriage, I thought we should learn to support each other.

I prayed, looked for assistance from other couples and counselors. After a few years, we tried reunion again. However my husband still could not give up gambling. When I found him in great debts again in 2009, I was so shocked and in despair. I really wanted to give up again the marriage.

Then, I met a priest who encouraged me to rely on God to sustain the marriage. He gave me a lot of guidance. I decided to give up my career and immigrated to Canada so that my husband could start a new life in a new environment after we renewed the marriage vow once again.

I experienced love and forgiveness in different groups in the parish like "Marriage Encounter", "Couple Co-creation Society", "Catholic Marriage Advisory Council", etc., so that I could have a breakthrough when I faced different stages of difficulties in my married life. I hope that there would be these type of groups in every parish so that couples can have spiritual support and acceptance when they experience difficulties. Thank God that we are married again.

My reflection on this case in addition to all the previous ones, is that "Love" is the most powerful word among all kinds of healing and guidance. Disregarding whether we are in addiction of gambling, materialism, ignorance or whatever else that affects our relationship in the family, if we are educated well in the "loving world" of Jesus Christ, we will have our resurrection!

Another case is telling me that our Catholic couples are not aware that marriage is life long and divorce is not allowed in our

religion. They don't understand the teaching on this Sacrament of marriage, that whenever difficulties are encountered in married life, divorce is the choice to resolve all problems. In case this statement reflects the actual situation, should our parishes do something more on the pre-marriage education work?

However, all these cases come from the voices of the lay persons who had their different difficulties in marriage and family life, and their expectations from their leaders in the parish community. I hope that these voices would generate some inspiration in our church leaders when they execute their pastoral nourishing in the church community. And I deeply believe that the Holy Spirit is within us when all of us are humbly inviting the Holy Trinity to guide us on this spiritual path towards Jesus Christ. May all the glory be with the Holy Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit!

V. THE PASTORAL SUPPORT TO FAMILIES THROUGH DIOCESAN PARISH AND BEC OR SCC STRUCTURES

- Fr. Cajetan Menezes

Pope Francis in October 2013 addressing the participants of the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the family stated that the "family is the engine of the world and of history."⁹ Few days after the Assembly he announced the plan to begin a discernment process on the pastoral care of the families, sending out the *Lineamenta* for the III Extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the Family in October of 2014 and the XIV Ordinary Synod of Bishops in October 2015. The welfare of the family is decisive for the future of the world and that of the Church¹⁰. "Aware that the well-being of society and her own good are intimately tied to the good of the family the Church wishes to help the family" (GS 47).¹¹ The Church has a duty to journey with the family at every stage of its development.

⁹ Pope FRANCIS, Address of Pope Francis to the Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Family 23-25 Oct. 2013.

¹⁰ Pope FRANCIS, *Amoris Laetitia*, 31.

¹¹ Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* 47.

Therefore, it must be emphasized once more that the pastoral intervention of the Church in support of the family is a matter of urgency. Every effort should be made to strengthen and develop pastoral care for the family, which should be treated as a real matter of priority, in the certainty that future evangelization depends largely on the domestic Church.¹²

If we want a strong parish church, then we need to have vibrant Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) or Small Christian Communities (SCCs) and strong domestic churches. This is possible when we have strong and functional families.

1. Effective Pastoral Care needs a “Family Perspective” as an approach

This paper attempts to explain how to keep the family in focus in our pastoral planning in Church set-ups at the parish and at the Small Christian Communities (SCCs) level. I define this approach of consciously strengthening the foundation (domestic church) of the Church and society as the '*family perspective in pastoral planning*'.¹³ I am contextualising this in the framework of urban pastoral planning as an urban parish may have more organisations compared to a rural parish. This approach will be effective in urban, semi-urban and rural parishes

2. The Church is aware of the current reality of the family

The Church acknowledges the many threats that the family, as an institution, faces in our times: from the materialistic influence of technology and communication, to poor value education at home, caused by both parents working long hours to keep up with the budget and times. Besides this, we have the family's income generation choices of overseas and call centre jobs. There is also growing pressure on young people, living in multi-religious countries like Asia, to choose marriage partners who are of other faiths, and as a consequence they could lose their own faith and the opportunity to share Jesus with their children. All these

¹² Cf. John Paul II, Address to the Third General Assembly of the Bishops of Latin America (28 January 1979), IV a: AAS 71 (1979), 204.

¹³ Cajetan D. MENEZES, Family Perspective, Roselight Media House, Mumbai 2010, 42.

threats are closing in around the Christian family unit, causing it to succumb to the pressures of the world.

The two recent Synods¹⁴ of Bishops on Family highlighted the challenges families face around the world. The Church knows the travails of the family. Guided by Pope Francis in his several teachings and now in *Amoris Laetitia* [AM] the Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family and St. John Paul II's vision expressed in *Familiaris Consortio* [FC] the foundational document on Family choose to respond in love and action.

3. Church's Vision and Mission for the Family

The Church is a family of families, constantly enriched by the lives of all those domestic churches. "In virtue of the sacrament of matrimony, every family becomes, in effect, a good for the Church. From this standpoint, reflecting on the interplay between the family and the Church will provide a precious gift for the Church in our time. The Church is good for the family, and the family is good for the Church. The safeguarding of the Lord's gift in the sacrament of matrimony is a concern not only of individual families but of the entire Christian community.¹⁵

Every family is constantly called to participate in the mission of the Church, and its mission and identity is deeply rooted in the 'Divine Trinity'. The experience of love in families is a perennial source of strength for the life of the Church. "The unitive end of marriage is a constant summons to make this love grow and deepen. Through their union in love, the couple experiences the beauty of fatherhood and motherhood, and shares plans, trials, expectations and concerns; they learn care for one another and mutual forgiveness. In this love, they celebrate their happy moments and support each other in the difficult passages of their life together ... The beauty of this mutual, gratuitous gift, the joy which comes from a life that is born and the loving care of all family members - from toddlers to seniors - are just a few of the fruits which make the response to the vocation of the family

¹⁴ III Extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the Family in October of 2014 and the XIV Ordinary Synod of Bishops in October 2015 in Rome.

¹⁵ Cf. *Ibid Amoris Laetitia* 87.

unique and irreplaceable', both for the Church and for society as a whole".¹⁶

John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio* [No.17] stated that every particular task of the family is an expression of the family's mission. He spelt out the four general tasks for the family as:

- a) The family is to form a community of persons in mutual self-giving
- b) The family is to serve life in its transmission, both physically in bringing children into the world and spiritually by transmitting values and traditions throughout its life cycle.
- c) The family is to participate in the development of society by:
Becoming a school of social life
Becoming a community of hospitality
Becoming politically active
- d) The family is to share in the life and mission of the Church by:
Becoming a believing and evangelizing community
Becoming a community in dialogue with God
Becoming a community in service to humankind. ¹⁷

Helping families realise their mission

The Pastor/Parish priest and his pastoral collaborators firstly needs to understand the mission of the basic unit of the church, and through its pastoral initiatives help and support the family to translate their mission into reality.

In order to be realistic and effective, there is a need for a continuous evangelization of marriage and the family, fostering relevant initiatives in individual families, in groups of families (Small Christian Communities (SCCs) and in all parish and diocesan communities. Some of these initiatives are remote, proximate and immediate preparation for marriage, the education of children with Christian values, the ongoing formation of married couples, parents, youth, etc.

¹⁶ Ibid, No. 88.

¹⁷ Cf. FC 17.

As families expect to receive from the community, they are also expected to give back, as its conjugal apostolate to other couples in the same community. In addition to being fruitful as biological, adoptive or foster parents, Christian couples are also called to be fruitful in the Church community, in the context that the whole Church is an evangelized and evangelizing community.

4. Parish structure at the service of the family

Every diocese and, in more particular terms, every parochial community, must become more vividly aware of the grace and responsibility that it receives from the Lord in order that it may promote the pastoral care of the family. No plan for organized pastoral work, at any level, must ever fail to take into consideration the pastoral care of the family.¹⁸ (cf. FC, 70) The parish church is a community of communities and Small Christian Communities (SCCs) should be a source of strength for families to live their mission in their own homes and neighbourhood communities.

4.1 FABC - encouraged grass root communities to organise and support families

The FABC¹⁹ which was established in 1970 has always stressed on a good grass root structure to support families in the parishes. One of the main Assemblies of the FABC is the fifth Plenary Assembly, which was held in Bandung, Indonesia, from 17th to 27th July 1990. In this assembly, the theme was condensed as: "The Emerging Challenges for the Church in Asia in 1990's: A Call to Respond."

The participants of the assembly powerfully felt that the Church in Asia will have to be a communion of communities, where laity, religious and clergy recognize and accept each other as sisters and brothers. They are called together by the Divine Word to form Small Christian Communities like 'neighbourhood communities', 'covenant communities,' etc. it is in communities

¹⁸ Pope JOHN PAUL II, *Familiaris Consortio* – Apostolic Exhortation on Family, St Pauls Press, 1982, No.70.

¹⁹ Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference.

that they pray and share together the Gospel of Jesus.²⁰ In communities like this they live their daily lives as they support one another and work together, united as they are “in one mind and heart.”

The statement of the assembly says that it is the desire of the community. At the global level it could be said to be the desire of solidarity. However, “more locally, it is seen in the growth of Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs), of neighbourhood groups, of groups that come together to defend human rights, or that come together for prayer of Bible-sharing.”²¹ Many a time these groups overlap and are interconnected. These groups are also motivated by a healthy reaction so that the traditional structures of community are broken down. Moreover, they rise from a concern with human persons rather than impersonal structures, and they also do have a concern for those who are small, despised or neglected.²² At several FABC forums the SCC structure has been encouraged to facilitate better pastoral care at the parish level.

4.2 Parish Level Animation: Priest, Parish Pastoral Council and Small Christian Communities

Each parish is animated by the parish priest and the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC). The parish is divided into geographical Zones (Group of SCCs), each zone has a bunch of SCCs and each SCC is a group of families living in the same neighbourhood. In these SCCs families need to find mutual support and live their mission and grow as a domestic church.

In small Christian communities we can find the description of the Church as pictured in the Acts of the Apostles, i.e. a community whose members were of one mind and one heart and where there was no one among them in need. It was a community that was nurtured on the Word of God and the Eucharist and lived out a deep Christ experience and was involved in the neighbourhood with a sense of Christian Mission. On the one hand, the parish

²⁰ G.B. Rosales and C.G. Arevalo, (eds) “For All the Peoples of Asia”, FABC Documents, Claretian Publications, Vol. 1, 1992, 287.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 278.

²² Joseph DIAS, SVD, *Small Christian Communities as a Paradigm for a Participatory Church*, St. Mary’s Burla, Sambalpur, Orissa 2007, 109.

will be a communion of these communities, and on the other, it will be a community in communion with all the kingdom forces that are operating in the neighbourhood. This ultimately will result in the formation of Small human communities.²³

4.3 The diocesan and parish structures are required to reach out to families in fulfilling their mission

Pastoral structures are necessary for discernment, planning, coordination and implementation of pastoral initiatives. There needs to be structures at the diocesan, parish and small Christian community (SCC) that will organise and deliver pastoral care to the people of God.

Coordination Body at Diocesan level for Pastoral care of the family

It is recommended that each Episcopal Conference has a National Family Commission which ensures that each diocese has a Diocesan Family Commission which is directly responsible for the pastoral care of families in the diocese through the deanery and parish structure. The role of the diocesan bishop and Diocesan Family Commission:

1. Ensure that the diocese has a Family Commission (Central body) and every Parish has a Family Cell (local body) which will cater to the needs of families in the diocese/parish.
2. Ensure that all Deaneries focus on having a proper structure and year around programmes suited to the deanery - e.g. language groups. Ethnic groups (Exchange of programmes for mutual enrichment of family life).
3. A Family Apostolate Centre with trained staff, will be a resource centre and visible face of the family apostolate in the diocese.
4. The Diocesan Family Centre coordinates and monitors Marriage Preparation, Post-Marriage Care Programmes, Marriage Follow up of young couples, parenting sessions, training of parish family cell animators, etc.

²³ Fernandes KAKKASSERIL, The priests and the Pastoral Care of Families, Indian Journal of Family Studies, Kerala; Vol. 8, No. 1, February 2010, 69.

5. Family movements²⁴ displaying Unity in Diversity will add richness to family ministry. Ensure that the Family Movements share their charisms and experience to clearly bring value to the family cells in each Parish by ensuring that their representatives in each parish join the Parish Family Cell.
6. To publish a diocesan family bulletin which facilitates sharing of ideas.
7. Publish the Calendar of Events in the Parish/Diocesan bulletin to inform of programmes arranged in Parishes/Deaneries under the auspices of the Diocesan Family Commission.²⁵

Through a relevant and functional structure all the members in the church beginning with the Bishops, priests, religious and all the lay faithful must do all in their power to protect, promote and sustain this fundamental unit of society and the church and accompany them on their mission.

5. Parish Family Cell - grass root structure for pastoral care

The most effective place to meet the pastoral care needs of the families is the parish and the SCCs.

To initiate and sustain the family perspective in pastoral care we need structures to reach-out to families in an effective and systematic way.

‘The pastoral care of families signifies, in practice, the commitment of all the members of the parish community to help the married couple discover and live their new vocation and mission. In order that the family may be ever more a true community of love, it is necessary that all its members be helped and trained in their responsibilities ... in family life.²⁶ In order for the family apostolate to take concrete shape at the grass root level

²⁴ There are several Family Movements / organisations in the church like C.F.M. (Catholic Family Movement), C.F.C. (Couples for Christ), M.E. (Marriage Encounter), , C.C.L. (Couple to Couple League), Retrouvaille, etc.

²⁵ Cajetan D. MENEZES, Family Perspective - Building on the Legacy of John Paul II, Roselight Media House, Mumbai, 2010, 64.

²⁶ FC 69.

we need “family caring groups” at the parish level. We can call this unit a “parish family ministry team” or “parish family cell”. The parish family cell or the parish family ministry team is the most basic structure of the family apostolate in the diocese.

We now look at the Role of the Parish Family Cells, in building the Domestic Church. But as we do so we also realize that creating Parish Family Cells needs to be done systematically with a renewed zeal to reach out to all families especially those in need. All families need to feel cared for and loved in the church. Then only will the church be relevant to our times. The Parish Family Cell can be effective in reaching out to all families at the grass root level if it is introduced at the parish level and coordinated and guided by the Family Commission at the diocesan level. Let us briefly try to understand the purpose, composition and functions of the Parish Family Cell:

5.1 Parish Family Cell is a *coordinating body* to

- Meet the Spiritual, emotional and material needs of the family
- Reach out to families in time of need
- Strengthen the family structure
- Build stable families in the parish
- Evolve a spirituality of the family that is relevant to the times.
- Make the family into a vibrant Domestic Church.

5.2 The goal of the parish family cell is to network with all other organizations to

- Make the Family aware of its role and mission (Educational)
- Development of healthy family life (Preventive)
- Reaching out to families in distress (Therapeutic)

5.3 The main function of the family cell is to NETWORK and LOBBY for the family in the parish by

- Keeping the family on the parish agenda at all forums, so that the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) can plan and execute pastoral initiatives with all parish cells and associations which aim to enhance the total quality of family life and transform it into a vibrant church.

5.4 Composition of our Parish Family Cell

A well-balanced team that

- represents the families in the parish
- has important members of other cells/parish organizations so networking is possible
- has at least one member of each category mentioned below,²⁷ unless specified otherwise

5.5 Some of the activities at the PFC meeting

Besides planning for the pastoral care of families, the activities should fall under three areas:

Formation, fellowship and service.

Formation activities include regular study Church documents /current issues on the family, participation in a seminar, etc. A fellowship session once or twice a year is recommended (a common day to celebrate birthdays of members or a Christmas get-together with their families). **Service** would include programmes/projects, of networking with different groups to **educate** the family of its mission, strengthen the family to **prevent** breakdown and reach-out to families that are hurting (**therapeutic**).

Some examples of Educational and Preventive Activities

1. Marriage Preparation: Remote, Proximate and Immediate
2. Follow up programme to support young marriages

²⁷ **Composition of the Family Cell :** The Parish Priest or his assistant priest

A Religious Sister/brother, Parish Pastoral Council Representative, Sunday School Catechist

SCC steering committee member, Faith formed stable couples with leadership qualities who are role models.

(The recommended number: minimum 2, maximum 4-6), Couple of inter-faith marriage (1), Representatives from Family Movements, Single parents (1 or 2), Women's Cell (1 or 2), Widows/widowers (1), Children (under age 15) (1), Youth (aged 15 – 25 years) (1 or 2), Unmarried single (age 25 +) (1), Professionals like doctors, nurses or a professional family counselor.

Language group representatives (for e.g.: English, Tamil, Tagalog) (1 each).

3. Family Enrichment Programmes e.g. Anger management training
4. Pre-baptismal catechism and parenting sessions for young parents
5. Education in Creative Natural Fertility Management. (CNFM)
6. Exposure to Family Movements e.g. CFC, CFM, ME, CCL, etc.
7. Sessions in Parenting Skills e.g. Building self-esteem in children
8. Campaign for violence-free families e.g. Tackling domestic violence, child abuse
9. Newsletter / Articles on the family
10. Support for the Elderly and Aged e.g. Senior care ministry
11. Pro-Life Issues
12. Celebrate Family e.g. Family Get-togethers, Parents' Day, etc
13. Celebrate Marriage e.g. Wedding Anniversaries and World Marriage Day
14. Care of Inter-faith marriages e.g. Enrichment sessions and support group

Some examples of Therapeutic Activities

1. Family Help-Lines
2. Crisis Counselling
3. Counselling of individuals and families
4. Support to broken families
5. Reconciliation Desks for marriages and families
6. Rescue of Battered women and children

5.6 What is the role of the Parish Family Cell?

1. To network with Parish Pastoral Council (PPC), associations and cells with a 'family perspective' in planning and implementing all parish projects.
2. Building the family into a Domestic Church where the

parents are the first Catechists and source of missionary zeal and apostolate.

3. Fostering a spirituality of the family that is relevant, family catechesis especially the centrality of spousal love and parental love in the divine plan.
4. To make Christ the centre of each home so that His values permeate family life which is reflected in daily family prayer, Scripture reading and reflection, remembering that the family that prays together stays together.
5. To train animator couples and individuals who can take on leadership roles and be resource persons for the parish Family Apostolate.
6. Organizing Marriage Preparation (remote, proximate, and immediate) and Marriage Enrichment Programmes to strengthen marriage and family life.
7. To make families aware of their role to become leaven in society and be agents of change against social evils, like caste, superstitions, dowry, etc.
8. To become Pro-Life and promote openness to life.
9. Conscientize families about the anti-family and anti-family tendencies encouraged and promoted by NGOs and the Government e.g. medical termination of pregnancy [abortion], contraception, one-child norm, etc.
10. Counsel and support families in crisis, like those in hurting marriages, separated, divorced, young widows and widowers, migrant families, single parent families, children with behavioural problems, etc.

5.7 Training for Family Ministry

Since its aim is to bring about holistic renewal in the domestic Church, the following training is needed for the members of Parish Family Cell.

- a. Formation in faith and human sciences so as to build up couples and individuals who are good human beings firm in the faith and religious conviction.
- b. Leadership training to enable the members to be servants of the community.
- c. Spiritual motivation to grow and help others to grow in service of the Church and society.

- d. Training on skills required to function independently as grass root family animators and network to work in collaboration with the Parish structures as a bonding catalyst.
- e. Event management skills to organize family enrichment programmes/events.

6. THE PROBLEM : Many families/communities/parishes lack the understanding of the role and purpose of the Christian family

Sadly, ordinary Catholic families, caught up in their everyday struggle of living, lack a sense of their own purpose and mission as a Catholic family. The Church's ideal for Catholic family life has not percolated down to the grass roots, which is the real Church. It is therefore our responsibility to take this awareness to them. For this to happen, more and more people must come forward and offer their talents for the service of the community.

The parish clergy and Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) need to promote the teaching of the Church on family and encourage authentic Christian living. The majority of Catholics see priesthood or religious life as a 'special calling for special people', but married and family life as an 'obvious choice for the ordinary' to find companionship and procreate. Like the "priesthood and religious life", marriage and family life is a vocation. Every parish must necessarily have a well built Family Cell / ministry team with a dedicated team of clergy and laity which promotes family life. The primary task of the Family Cell is to keep family on the agenda and inspire other associations and cells to strengthen the domestic church.

6.1 "Family perspective" in pastoral planning will help build the domestic church in a parish

The domestic church is the foundation of the parish church. A "family focus" to its pastoral planning and activities will help strengthen this basic unit of society. The clergy team and the different pastoral bodies, cells and associations work towards building the parish community. The apex pastoral planning body of the parish is the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC).

The role of the PPC is primarily 'pastoral', i.e. facilitative, reflective, evaluative and coordinating, as opposed to merely implementing. Therefore the parish councilor is called to be a community builder. The function of the PPC is to promote renewal of the parish community by continuously responding to the pastoral needs of its families. The PPC plans, creates a vision-mission statement, and tries to translate it into concrete action. This "concrete action" will be effective only when they respond to the concrete reality of the parish and effectively build up the domestic church. By using good management principles, the PPC ought to foster a sense of communion in the parish, coordinate activities of the various associations, cells and communities, foster love and promote human rights and dignity. The parish community should grow into a big united and healthy family.

The PPC collaborates with the Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) and helps build a strong diocese. The DPC prepares papers for parish councils to discuss and give feedback to the DPC to ensure discussion of ideas and constant flow of feedback. The effectiveness of pastoral work is threatened when it lacks the "family perspective".

6.2 The obstacles for parish councils to understand and prioritize family perspective in pastoral planning

The first obstacle could be the lack of understanding that the "domestic church" is the foundation of the parish/diocese and universal church. So no serious effort is made in pastoral initiatives to strengthen the family. They lack the "family perspective".

Another obstacle could be no representation or ineffective representation of the "family cell" on the PPC, as members from parish cells and associations are nominated and obviously all cells/associations cannot be fairly represented. This lack of representation however is compounded by a lack of the family cell's understanding of their own vision and mission. Besides, the family cell not only needs to be represented on the PPC, but it is also suggested to be represented on the council of lay associations and cells so that there is effective networking between organisations/cells in order to reach out to all families, especially

the weak and marginalized. The ultimate goal of the parish should be to build the family and make every member in the parish community feel cared for and loved.

Another obstacle is that some PPCs do not function as they ought to but are merely an agreeable audience for decisions made by parish priests who lack the “family focus”.

7. Networking among parish organisations and Small Christian Communities with Parish Family Cell to build families

The SCCs and Parish Family Cell (PFC) need to work with other organisations and associations for effective out-reach to families through the parish and SCC organisational structure. This will require a spirit of collaboration and not competition. If the parish is very small and has few members and associations then the parish priest can form a small “Family Committee”²⁸ to animate the parish as an alternative to PFCs.

7.1 In each parish there are many associations and cells that work together to fulfil the vision and mission of the parish

Besides the Parish Family Cell (PFC) there are several other organisations and associations working in the parish.

Some of the more common ones are:

- Altar Servers League (children help in serving mass, growing in fellowship and confidence)
- Bible Cell (trained Ministers of the Word conduct Bible studies and other Bible related activities)
- Small Christian Communities (SCCs): Support the family in their neighbourhood and members interact to mutually support each other in their mission as families.
- Catechesis (Sunday school and confirmation classes)
- Catholic Charismatic Renewal a.k.a prayer groups (praise and worship, intercessory prayer, teachings on Bible

²⁸ “Family Committee” is a small “Pastoral Think-Tank” group that animates the pastoral care of families with a “Family Perspective”. Many parishes in Asia are run by a single priest and have small congregations, but that should not be an excuse for inadequate pastoral care. The pastor with a group of lay collaborators need to visit families and then develop appropriate pastoral care initiatives for families.

- themes, organizing retreats and seminars)
- Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist (taking Holy Communion to the sick and home bound)
- Legion of Mary (prayer, visitation of families and active apostolic works)
- Liturgy Group (liturgy committee who animate the liturgy with cooperation from lectors, cantors, choirs, sacristan, altar servers, etc)
- Pre- Baptism Catechesis (to prepare expecting couples for Christian parenthood)
- Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults [RCIA](for adults of other faiths who want to know more about Jesus, to get catechised in an informal, interactive, community oriented and inculturated way over one year, after which they may choose to follow Christ and get baptized)
- Society of St. Vincent de Paul (caring for the poor and marginalized families)
- Youth (all round development of youth)
- Centre for Community Organisation [CCO] (coordinates all pastoral care activities and not just a social work centre)

7.2 The PFC should promote networking to strengthen family life

Even though the Parish Family Cell is one of the several cells/bodies in the parish, the family cell is called to be a “lobby group” which fosters and encourages the “family perspective” by implementing activities specifically designed to enrich family life, and by engaging other cells and associations for greater outreach. The PPC which is the apex body in the parish should facilitate and foster networking among the different groups/organisations and SCCs to strengthen family life in the parish, just as it is called to create synergy for the implementation of other pastoral priorities.

A parish which has a “family perspective” uses its energy and resources to reach out to families in a conscious and systematic way: from its budget to execution of pastoral activities and from its liturgy to human and faith formation.

7.3 A parish with a family perspective

The clergy team and the PPC functions with an awareness that their parish is made up of Zones, and these Zones are made up of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) and these SCCs are finally a group of families (clusters). If their parish needs to be vibrant then they need to have healthy and functional families. The PPC realises that in order to have healthy families they need to “enhance the total quality of family life.”²⁹ They can “enhance the total quality of family life” when they are able to have a holistic view of human development and through their pastoral initiatives reach out to all sections of the parish (Children, Youth, Adults, Senior citizens, singles, married couples, widows/widowers, single parents, inter-faith marriages, etc).

The parish with a “family perspective” sees preparation for family life as a gradual and continuous process.³⁰ The parish has a good marriage preparation programme; with children (remote) organised by the catechists, youth (proximate) organised by the youth ministry and young couples on the threshold of marriage (immediate) taken care of by the parish clergy and family cell. Besides, attending the marriage preparation course organised at the diocesan level, great care is taken by the clergy to spend time with the couple during the pre-nuptial inquiry (PNE) procedures and wedding preparation. The family cell follows up the couple from the time of the wedding to the early formative years of marriage and children. The parish has a well knit pre-baptismal ministry team which is sensitive to the needs of expecting mothers and fathers, and journeys with them as they prepare themselves for parenthood.

The catechists at Sunday school journey with the child to adolescence, and the Sunday school and family cell train parents to be well equipped to handle the challenging task of parenting kids and teenagers today. The family cell regularly organises

²⁹ Phrase used by Psychologist Rev Fr. Vincent S. Pereira in his article on “Enhancing Total Quality of Family Life”. *Vidyajyoti Journal*, New Delhi, June 2007, Vol. 21 No. 6.

³⁰ Read. FC 66 for teachings on three main stages of marriage preparation: remote, proximate and immediate.

workshops to train couples to enhance their relationship skills, so that they can remain committed to the marital covenant and make their marriage a joyful experience. The individual and couples that are hurting are taken care of by the therapeutic initiatives taken by the clergy, Centre for Community Organization (CCO) and family cell. Local counselling centres or professional counsellors can be invited to help in this delicate task of healing individuals and broken families.

The CCO and St. Vincent De Paul (SVP) association provides support to needy families. The SVP constantly reviews their work with families, so that they can be effective in reaching out to the poorest of the poor each year. The SCC animators, through their visitation and community intervention skills, identify individuals, marriages and families that require help and refer them to the CCO which coordinates the resources of cells and associations. The CCO, in collaboration with the Women's Cell, works towards empowering women in the family. The Women's and Family Cells' collaborate to work towards building violence-free families.³¹

The Sunday School and Altar Servers' Association gives special attention to children to nurture vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Besides training them in liturgical matters, activities to promote vocations needs to be integrated.

The Liturgy Committee prepares "family centred" liturgies, the clergy delivers family enriching homilies, and the prayers of the faithful highlight various needs of the families every Sunday. Liturgical and para-liturgical services always have a family touch. In a traditional parish, the vocation to the priesthood is highlighted on Vianney Sunday. Family life which is the vocation of the overwhelming majority should be highlighted regularly. Feasts of the Holy Family, Sts. Joaquim and Ann, and World Marriage Day³² should be given greater importance. Special masses to celebrate wedding anniversaries and to renew

³¹ The Women's Commission in the Archdiocese of Bombay initiated the "Campaign for Violence-free families".

³² World Marriage Day is celebrated by Marriage Encounter and in many dioceses on the Sunday before Valentine's Day (14th Feb.)

marriages vows would celebrate the vocation of married life. The parish community celebrates family by having a special mass for families and celebrating family days.

The SCCs network with the prayer groups and the Bible Cell to enhance the quality of prayer life in families. The SCC animators, Eucharistic ministers and Legion of Mary members administer to families in need. The Inter-Religious Dialogue group helps foster greater harmony among families of various religious communities in the neighbourhood.

Some examples have been mentioned to illustrate various family centric initiatives which form part of the “family perspective” in pastoral care. The primary task of the PPC is to enhance the quality of Christian life in the parish. This can come about only when we enhance the quality and participation of families in the parish.

7.4 Case studies to understand implementation of “Family perspective” in parish life

Case 1.: Example of a “family perspective” at a parish event: A parish was celebrating “Parents’ Day” and over 500 parents were to attend. The catechists of the Sunday School had planned the event which included two dances inspired by Bollywood³³ films. The Sunday School representative from the family cell at the catechists’ meeting raised an important issue: Can we use this event to convey a positive message to the parents and strengthen family life? What was the objective of putting up Bollywood songs and dances? There was a debate among the catechists and they decided to replace the dance items with a well written skit reflecting the values parents need to teach children, using every day events in a family. The parents’ day event was used to strengthen family, because the family cell animator encouraged the catechists to have a “family perspective” in organising the event. The money spent, time and the children’s talent were channelized to build family life in the parish.

³³ Bollywood refers to the Mumbai/Bombay based Hindi Films industry.

Case 2. Example of an individual/family helped through networking with a “family perspective”: An attentive and cooperative spirit of unity among the associations/cells ensures that even those who would ordinarily fall through the cracks in the system of pastoral care, are noticed, ministered to and followed up. One such example is that of a 12 year old boy in a Catholic school who had a Catholic name and surname, but was spotted by an attentive teacher going to the moral science class, meant for non Catholic students, rather than the ‘Catholic doctrine class’ meant for Catholics. The child said this was because he was not yet baptized. The concerned teacher took the matter up with the parish priest of the parish running the school, even though she herself was from another parish. The parish priest brought it up at the parish team meeting, where the priest in-charge of the family cell volunteered to investigate and address the matter in collaboration with other associations. So the Legion of Mary got involved to visit the family and discovered that the child's Catholic father was an absent, alcoholic parent and the child's non-Catholic mother was an overworked, struggling parent who did not mind the child getting baptized. The area SCC animator started the work of follow up and catechists got involved to absorb this child in the Sunday School system. The SVP got involved to provide financial assistance to the family and the Legion of Mary continued to follow up with visits. In this way a pastoral apostolate, reflecting the unity of the Triune God we serve, could be an effective witness of Christian love to a struggling family and a lost child. During the Easter vigil the following year this child was baptised and also received first Holy Communion.

Case 3: Examples of reaching out to families through networking between different organisations and the family cell:

Parish 1. The family cell of one of the parishes in Mumbai has been able to collaborate with SCCs and the Bible Cell. They are striving to get at least one member/couple from all the 34 SCCs to join the Family Cell so that networking will be more effective. Their collaboration with the Bible cell is because some of their members are a part of that Cell also and believe that it is the

Word of God that keeps families together. The Bible cell regularly prepares sessions/hand-outs to promote creative use of scripture during family prayer and they go around teaching the method in SCC clusters. The PPC is looking for more ways of collaboration and networking to make a tangible difference to family life.

Parish 2. The family cell of the parish in a semi-urban area on the outskirts of Mumbai has members from the Bible Cell, SVP, Hope & Life Movement (widows), Youth & SCCs, therefore all their activities are planned with the ideas contributed by the members of other parish cells and associations. This could be one of the reasons that the family cell is the most active cell in their parish, because they network with ease to improve the quality of family life. The newsletter has “Family focussed” articles and fun activities for the entire family.

Parish 3. In a parish located in the Mumbai suburbs, the family cell and bible cell under the animation of the PPC are organising a faith enrichment programme to re-evangelize families. When the SCC animators went around visiting families, they came across several married couples in civil unions who want to rectify their marriages. Some were inter-faith unions and the non-Christian spouse was interested in receiving the faith. The SCC steering committee and family cell networked with the Rite to Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) team to reach-out to these families.

Parish 4. In another case, an estranged family was ministered to by parishioners from different cells, working together in the time of crisis. A Eucharistic minister received a call to administer Holy Communion to an alcoholic dying of tuberculosis and AIDS, unattended by anyone because of family ties burnt by years of alcoholism, violence and adultery. The Eucharistic minister took along a priest who heard his confession and dispensed the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. They then contacted the CCO and family cell coordinator who contacted the estranged family members, and, along with the Charismatic Prayer group leader, enabled the family's journey towards forgiveness and reconciliation. The dying man was able to die with forgiveness received and given, the family he left behind experienced closure and hope of eternal life and reunion.

8. Pastoral Accompaniment of Families

Both the Synod documents and Pope Francis propose several groups and family situations that need accompaniment beginning with young marriages to those separated and divorced lonely spouses. Those in inter-faith marriages to those in civil unions. Those families forced to migrate³⁴ to those families who have lapsed in their faith. Diocesan Family Commission, Family cells and SCCs can play a great role in the pastoral care of these groups³⁵ as the Synod and Pope Francis puts doctrine 'at service of pastoral mission'.

Marriage Follow up Programme

To build stable, happy and Christ centred families the parish community needs to journey with the couple from their early

³⁴ In accompanying migrants, the Church needs a specific pastoral programme addressed not only to families that migrate but also to those family members who remain behind. This pastoral activity must be implemented with due respect for their cultures, for the human and religious formation from which they come and for the spiritual richness of their rites and traditions, even by means of a specific pastoral care ... (AM 46).

³⁵ **Relatio Finalis 2015**, The Final Report of the Synod of Bishops to the Holy Father at the end of the XIV Ordinary Synod of Bishops on Family 24th October 2015 proposed several new initiatives. We could have these new initiatives at the diocesan or parish levels according to pastoral needs. I will quote the relevant sections from the **Relatio Finalis 2015. Pastoral Accompaniment of Families** in complex situations (no. 69), of the newly wed in the initial years of marriage (60), of the civilly married and co-habiting couples (70), Disparity of Cult and Mixed Marriages (72-74), families where there are members who are being attracted towards the same gender (76), the divorced and separated, lonely and abandoned spouses, those who have contracted a second marriage, those whose marriage has been a failure and those spouses and children who encounter violence and sexual abuse (78-79), Single parental families having diverse origins (80), Parents may be biological, legal, those abandoned by the other spouse and those co-habiting (82), Unwed mothers, widows and widowers (19), Unforgiving spouses, those having marriage crises and conflicting situations (81), Elderly persons (17), Differently abled persons (21), Bachelors and spinsters (22), Migrants, refugees and those persecuted (23). Pope Francis has integrated most of the mentioned groups in this latest document *Amoris Laetitia* 2016.

days. The Family cell and experienced couples from the SCCs can plan an important role in pastoral accompaniment.

The pastoral care of the regularly established family signifies, in practice, the commitment of all the members of the local ecclesial community to help the couple discover and live their new vocation and mission. In order that the family may be ever more a true community of love, it is necessary that all its members should be helped and trained in their responsibilities as they face the new problems that arise, in mutual service, and in active sharing in family life. This holds true especially for young families, which, finding themselves in a context of new values and responsibilities, are more vulnerable, especially in the first years of marriage, to possible difficulties, such as those created by adaptation to life together or by the birth of children. Young married couples should learn to accept willingly, and make good use of, the discreet, tactful and generous help offered by other couples that already have more experience of married and family life. Thus, within the SCCs they experience help and support. Christian families-there will take place a mutual exchange of presence and help among all the families, each one putting at the service of others its own experience of life, as well as the gifts of faith and grace. Animated by a true apostolic spirit, this assistance from family to family will constitute one of the simplest, most effective and most accessible means for transmitting from one to another those Christian values which are both the starting point and goal of all pastoral care. Thus young families will not limit themselves merely to receiving, but in their turn, having been helped in this way, will become a source of enrichment for other longer established families, through their witness of life and practical contribution.³⁶

The pastoral care of newly married couples³⁷ must also involve encouraging them to be generous in bestowing life. "In accord

³⁶ Cf. FC, 69.

³⁷ In the Archdiocese of Bombay since 2014 we have a systematic follow up programme for accompanying young marriages (0 - 5 years) introduced in several parishes with Parish Family Cells. The Archdiocesan coordination centre - Snehalya Family Service Centre follows the "Marriage Follow up Instruction Manual -

with the personal and fully human character of conjugal love, family planning fittingly takes place as the result of a consensual dialogue between the spouses, respect for times and consideration of the dignity of the partner. In this sense, the teaching of the Encyclical *Humane Vitae* (CF 1014) and the apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (cf. 14: 2835) ought to be taken up anew, in order to counter a mentality that is often hostile to life...³⁸

Pope Francis mentioned (AM 223) that the Synod Fathers observed that “the initial years of marriage are a vital and sensitive period during which couples become more aware of the challenges and meaning of married life. Consequently, pastoral accompaniment needs to go beyond the actual celebration of the sacrament (*Familiaris Consortio*, Part III). In this regard, experienced couples have an important role to play. The parish is a place where such experienced couples can help younger couples, with the eventual cooperation of associations, ecclesial movements and new communities. Young couples need to be encouraged to be essentially open to the great gift of children. Emphasis should also be given to the importance of family spirituality, prayer and participation in the Sunday Eucharist, and couples encouraged to meet regularly to promote growth in their spiritual life and solidarity in the concrete demands of life. Liturgies, devotional practices and the Eucharist celebrated for families, especially on the wedding anniversary, were mentioned as vital factors in fostering evangelization through the family”.³⁹ These pastoral accompaniments should include all couples and that includes the growing number of inter-faith marriages⁴⁰ in our Asian context.

Accompanying couples through the early years” by Fr Cajetan D. Menezes, Revised edition February 2016.

³⁸ AM, 222.

³⁹ *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 40.

⁴⁰ Marriages involving disparity of cult represent a privileged place for interreligious dialogue in everyday life ... They involve special difficulties regarding both the Christian identity of the family and the religious upbringing of the children ... the number of households with married couples with disparity of cult, on the rise in mission territories, and even in countries of long Christian tradition, urgently requires

9. Conclusion: Accompanying the family means ...

To respond to the new challenges we face in our pastoral care of families, in a reflective spirit, we have tried to discern what the Spirit has been revealing to us and making us aware of new horizons with their challenges and possibilities in the field of pastoral care of family and marriage. The many forces at work both within the church and family spur us on to a renewed commitment to the cause of the kingdom, which Jesus envisaged.⁴¹

Families need the Church and the Church needs families in order to be present in the midst of life and in the milieu of modern living. Without domestic Churches, the Church is estranged from the concrete reality of life. Only through families can the Church be at home, where people are at home. Understanding the Church as a domestic Church is, therefore, fundamental for the future of the Church and for the new evangelization. Families are the first and the best messengers of the gospel of the family. They are the way of the Church.⁴²

John Paul II spoke about love for family in his concluding remarks in *Familiaris Consortio*. "We must show the family special love". This is an injunction that calls for concrete action. Loving the family means being able to appreciate its values and capabilities and fostering them always. Loving the family means identifying the dangers and the evils that menace it, in order to overcome them. Loving the family means endeavouring to create for it an environment favourable for its development."⁴³ Loving

providing a differentiated pastoral care according to various social and cultural contexts. In some countries where freedom of religion does not exist, the Christian spouse is obliged to convert to another religion in order to marry, and, therefore, cannot celebrate a canonical marriage involving disparity of cult or baptize the children. We must therefore reiterate the necessity that the religious freedom of all be respected. (AM 248)

⁴¹ Cf. Fernandes KAKKASSERIL, *The priests and the Pastoral Care of Families*, Indian Journal of Family Studies, Kerala; Vol. 8, No. 1, February 2010, 69.

⁴² Walter Cardinal KASPER, *The Gospel of the Family*, St. Paul books, Mumbai, 2014, 31.

⁴³ FC, 86.

the family means having a family perspective in all that we do to help our families achieve the 'Joy of Love' in their mission.

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VI. SPIRITUALITY OF THE FAMILY: AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT *Archbishop Patrick D'Rozario, CSC*

Introduction:

The subject matter proper to this presentation is the "Spirituality of the Family as an Essential Component of Pastoral Care", to be discussed within the perspective of the general theme of the present seminar: "Shepherding Families in Asia".

This presentation presupposes previous talks and discussions on: "Situation on current challenges to the pastoral care of families in Asia", "Pastoral perspectives for families in Asia, in the light of the recent Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation", "Expectations of the family from their Bishops, Priests and Family Apostolate Leaders in the parish community" and the "Pastoral Support to families through diocesan, parish and Basic Ecclesial Community structures."

I also presume that the recently published Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis, on the "Joy of Love: Love in the Family" has served as one of the basic sources in the different presentations in this seminar. I too follow their approach. Hence, to begin with, I present a brief summary of

Chapter Nine of the Apostolic Exhortation where Pope Francis deals with “The Spirituality of Marriage and the Family”, a topic directly connected with ours. This brief resume will situate our discussion more specifically on “shepherding in the spirituality of the family”.

I. The Spirituality of Marriage and the Family (Amoris Laetitia, (AL) 313-325)

In the beginning of the chapter Pope Francis refers to the Second Vatican Council which spoke of a “spirituality born of family life”; it is lay spirituality which takes “its particular characteristics of ... married and family life”, and that “family cares should not be foreign” to that spirituality. Basic characteristics of this specific spirituality reveal itself in family life and its relationships. (AA, 4), that is, understanding of marriage as Christian, living in day to day life as Christian in relation to different aspects of life (economic, social, spiritual etc), relationships between husband and wife, between parents and children, among brothers and sisters and other relations in extended families, in ecclesial communities and in society at large.

A. *Spirituality of Supernatural Communion (AL, 314-316)*

Basic to the spirituality of marriage and the family is the fact that God as communion of three Persons, dwells in the hearts of men and women living in grace. God dwells in the temple which is of marital love and communion. He lives in “concrete families with all their daily troubles and struggles, joys and hopes” and the Lord reigns there with joy and peace. In the variety of gifts and encounters family communion is deepened which “brings together the human and the divine”, the natural and the supernatural. The Human communion in marital life signifies and finds its completion in the communion with the divine. On the other hand communion with divine communion becomes flesh in the human communion found in the family.

Family communion is a true way to daily holiness and mystical growth. No one should think that family detracts them from their authentic spiritual aspirations. Whereas spiritual aspirations are actually realized in and through family experiences which are again foretaste of the deeper union with God. Thus John says: “If

only we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:12).

B. Gathered in Prayer in the Light of Easter (AL, 317-318)

Family life, like the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ, is always marked by the paschal mystery of Christ, his sufferings, passion, cross and resurrection. By sharing in "the mystery of Christ's cross which transforms difficulties and sufferings into an offering of love", the spouses grow in holiness of the married life. "Moreover, moments of joy, relaxation, celebration, and even sexuality can be experienced as a sharing in the full life of the resurrection" and as hidden presence of the risen Lord. Thus the joyful moments and the painful moments of married life lived responsibly are one integrated experience of its paschal joy and glory.

Family prayer, even for a few minutes every day, is a required instance to come together in the presence of the Lord, when we can tell our sorrows, our worries, express the needs of our families, pray for the one facing difficulties, asking for help to show love, thanking for life and blessings, asking Our Lady to have her maternal care for us, etc. The popular and particular piety and devotions, which are often also occasioned by important family events, are precious treasures for the families.

Celebrating Sunday Eucharist, the Sacrament of the new covenant, the spouses may experience the moment of sealing anew the paschal covenant, the strength and incentive needed to live their marriage covenant in the "domestic church".

C. Spirituality of Exclusive and Free Love (AL, 319-320)

The spirituality of the couples lies in belonging completely to another person, giving of self for others, "supporting one another, growing old together and in this way reflecting God's own faithfulness." A firm decision is required for conjugal love, since "a person who cannot choose to live forever can hardly love for even a single day" Pope says. "Each spouse is for the other a sign and instrument of the closeness of the Lord" who says, "Behold, I am with you always, to the close of the age." (Mt. 28:20)

The couples' love reaches the height of its freedom "when each spouse realizes that the other is not his or her own, but has a much more important master, the one Lord." They realize that none other than God "can completely satisfy his or her needs." Exclusive personal relationship with God will make someone discover the deepest source of the meaning of life. Just as in the Holy Trinity each person is defined as "for the other" through relationship and procession, so also in the family each one is "for the other" through their lasting graceful relationship (and procession) as husband and wife, as father-mother and children, and as brothers and sisters, and as friends. In the family our relationships are the most intimate and mystical definition of our own person.

D. Spirituality of Care, Consolation and Incentive (AL, 321-325)

God calls Families to bestow life and care for life. Pope says that Family "has always been the nearest 'hospital'. So let us care for one another, guide and encourage one another, and experience this as a part of our family spirituality." The couples are "mutual reflections of that divine love which comforts with a word, a look, a helping hand, a caress, embrace." To form a family, Pope says, "is to resolve to be a part of God's dream, to choose to dream with him, to want to build with him..."

"All family life is a "shepherding" in mercy. Each of us, by our love and care, leaves a mark on the life of others." Pope says. Each spouse is a "letter of recommendation" (2 Cor 3:2-3), "fisher of men" (Lk. 5:10), each "casts nets" in the name of Jesus (Lk 5:5), a farmer who cultivates the soil of his/her beloved and brings out the best in them.

It is a profound spirituality manifested when everyone in the family is seen with the eyes of God and to see Christ in them. Jesus is our model in this. Jesus looks directly and lovingly to those who are gazing at him; he does not overlook the presence of anyone. This loving attention gives rise to tenderness which can "stir in the other joy of being loved. Tenderness is expressed in a particular way by exercising loving care in treating the limitations of the other, especially when they are evident."

Family which generates life within goes forth to spread life by caring others and seeking their happiness. Thus Pope says: "When a family is welcoming and reaches out to others, especially the poor and the neglected, it is a 'symbol, witness and participant in the Church's motherhood.'" Very meaningfully the final blessing for the new couple at the Wedding Mass expresses this wish for them to receive the poor and the needy who come to them.

The family that lives its spirituality as the 'domestic church' becomes a vital cell for transforming the Church and human society at large, injecting into giving for them the 'familial' touch.

We urgently need to rediscover the richness of the teachings of our Teacher and Master Jesus and the Church regarding marriage and the family and "see the deeper meaning of their journey through life." Pope says: "no family drops down from heaven perfectly formed; families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love. This is a never-ending vocation born of the full communion of the Trinity, the profound unity between Christ and his Church, the loving community which is the Holy Family of Nazareth, and the pure fraternity existing among the saints of heaven." Our contemplation of the fullness of love and communion which God holds out before us, leads us on our journey through life marked by limitations and frailties, and with prayer to the Holy Family.

E. Other aspects of Spirituality of Marriage and Family (additional)

To this summary of the spirituality mentioned in the Apostolic Exhortation Joy of Love, I would like to make reference to the following aspects of the spirituality of the family as well.

The first aspect is that each member of a family experiences the fundamental Christian call of Baptism and Confirmation to be a disciple of Jesus and to follow him closely. At the time of marriage, they experience a Divine call, a vocation for married life and family. The more the couples experience this call, the more they are able to center their life in Jesus and grow in loving communion with him, who becomes the source of the daily communion in their family life.

Secondly, I would like to emphasize the aspect of the Spirituality of pastoring or shepherding by the Family itself. Family is the "Domestic Church". Everyone in the family and particularly the parents and elders, shares in the shepherding mission of Jesus by forming family which sanctifies, teaches and governs at the domestic level. The parents and the grand parents are truly "pastors" in and of the "Domestic Church" after the example of Christ who shepherds us as priest, prophet and king.

Thirdly, extensive discussions have been done on a variety of difficult family issues such as irregular marriages, divorce and remarriage, mixed marriages, marriage of the same-sex, singleparent family as matters of critical and painful situations, also as needing pastoral attention and care. Yet very important is also to note the spirituality, the day-to-day spiritual living of these persons and families in crisis and sufferings, a difficult or 'mixed' manner of participating in Christ's suffering. We feel a proper and positive discernment needs to be done regarding the specific spiritual life of these people living in these kinds of marriage or union.

Fourthly, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is experienced by families as indispensable for family spirituality. This Sacrament brings repentance for sins, an experience of God's love and mercy, joy of forgiveness and reconciliation. Pastoral guidance, discernment and integration to the society are experienced as moments of healing of wounds, building of bonds and receiving spiritual consolation.

II. Shepherding in Spirituality of Marriage and the Family

After a brief outlining of the spirituality of marriage and the family as presented in the last chapter of the Apostolic Exhortation, "Joy of Love", we are now ready to take up the aspect of shepherding or pastoral care in view of the spirituality as illustrated above. In dealing with this section I put forward the following areas of pastoral care for promotion of marital and family spirituality. This pastoral care, the shepherding function of the Church, belongs primarily to the families themselves, and to ministers involved in family apostolate, Priests and Bishops.

It should be mentioned in this context that the radical novelty of the Apostolic Exhortation is the emphasis for a change of pastoral attitude and the ways or methods of pastoral care to be given, while grounded on the fundamental doctrine of the family. We must view our subject of promoting spirituality of marriage and the family in that perspective. Providing Spiritual accompaniment constitutes the core of our pastoral outreach and care.

1. Vocation to the Discipleship of Christ

In the midst of contemporary crisis of faith, what is needed most is the basic formation of every Christian with regard to the Profession of Faith, Celebration of Sacraments, Christian Moral Life and Life of Prayer. In this Christian formation the faithful should have a personal experience of God's love, mercy, forgiveness in Jesus, whom he commits to follow in the situation of his or her life. This is a personal call and a fundamental vocation of every Christian, based on which the Christian life continues gradually to completion and fruition. This fundamental, sound and experiential formation is given to all the Christians before they make a choice of state of life, either of married life, priestly life or Religious life. This is given through catechism to the children, sacramental preparation, youth formation programs.

2. Marriage and Family Life as Divine call

Marriage and family life should be viewed and presented as a Divine Vocation, a Call from God, like the call to Priesthood and Religious Life. Marriage and Family should be seen both from human and divine perspective: God's plan, his dream at the time of Creation, unity of man and woman created in the image of God, and reflecting the oneness of God of the Trinity, the unity of the human and the divine in the new creation of the Second Adam, the incarnated Son of God, and the indwelling of God as Emmanuel in the family, etc. Marriage is also a call to fruitfulness of love manifested in the transmission of life and education of the children. The nuptial communion of the spouses is the mirror of communion between God and humanity, between Christ and his bride, the Church, which is being signified and actualized in

mutual relations of spousal love. Sharing in the Paschal mystery of Christ comes as a call from Jesus himself in their everyday life. It is important to note the oneness of call to holiness either lived in the Family or in the Priestly and Religious vocations. However different ways the shepherded and shepherd, the servants and those served belong to the same sheepfold of holiness in Christ the Lord. We are all encouraged, consoled and fed by one another's holiness of life. This communion is strengthened as we pray for one another to our God, our Heavenly Father.

In our general pastoral care to the young people who are willing to respond to the vocation to marriage and family we need to present the beauty, truth and values of marriage and family: (a) as in God's divine plan, and not simply as human (social) institution and not in a legalistic and moralistic way; (b) as vocation to holiness which is to be experienced in married and family life according to the situation and journey of life under the guidance of the Spirit.

3. Preparation to respond to the Divine call to Marriage and Family

All the preparation for marriage, either remote or immediate, should mainly be directed towards discernment of the call and ways to respond to it with commitment of love for and acceptance of each other. Bio-sexual education, psychological maturity, social relations, Biblical family stories, theological reflection and spiritual motivation should accompany initial formation as well as during the post-nuptial period of some years.

The steps that we may take in our pastoral care is: accompaniment for discernment of their vocation and decision-making, catechetical instructions, sexual life and relations, spiritual programs like retreats, exposures, mutual sharing in groups, etc.

4. Marriage and Family Celebrations

Wedding or celebration of marriage should be a celebration of love and communion of the human and the Divine in all its aspects. The ceremony should reveal the mystery of communion,

liturgy should signify that mystery and the Word of God be proclaimed and preached accordingly. Everyone should feel some amazement at the working of God in a very human way on human couples. Let the marriage be a spiritual and prayerful experience for the would-be-couples and for the community present and above all for the pastor who presides over the covenantal ceremony in persona Christi. Family celebrations at different occasions and anniversaries should be observed socially and spiritually among the close ones in the extended families to experience with joy and gratitude, the gifts of persons, their vocation and contribution in family life, bond of relationships and mission of the family.

5. Love in Marriage

In pastoral care the most important matter to deal with is the “love in marriage”. “We cannot encourage a path of fidelity and mutual self-giving without encouraging the growth, strengthening and deepening of conjugal and family love.” St. Paul’s Hymn to Love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 depicts love with beauty and novelty and in human concrete terms in marital life. In this both couples and the pastors are involved in shepherding the family in the process of love.

In our pastoral care we provide opportunities to come together with other couples, to share their experience of love, to listen to the examples and witnesses of other couples, joining a group of married couples, like Marriage Encounter Group, Couples for Christ, other Spiritual movements for the married, etc. The Small Christian Communities, as Communion of families or domestic churches shall be a locus for evangelization of families, of family support groups as well as celebration of love and communion as an ecclesial community. Different Seminars and retreats for young couples, counseling, accompaniment and discerning the will of the Spirit shall be other means of pastoral care.

6. Journeying with People living in irregular situations

Pope Francis acknowledges the various irregular and concrete situations of Marriage and Family in which many people live. In this situation, within the framework of the authentic teaching of the Church, and avoiding judgment or condemnation to anyone

with the notion of “ideal” marriage, Pope Francis calls pastors as well as evangelized lay persons to make journeys with these persons in their realities of life. Pastoral care in this area takes the forms of: (a) guiding as divine pedagogy recognizing the gradualness of it; (b) discerning in the Holy Spirit the will of God for persons concerned; and (c) integrating them who feel alienated from God and the Church with “logic of pastoral mercy”. This journey together both by the family who are living in fragile, complex and irregular situations and by the pastors will be full of spiritual experience and beneficial to both of them. The objective of the pastoral care is to strengthen their conjugal love, helping to heal wounds and to prevent possible breakdown. This is the most important pastoral care needed in difficult moments of their life.

7. Shepherding through Pastoral Visits and Prayer

Pastoral care through guiding, discerning and expressing pastoral mercy should be accompanied by family visits, which however, should go beyond socializing. Family visits should be an experience of love and concern of the Church for the family visited, of communion of the shepherd and shepherded, of the presence of sacred in the midst of the family and of the sharing of the events and needs. Pastoral visits should be concluded with prayer: of praise and thanksgiving, prayer of asking God’s mercy and forgiveness, prayer of petitions for different needs of the family.

Shepherding should mean praying. In pastoral accompaniment praying will make everyone aware of the indwelling of God, his amazing and consoling presence, and His ever faithfulness to His call and promise. Examples of the fruitfulness of prayer are innumerable.

8. Spirituality of Mixed Marriages

Those Christians who are married to a partner belonging to other ecclesial communities or other religions should experience more pastoral care and attention, especially accepting and receiving the couples and their children with positive motive and approach, regularly visiting them, inviting them in the celebrations and in different parish programs; in no way they should feel that they

are outside of the Church and her care. Because of the care, the couples will become convinced of the meaning of their life; they shall be inspired to share their own spiritual stories which are at times so positive and at other times tragic as well. Their spiritual stories shall be treasure which will enrich the Church as well as her mission of evangelization.

Conclusion

Any genuine aspect of our life on earth concludes in the spiritual, into spirituality, which is its inner core. The spirituality of the Family is the wholeness or totality of married and family life. It is the integration of all the different facets of marriage and family life. This wholeness and integration brings forth the core of the Gospel of Family. Love in the Family flourishes as the “Joy of Love”; and we conclude, with the words of Pope Francis that “The joy of love experienced by families (domestic churches) is also the joy of the Church.” (AL. 1)

VII. REPORT OF THE FABC OC AND OLF JOINT SEMINAR

From May 16 – 20, 2016 ninety-nine (99) participants composed of 14 bishops, 24 priests, 2 religious nuns, and 59 lay leaders, who are all involved in family ministry, gathered at the Salesian Retreat House in Hua Hin, Thailand. They came from 14 distinct Asian neighbors (Bangladesh, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam) in order to listen and reflect together on *Shepherding Families in Asia*, focusing on current challenges and responses. Specifically, this community meant:

1. To understand current challenges from specifically Asian perspectives on marriage and family life that are contrary to genuine Christian teaching;
2. To empower bishops and priests with insights, means and guidelines in strengthening and safeguarding the sanctity of marriage and family life; and
3. To motivate the participants to identify, explore and devise pastoral plans to promote and strengthen good Christian

families after the example of the Holy family in Nazareth, sustained by the Trinitarian relationships.

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FABC Papers:

145. Theological Reflections on the Family in the Lead up to the 14th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the Family October, 2015, Prepared by Fr. Vimal Tirimanna, CSsR, May 2015
146. Towards Responsible Stewardship of Creation An Asian Christian Approach, Edited by Fr. Clarence Devadass, Executive Secretary, FABC Office of Theological Concerns, June 2015
147. Catholic, Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic Declarations on Climate Change, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Twenty first session Conference of the Parties (COP 21), Paris, France, 30 November - 11 December 2015, Edited by Fr. Raymond L. O'Toole, SFM, FABC Central Secretariat, December 2015
148. "50 Years After Inter Mirifica: Asian Communication Challenges", 18th Annual Bishops' Meet, FABC Office of Social Communication, March 2016
149. "Give Me A Drink (Jn 4:7): The Challenges of New Evangelisation and Creative Pastoral Responses", Fifth Bishops' Institution for Theological Animation [BITA-V], Edited by Fr. Clarence Devadass, Executive Secretary, FABC Office of Theological Concerns, December 2016
150. FABC Papers Periodic Index (Papers 126-150), James H. Kroeger M.M., April 2018
151. "The Catholic Family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy", XI FABC Plenary Assembly, Colombo, Sri Lanka, FABC Central Secretariat, March 2017
152. Asian Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of Nostra Aetate, Part 1, Bishops' Institute for Religious Affairs - BIRA VI, Edited by Fr. William LaRousse, MM, Executive Secretary, FABC Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (OEIA), June 2017

153. Asian Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of Nostra Aetate, Part 2, Bishops' Institute for Religious Affairs – BIRA VI, Dialogue with Religions in Asia and Interreligious Marriage, Edited by Fr. William LaRousse, MM, Executive Secretary, FABC Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (OEIA), June 2017
154. Asian Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of Nostra Aetate, Part 3, Bishops' Institute for Religious Affairs – BIRA VI, Dialogue with Religions in Asia and Interreligious Marriage, Edited by Fr. William LaRousse, MM, Executive Secretary, FABC Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (OEIA), June 2017
155. Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Myanmar and Bangladesh, 26 November – 2 December 2017, organized by Catholic Bishops' Conference of Myanmar and Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh, edited by FABC Central Secretariat, December 2017
156. Business in the Context of *Laudato Si'* - 1) *Laudato Si'* & Christian Business, 13 November 2016, organised by FABC Climate Change Desk in collaboration with the Christian Business Forum for Climate Change. 2) Business Sector's Response to *Laudato Si'*, 6-7 November 2017, organised by FABC Office of Human Development - Climate Change Desk with FABC Central Secretariat and the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand, edited by FABC Office of Human Development - Climate Change Desk. Conferences sponsored by CAFOD, December 2018

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