

# MARRIAGE AND CHRISTIAN FAMILY

## An Ecclesial View

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*Abstract:* It is in families that Christian values and traditions are shaped and transmitted to the following generation. Studying the ecclesial perspective on Christian marriage and family, the author claims that if families fail in this sacred duty, the future of the Church is bleak. With the help of various documents of the Church, the author analyses the concept and content family. She continues to consider the vision of the Church regarding the marriage as a covenant and sacrament. She stresses the sacredness of the institution of family because Christian marriage, which is at the root of family is made in Christ. For this reason it becomes a sacrament of the Church. Since family is the basic unit of the society, in ecclesiastical perspective, it is a miniature Church, which has a prophetic mission with its implications for the society. The study concludes with an admiration for the pastoral letters and encyclicals about an ideal familial situation in the Church, painting the family in attractive colours. She also makes a plea to the Church to get involved with the families and to understand and appreciate the daily trials and hardship that the members of the family, especially the parents undergo.

*Keywords:* Church, encyclicals, covenant, family, body of Christ, morality, marriage, sacrament, Domestic Church, sacramental sign, sanctification, grace, Eucharist, mission, pastoral letters

### 1. Introduction

“Love one another (Jn 10:18); each one forgive the short-comings of others. Love and forgiveness pave your way to peace on earth and eternal joy in heaven.” In the testament that he composed for the parishioners of his home parish, Chavara presented love as the only force in the world that can bring eternal bliss in the world to come. This love is expressed in various ways in the Church. In this brief study, we are taking a cursory glance at the ways in which the love and concern that the Church has for families of the believers has been

expressed in the recent official documents of the Church that have an impact on the families.

The Church has always preferred the biblical and personal word *covenant* to the legal word *contract* when it referred to marriage. The reason for this constant use of covenant as a referent to marriage is the thought that marriage is rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent. The essence of Christian marriage lies in it's being an interpersonal covenant and communion of love, which is permanent and exclusive in nature. The covenant is not established just on account of the mutual consent of a man and woman to marry each other, rather on account of their Christian faith, which impels them to represent Church as the body of Christ.<sup>1</sup> Consent and the subsequent contract make a marriage a secular institution, but it is faith and the fidelity that makes it a covenant.

The future of Church depends on the healthy existence of Christian families. It is in families that Christian values and traditions are shaped and transmitted to the following generation. If families fail in this sacred duty, the future of the Church is bleak. If the institution of family is in crisis, the Church itself is in crisis. Taking this grave situation onto account, Vatican II reintroduced the early Christian tradition by designating the family as "domestic Church."<sup>2</sup>

Christian family today is placed in a world of competition, exploitation and greed where life has become the most expendable commodity, where love has become equivalent of sex and where sex has become the best seller among the young and old alike. In the accelerated world, it is impossible for a Christian to subscribe to the modern value system without counter witnessing to the Christian values. In such situations the Church feels the great need of helping families to be truly Christian in the modern world.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*Gaudium et Spes*, 26 considers the right to establish a family as one of the basic rights of human beings. "Therefore, there must be made available to all men everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing, and shelter; the right to choose a state of life freely and *to found a family*, the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate information, to activity in accord with the upright norm of one's own conscience, to protection of privacy and rightful freedom even in matters religious."

<sup>2</sup>*Lumen Gentium*, 11.

<sup>3</sup>*Familiaris Consortio*, 18. *Familiaris consortio* is the post-synodal apostolic exhortation by Pope John Paul II on the role of the Christian Family in the Modern World, which was promulgated on November 22, 1981. It describes the position of the Church concerning the meaning and role of marriage and the family, and outlines challenges on the way to realizing that ideal. It defines marriage as a personal union

*Gaudium et Spes*, in §§47-52, speaks of the dignity of marriage and family. The wellbeing of the Christian society is intimately connected with the healthy state of marriage and the family. However, in the modern world, the dignity of this institution is not guarded as it should be and marital love is often degraded by selfishness, pleasure seeking and disrespectful practices. In addition, modern economic, socio-psychological and public conditions are seriously disrupting the traditional and delicate web of the Christian families.

The covenant of marriage sets up an intimate sharing of married life and love as instituted by the Creator and regulated by God's laws, because "God himself is the author of marriage."<sup>4</sup> The human action in which spouses give themselves to each other and accept each other results in an institution, which is stable by divine decree.<sup>5</sup> This sacred bond aimed at the good of the couple, their children and of the society does not get altered at human pronouncements. Since God is the author of marriage he has endowed it with various values and purposes. The dignity, stability, peace and prosperity of the family itself and of human society as a whole have their provenance in God. The institution of marriage and married love are, by their nature, directed at the companionship that the husband and wife share and the begetting and upbringing of children. It is in these that Christian marriage finds its fulfilment. In their marital covenant, the couple help and serve each other in their intimate union of persons and activities. They are further helped by their children to experience and increase their sense of oneness through them. On the one hand, the children, as living members of the family contribute in their own way to the sanctification of their parents. On the other hand, inspired by the

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in which the spouses reciprocally give and receive (13). Speaking of the family, the document also restates the mind of the Church regarding artificial birth control stated earlier in *Humanae Vitae*, and mentions opposition to abortion in brief. It also discusses the responsibility of the family regarding the future of the children, especially their education, the expectations of the family regarding the larger society. The document delineates the role of religion in the daily life of the family. The document relates the family to several of the sacraments, particularly marriage, and strongly urges family prayer. The document restates the permanency of union for all members of the Church united in marriage, rejecting the acceptability of alternative arrangements, such as trial marriages, exclusive civil marriages, and unions with no publicly recognized bond such as cohabitation (80-82).

<sup>4</sup>*Gaudium et Spes*, 48.

<sup>5</sup>It also has become solid in the eyes of society, but in a different way. The difference consists in the fact that in the civil marriages, separation is possible where the husband and wife may be released from their obligations to each other.

example and family prayer of their parents, children and all who live within the family more readily discover the way to more perfect humanity, holiness and salvation.

The Church regularly invites and encourages married couples to nurture and cherish their marriage with undivided devotion. The divine providence perfects and raises this love by a special grace. The acts by which married couples are intimately and chastely united to each other and in a lasting manner are honourable and respectable in the eyes of the Church. When they are carried out in a truly Christian manner with respect for each other, they express a mutual giving in which they enrich and cherish each other.

Marriage and marital love are by nature ordered to the procreation and education of children. Children are the gift of marriage and greatly contribute to the good of the parents themselves. By means of the genuine practice of marital love and an orderly family life, the couples cooperate with the divine design of the Creator. It is the teaching of the Church that the very nature of marriage demands procreation and the mutual love of the partners in marriage. However, even if children, who are longed for, are not forthcoming for one reason or another, marriage remains indissoluble as a sharing and communion for the whole of life.<sup>6</sup>

## **2. Family: The Concept and Essence**

Christian family is meant to be a space with an environment where the love of the spouses grows and is manifested in various ways. There the couple need one another for their entire life. Their love is the source of a future generation. Children are a crucial part of family life. However, they are not the reason but the result of their love. Family is a place where pleasant memories and inner joys are expressed and communicated in an intimate atmosphere of selfless love. In their parents' arms, children open their eyes to life, they satisfy their needs, they learn to love and care for others because they need them, they learn to need them because they love them. It is in a true family, that one feels the sense of worth and enjoys the dignity as a person.

Family is the place where values are generated, discovered, developed and transmitted. It is in the process of value generation and transmission in the family that the fundamental aspects of our personality are moulded. Just as our deepest values are learnt in the

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<sup>6</sup>*Familiaris Consortio*, 13.

family in the first few years of our childhood, so also, our most serious failures are often a product of the flaws in our early life in the family.<sup>7</sup>

It is in the environment of home that the formation and development of faith in children are realized. Our pilgrimage on earth to God is initiated in the family. As parents and children, when we live the dimension of faith, we experience the Fatherhood of God and learn to live as brothers and sisters. This experience of the children of God enables them to become loving parents, children, and siblings leads them to the human community and enables them to love the rest of humankind, to relate to them.

Family is the starting point of initiation and integration its members into social life. The first persons whom a child meets are his parents, siblings, and relatives. However, starting with the family and through the members of the family, the child begins to relate with others: such as neighbours and friends. This opens a child up little by little toward others. In order to educate its members properly, all the members of the family help one another to discover, through constant observation what God and the community expect from them.

### 3. Covenant of Marriage and Institution of Family

The idea of *covenant* was central to the Israelite notion of their special relationship with God. Yahweh is the God of Israel; Israel is the people of Yahweh. Together they formed a community of grace and salvation. Gradually, the people began to imagine this covenantal relationship in terms of marriage. Nowhere this analogy is more evident than in prophet Hosea. In marriage he was called to show his peoples the steadfastness of Yahweh's covenantal love for them and their infidelity.

The experience of covenant fidelity and its absence on several occasions opens the possibility of fidelity in marriage, which then becomes a prophetic symbol of the covenant. Yahweh's covenant fidelity experienced by the Israelites becomes an ideal to be imitated by men and women who choose one another in marriage. At the same time, it is a challenge to be accepted in every marriage. Covenant love in the bible is a love that is defined in terms of loyalty, service and obedience. The same is true of Christian marriage too. The love that is

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<sup>7</sup>However, *Gaudium et Spes*, 8 would observe other reasons for family discords. As for the family, discord results from population, economic and social pressures, or from difficulties which arise between succeeding generations, or from new social relationships between men and women.

demanded in a Christian marriage is love as mutual giving; a love that does not insist on its own way, a love that does not seek to dominate and control the spouse. The steadfastness of the covenant necessitates the Christian husband and wife to love each other faithfully. The first of the commandments of Yahweh makes this mutually faithful love exclusive and permanent and therefore an indissoluble communion of love.

#### **4. Sacrament of Marriage and Sacredness of Family**

Christian marriage is a challenge to which spouses respond as followers of the Christ who is for them the prophetic symbol of the fulfilment of the covenant promise of God. Christian marriage is both a covenant and communion of love between a man and a woman. This love is steadfast and faithful; it does not seek its own, it gives way and serves. Since marriage is a covenant and a communion of steadfast love, it is a permanent and exclusive state and by analogy, it a prophetic symbol of the steadfast covenant and community of love between Christ and his Church.

Marriage between two baptized Christians is a sacrament, one of the seven sacraments of the Church. Sacraments make visible the reality of God's love. In the sacraments, God continues in present visibility what he has already accomplished in the historical visibility of Jesus. God works through what the partners bring to their marriage as they administer the sacrament to each other. The love they share with each other makes the divine communion present to them.

A Christian couple entering into the covenant of Christian marriage allows God and Christ to be present as parties involved in it. This divine involvement is something essential to Christian marriage. It is in this way that marriage as a sacrament becomes a means of holiness. Marriage is a sacrament which transforms a human institution into an instrument of the divine action. In a sacramental union, marriage, which is a human act for a natural end and a human institution for natural life is raised to a higher level of dignity.

##### **4.1. Christian Marriage in Christ**

Bond of Christian marriage has in itself an essential religious dimension. Authentic marital love is included in divine love and is guided and enriched by the redeeming power of Christ. Marital love exists under the sign of Christ's cross, and it is fostered by giving and being given, forgiving and being forgiven initiating a continuous process of new beginning. The loving faithfulness of God is made

present by the love and faithfulness of Christians among themselves. Christian marriage is the most profound expression of this loving faithfulness lived out in the family, which is a Church-in-miniature, also called a domestic Church. Married and family life make an active contribution to the building up of the Church. That is why married couples have a special charism, a distinctive call, a gift and form of service, within the Church.

#### **4.2. The Sacrament of the Church**

God's love and faithfulness in Jesus Christ applies to people in activity. They are therefore present in human life in a visible and truly human way, that is, through the service of the Church as the community of believers. The love and faithfulness of God are made present by the love and faithfulness that Christians have for and towards each other. The inner connection between marriage and the Church is most clearly expressed in the solemnization of marriage. As a sacrament of the Church, marriage is a prophetic symbol, and it reveals and celebrates the intimate communion of life and love between a man and a woman, between God and God's people, the Church. The sacramental aspect of marriage consists in the couple's participation in the life and love between Christ and his Church. This connected meaningfulness is behind the claim that marriage between Christians is a sacrament. In and through the mutual love of the spouses, God is present in a Christian marriage, gracing the spouses with his presence and providing for them models of steadfast and abiding love. This abiding presence of God is revealed in and through the Church.

#### **5. Family as a Sacramental Sign to the World**

In Jesus the full and definite meeting of God and his people are realized. Metaphorically, as the divine bridegroom, Jesus loves the people of God and gives himself to them as their saviour, uniting them to himself permanently, thus becoming one body - the mystical body. In doing so, he recaptures the original sense of marriage (Gen 2:24). He also emancipated the human conscience from the hardness of heart that had made them rebel against this original will of the Father (Mt 19:8). The essence of this truth is that he shared with us the gift of love by emptying himself, assuming our human nature, and by offering himself upon the cross (Phil 2:7) for his bride. In this sacrifice of love, he revealed that plan which God had imprinted upon the nature of man and woman since their creation. On account of this sacrifice,

Christian marriage becomes a real symbol of that new and eternal covenant ratified in the blood of Christ. The work of the Holy Spirit in the ambience of the sacrament renders the man and the woman, now united in marriage, capable of loving one another as Christ loves the Church.

The marriage between a baptized man and a baptized woman is a sacrament. On this we have the explicit teaching of John Paul II in the light of the Council of Trent: "Receiving and meditating faithfully on the word of God, Church has solemnly taught and continue to teach that the marriage of the baptized is one of the seven sacraments of the New Covenant."<sup>8</sup> On account of the sacramentality of marriage, the life of the couple in the Christian family becomes a sacramental sign. Pope John Paul II continues to note that by virtue of the sacramentality of their marriage, "spouses are bound to one another in the most profoundly indissoluble manner. Their belonging to each other is the real representation, by means of the sacramental sign, of the very relationship of Christ with the Church."<sup>9</sup>

Indian Christian families have a great responsibility to present their life as a living witness to those living around them. Their faith centred life ought to be a sign to others because of the sacramentality of their marriage. However, there are many forces which are at work to hamper the family's mission in the world. It is in this context, that the words of Pope John Paul II become more relevant: "At a moment of history in which the family is the object of numerous forces that seek to destroy or in some way to deform it, and aware that the well-being of society and her own good are intimately tied to the good of the family the Church perceives in a more urgent and compelling way her mission of proclaiming to all people the plan of God for marriage and the family, ensuring their full vitality and human and Christian development, and contributing to the renewal of society and of the people of God."<sup>10</sup>

In this context, we look for the positive steps that Christian families can take in order to bear witness to Christian love among the non-Christian people. The opinion of Pope John Paul II in this regard is that the social role that belongs to every family pertains by a new and original right to the Christian family, which is based on the sacrament

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<sup>8</sup>*Familiaris Consortio*, 13.

<sup>9</sup>*Familiaris Consortio*, 13.

<sup>10</sup>*Gaudium et Spes*, 47.



of marriage.<sup>11</sup> In view of the human reality of the love between husband and wife in all implications, the sacrament gives to the Christian couples a power of commitment to live their vocation to seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them to the plan of God."<sup>12</sup> Christian couples are invited to render political and social service to their fellow men in various ways. No Christian family is exempt from this mission of bearing witness to their faith.

The social sense of the Christian family impels the families to generous and disinterested dedication to social matters, especially in their concern for the poor and the disadvantaged - the hungry, the elderly, the sick and those who have no family. The strong recommendation of the Church regarding this subject to every Christian family is to be a sacramental sign to all wherever it is. This is how the Church becomes an "evangelizing community."<sup>13</sup>

## 6. Christian Family: A Miniature Church

The family is a human institution which involves a life in community, which in turn, implies trust, hope and growth on the psychological, moral and social levels. In hope and full trust in the Lord, the family is always in dialogue with God who is the source of love. In union with Christ, with whom the spouses and their children have been made one in baptism, the family has the right to offer with Christ a homage and worship to the Heavenly Father. Every Christian is invited to present his body as a living sacrifice (Rom 12:1) and hence, the Christian family by virtue of its sacramental grace becomes a living act of worship to God.

In the miniature Church that family is, the members play their priestly role. "This is the priestly role which the Christian family could and ought to exercise by an intimate communion with the whole Church, through the daily realities of married and family life. In this way, the Christian family is called to be sanctified and to sanctify the ecclesial community and the world."<sup>14</sup> By virtue of the death and Resurrection of Christ, in which the spouses partake in a new in their sacramental marriage, their mutual love is purified and made holy because the Lord has judged this love the worthy of special gifts,

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<sup>11</sup>*Familiaris Consortio*, 56.

<sup>12</sup>*Lumen Gentium*, 31.

<sup>13</sup>*Familiaris Consortio*, 55.

<sup>14</sup>*Familiaris Consortio*, 55.

healing, and grace.<sup>15</sup> In the sacrament of marriage, the sanctifying grace that is received in baptism is made more specific.

Irrespective of his or her state of life, everyone is called to sanctity. On account of the participation in the sacramental grace, Christian couples are included in this call to sanctity in a special way. The uniqueness of their call consists in the very sacrament of marriage which they have celebrated and experienced concretely in the actualities appropriate to their marital and family life. This celebration and experience remain the source of an authentic and profound marital and family spirituality that draws its inspiration from the biblical themes of creation, covenant, cross, resurrection. For this reason, the purpose of Christian marriage and family is to sanctify people, to build up the body of Christ, and finally, to give worship to God. The family life lived in sacramental holiness, is in itself a liturgical action glorifying God in the Church.<sup>16</sup>

The sanctification that takes place in the family when the members of the family respond to their specific vocations, is apostolic in nature. According to E. Schillebeeckx, "marriage is essentially a commission, a task of apostolic sanctification proceeding from the partners in marriage to each other and to the children and family as a whole. Marriage does not simply enter salvation by doing so; it also becomes an instrument of salvation effective within the personal relationship of marriage."<sup>17</sup> Pope Pius XI holds that Christian marriage is an effective means of sanctification and that in matrimony Christian couples share, in a special way, the priestly work of Christ by raising up a holy people, which is the Church.<sup>18</sup>

The Holy Eucharist, Vatican II tells us, is "the source and summit of the Christian life."<sup>19</sup> The Eucharist is the supreme act of Christian worship. The family, in a special way, participates in the priesthood of Christ by the celebration of this supreme act of worship. It is in this sacrament that the sanctifying role of the family is realized. Thus, the Eucharist becomes the "very source of Christian marriage."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>*Gaudium et Spes*, 49

<sup>16</sup>*Familiaris Consortio*, 56.

<sup>17</sup>E. Schillebeeckx, "Church Teaching on Marriage and Sexuality" in *Catholic Divorce: The Deception of Annulments*, eds. Pierre Hegy and Joseph Martos, trans. Daniel P. Thompson, , 180-200, New York: Continuum, 2000, 190.

<sup>18</sup>*Casti Conubii*, 41. *Casti Conubii* is a papal encyclical promulgated by Pope Pius XI on 31 December 1930 which stressed the sanctity of marriage.

<sup>19</sup>*Lumen Gentium*, 11.

<sup>20</sup>*Familiaris Consortio*, 57.

## 7. Family and the Prophetic Mission

Christian family is the most basic sacramental community of baptized persons where faith of each member is deepened and enriched. In their family life Christian spouses speak for and on behalf of Christ, building up the kingdom of God in history through the everyday realities that concern and distinguish its state of life.<sup>21</sup> The prophetic mission of the couples consists in welcoming, living and announcing the Word of God in by means of their lives. This proclamation of the gospel is a lifelong and continuous process in which the couples become witnesses to their faith in the heart of their family. According to the great catechism, Christian married couples help one another to attain holiness in their married life and in the rearing of their children. The parents by word and example are the first heralds of faith to their children.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, fostering of authentic and mature communion between persons within the family is the first and irreplaceable function of this school of social life. Here, the members receive the example and stimulus for the broader community relationships marked by respect, justice, dialogue and love.<sup>23</sup>

Faith is a gift and he who is firm in his or her faith has a responsibility to share it with others, and especially with their children. Regarding the responsibility of the parents in sharing their faith with children Pope John Paul II reminded Christians worldwide: "The Christian Family is the first community called to announce the Gospel to human persons during the growth and to bring him or her through progressive education and catechesis to full human and Christian maturity."<sup>24</sup> When the couples are conscious of their prophetic mission, they undergo a process of being evangelized in order to become an evangelizing community in the Church. This is the task that God entrusts the domestic Church both by virtue of their baptism and the sacrament of marriage. The special role of the family in the apostolate of evangelization is stated in the teaching of *Lumen Gentium*: "The Christian family proclaims aloud both the present power of the kingdom of God and the hope of the blessed life."<sup>25</sup> In order to carry out this evangelizing mission, the family has to be healthy in all the levels of its existence. For the good of the person and

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<sup>21</sup> *Familiaris Consortio*, 50.

<sup>22</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1656.

<sup>23</sup> *Familiaris Consortio*, 43.

<sup>24</sup> *Familiaris Consortio*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 35.

of society is closely connected to the healthy state of the family.<sup>26</sup> The future evangelization depends to a great part on the Church of the home.

### **7.1. Family Oriented to God**

Christian family is called upon to maintain the “the dignity and supremely sacred value of the married state.”<sup>27</sup> It is constantly in dialogue with God who is the basis of their faith, the source of the love that they share and the reason for the hope they cherish. Hence it always maintains a relationship with God to keep the supply of hope and love alive. When this relationship is lost, family life becomes devoid of all that is good and it withers away. *Familiaris Consortio* asserts this fact: “By means of the sacrament of marriage, in which it is rooted and from which it draws its nourishment, the Christian family is continuously vivified by the Lord Jesus and called and engaged by Him in a dialogue with God through the sacraments, through the offering of one’s life, and through prayer.”<sup>28</sup> Hence sharing the priestly ministry of the Church through liturgical celebration of holy Eucharist, penance and prayer, Christian families keep themselves incessantly God-oriented.

### **7.2. Family and the Social Mission**

As a community of persons, the family is called to be at the service of humanity in many ways. Fruitful married love expresses itself in serving life in many ways. Of these ways, begetting and educating children are the most immediate, specific and irreplaceable. In fact, every act of true love towards a human being bears witness to and perfects the spiritual fecundity of the family, since it is an act of obedience to the deep inner dynamism of love as self-giving to others.<sup>29</sup> Transmission of life is the greatest service of the family to the society and world. The Church always reminds the couples their responsibility of protecting and respecting the great good of life, every life<sup>30</sup> at every stage from birth to bringing the life to its full maturity by

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<sup>26</sup>*Gaudium et Spes*, 47.

<sup>27</sup>*Gaudium et Spes*, 47.

<sup>28</sup>*Familiaris Consortio*, 55.

<sup>29</sup>*Familiaris Consortio*, 41.

<sup>30</sup>*Evangelium Vitae*, 42. *Evangelium Vitae* is the encyclical written by Pope John Paul II and issued on 25 March 1995. It expresses the position of the Church regarding the value and inviolability of human life.

giving it physical, social, moral and spiritual education which are within their capacity.

Christian families, recognizing with faith all human beings as children of the same heavenly Father, will respond generously to the children of other families, giving them support and love not as outsiders but as members of the one family of God's children. Christian parents will thus be able to spread their love beyond the bonds of flesh and blood, nourishing the links that are rooted in the spirit and that develop through concrete service to the children of other families, who are often without even the barest necessities.<sup>31</sup>

Another area of service that Christian families can render to the humanity is to adopt and foster children who are either abandoned by their parents or have been orphaned.<sup>32</sup> These children are in need of affection of the family and which will help them to experience the love and providence of God to them.

Christian families are also called upon to offer its share in the development of society. This is a special obligation that Christian families have toward the society. Christians are advised not to turn into a closed and isolated family units. Instead, they are called upon to open themselves up toward other families and toward the society at large. It is in this way that Christian families ought to realize their peculiar social mission, rendering its first and fundamental contribution to the society.

As the domestic Church,<sup>33</sup> Christian family is called upon to carry out the three fold missions of Christ - prophetic, priestly and kingly.<sup>34</sup> In this domestic Church, evangelization, worship, catechesis and Christian services are to be made present in a vibrant manner. The families participate in the general mission of the Church as a believing and evangelizing community, as community in dialogue with God and as a community at the service of people.

## 8. Conclusion

In the plan of God revealed in the Scripture, the tradition and the teaching of the Church, Christian family finds its identity and mission, what it is and what it can and should do. Each family finds within itself a directive that cannot be ignored and that specifies both its

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<sup>31</sup>*Familiaris Consortio*, 41.

<sup>32</sup>*Familiaris Consortio*, 14, 41.

<sup>33</sup>*Lumen Gentium*, 11.

<sup>34</sup>*Familiaris Consortio*, 50.

Christian dignity and its responsibility. And since in the plan of God, family has been established as an intimate community of life and love, it has also received the mandate to bear witness to the love of God before the world as a community of life and love. It has also been given the mission to safeguard and communicate this love as a living reflection of God's love for humanity and the love of Christ for the Church. Every particular activity that the family undertakes is an expression of that fundamental mission. According to the biblical stories, on the one hand, God willed that humanity might come into the created world as a family; and on the other hand the same God that willed so, coming to the humanity chose a family as a place to be born, raised and to fulfil his mission to the humanity.

The Church feels the urgent need to make Christian families aware of the great plan of God for the sacrament of marriage and the constitution of a family, thus helping them develop into organs which would contribute to the renewal of the society in general and of the people of God. Since in the modern civilized societies, human beings are born to families, every human family is to make an ideal atmosphere for them to grow into responsible citizens of both the earthly and heavenly kingdoms for peace and joy to flourish in the world.

It is one thing to fill the family with pastoral letters and encyclicals in order to bring about an ideal familial situation in the Church, painting the family in attractive colours and totally another thing to get involved with the families and to understand and appreciate the daily trials and hardship that the members of the family, especially the parents undergo. In order to fulfil the obligation of the Church to serve the family, first of all, Church should understand the social and cultural situations around the world within which marriage is celebrated and family is lived today. This understanding is a necessary condition for the effective evangelization of the families in order to make them agents of evangelization. In fact, it is to the families of our times that the Church must bring the ever new hope of the gospel, because it is the families that are involved in the present conditions of the world and are called to accept and to live the plan of God for them.