

FAMILY

The Cradle of Vocations

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Abstract: The author expresses her conviction that genuine vocations to religious life are created in the congenial atmosphere of Christian families. Family, which is the first and most vital cell of the society is where life and love germinates, grows, flourishes and flowers. In the first ever school of spirituality that family is, children receive the seeds of vocation. An authentic Christian family is a communion of persons modelled after the Holy Family of Nazareth. Basing on the conciliar teaching that Christian family is the domestic Church, the author reflects on the role and responsibilities of the family in which love works as the principal power. Since family values practiced in love in the natural setting of a family, they leave a great impact in the life of children. The author sums up the reflection with a plea that as vocation is a precious gift of God, it has to be fostered in the family with the divine help because, it is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Keywords: vocation, family, child-rearing, laity, society, religious life, spirituality, Holy Family, communion, culture, love, Domestic Church, community, marriage, witnessing, conscience

1. Introduction

“Family is the basis of human society and the foundation upon which any community is built. Everything is really good with humankind when family life is orderly and flourishing” said Pope Pius XII. Family is a place where one experiences love, understanding, warmth and friendship. A Christian family which is grounded in prayer and deep faith helps its members to respond positively the call of God to various walks of life including religious and priestly life. A family in which the virtue of love between the parents is practiced with a touch of fear of God, children grow up in love for God and fellow beings. The vocations they receive and they choose enable them not only to find fulfilment in personal life, but also serve their fellow beings diligently. If a family is holy, it is a seedbed of useful vocations. “The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial

communion and for this reason it can and should be called a domestic Church."¹

Among the many instructions that St Chavara gave his parishioners at Kainakary, there is a note on Christian vocation to religious life and priesthood. Vocation, according to Chavara, is a matter of personal choice. The parents might guide them, help them discern and place before them all kinds of possible vocations a Christian youth can respond to. However, when children are old enough to determine their vocation, they should be given full freedom to follow their bent of mind. For, it is God who inspires them and it is their part to choose one or the other.

Vocation to religious life is only one of the many vocations that young men and women usually choose in response, both to their inner urge and faith that God is calling them to dedicate their lives to a life of commitment to him and to his people. A healthy family is considered to be the cradle of vocation to consecrated life. As we know, the seedlings of various vocations grow and flourish, and the dreams of many young people regarding their future are realized, because of the encouragement from their parents. Unfortunately, many seeds of vocation to consecrated life also fail to germinate and grow and thus, many fresh efforts are frustrated, because of the lack of encouragement and support from their parents. "Rear a child for your old age; save up grain for a famine" seems to be a common view among parents who do not wish their children to answer to God's call. For them, to have their children respond positively to religious vocation means losing support in their old age. However, it is the experience of many generous people that God will not allow any one's generosity to go unrewarded. The greater the sacrifice, the greater the reward, and God's reward is a hundredfold.

Vatican II has beautifully expressed its view on the relationship between the Church and a Christian family in the following manner: "The Christian family which springs from marriage and has a participation in the Covenant, will manifest to all men the saviour's living presence in the world, and the genuine nature of the Church."² The parents are reminded of their obligations in leading a virtuous life and radiating the love of God to all humankind. The various degrees and levels of formation begin in the family, which is the primary arena

¹*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, New Delhi: Theological Publications of India, 1994, 405.

²*Gaudium et Spes*, 48.

of formation in the life of an individual. Since family plays such an important role in the life of an individual, the reflection in the following pages examines the roles and responsibilities of a family in discerning, nurturing and realizing the vocation of each member there and positively helping them to respond to the call of God.

2. The Christian Family

According to John Paul II, a family finds in the plan of God the creator and redeemer not only its identity, but also its mission.³ It is composed of individuals who are growing and responding in faith and love to God in Jesus Christ.⁴ Its mission concerns its members. The family has a great role to play in each individual's life, and it is in the heart of family that is rooted in Christian values that a religious vocation takes root first. As a young member of the family grows, this gift of vocation is nurtured in the family by means of the encouragement and cooperation of the parents and siblings. The Church believes that the family is ordained by God as the basic ecclesial unit to perform certain essential functions not only in the Church, but also in the society, for the members of the society and for the kingdom of God.

3. Family as the First and Vital Cell of the Society

Since the creator of all things has established conjugal partnership as the beginning and basis of human society, family is the first and vital cell of society.⁵ It is to the family that faithful are born and it is within the family that they find the first lessons of the social and ecclesial virtues that are the animating principles of the existence and development of both the Church and the society. Like any other living reality, family too is called upon to be planted, develop and grow.⁶ Family is the place of origin and the most effective means for humanizing the society.

4. Life and Love in Family

Family is the sacred place where life breeds and love matures and so it is the cradle of life and love. Family is for love and for life; in the

³John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, Bombay: St. Paul's Press, 1987, 28.

⁴M. Thomas, *Family Life: A Christian Perspective*, Madras: St. Paul Publications, 1982, 51.

⁵John Paul II, *The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*, Vatican: Polyglot Press, 1994, 67.

⁶*Familiaris Consortio*, 90.

family, one experiences, learns, and develops better not when love is kept selfishly but when it is given generously. Life begins in a family as a result of the mutual love of the couples. Parents transit their faith in love by living and being real Christians.⁷ When children perceive the generosity and Christian meaning of life through the words and deeds of their parents and grandparents, they gradually learn to follow their example and are oriented towards religious values.

The very experience of communion and sharing characterizes the daily life in the family as it represents the first and fundamental contribution to society. The relationship between the members of the family are inspired and guided by the law of free giving. By respecting and fostering personal dignity in each and every one as the only basis for value, this free giving takes the form of heart-felt acceptance, encounter, dialogue, availability, generous service and deep solidarity.⁸ A mature communion between the members of the family is an exemplary stimulus for the broader community and social relationship marked by respect, justice, dialogue and love. A Christian family is an image of and sharing in the partnership of love between Christ and the Church. It has a special vocation to bear witness to the paschal covenant of Christ by constantly radiating the joy of love and hope.⁹ It is inspired and guided by the new law of the Spirit to exercise its service of love towards God and towards the fellow human beings. The sharing between the members helps them to experience the Trinitarian love and becomes a source of joy.

5. Family as the First School of Spirituality

The spirituality of the family flows from the relationship that the members exercise between themselves and God. It is founded upon God's love for us and on the Gospel command to love one another. The family as a domestic church and as a community of love and faith, is responsible for the virtuous lives of its members and their spirituality. The family is the first school of the preliminary lessons of the doctrine of spirituality in the basic catechism. Maintaining a family spirituality is to be distinguished from mere educational responsibility of the parents and the attitude of respect towards the parents demanded from the children. All these are indeed, included in a family spirituality, which goes beyond these aspects. It is a

⁷M. Rebeiro, "Life and Love in the Family," *Jyotir Dhara* 8 (2006), 11-13, 11.

⁸*Familiaris Consortio*, 64.

⁹*Familiaris Consortio*, 52.

communitarian relationship that governs the attitude of each member, so that no one reacts as an isolated individual, but shares responsibilities together with others, without losing the irreplaceable uniqueness of their individual personalities.¹⁰

6. Holy Family: A Model for Today's Family

Parents have been entrusted with the grave responsibility of raising children made in the image and likeness of God. He provides all the tools and graces necessary to accomplish this commission. We find a portrait of true family unity in the Holy Family of Nazareth. God sent His Son into the heart of a human family. Joseph and Mary are thus timeless examples of authentic parenthood, especially in their conformity to the divine will and their dedicated service to God in Jesus.

As the chosen earthly father of Jesus, Joseph revealed the compassion, love and care of God the Father in his home. Parents today are invited to reveal the same mercy, forgiveness and compassion in the family as a child experiences God's paternity in him. As parents, Joseph and Mary taught Jesus important lessons of life. So too, following the example of Joseph and Mary, today's parents are study bound to guide their sons and daughters towards mature and responsible manhood and womanhood. When parents fail to get involved in their children's healthy transition into adulthood, by default, the world gets involved, pitching superficial and unhealthy images of masculinity and femininity at them through the news and unguided entertainment media.

7. The Family: A Communion of Persons

Pope John Paul II describes beautifully how family is a communion of persons. It is composed of a complex of interpersonal relationships, that of husband and wife, motherhood and fatherhood, filiations and fraternity, "through which each human person is introduced into the 'human family' and into the 'family of God'," which is the Church. "The Church thus finds in the family, born from the sacrament, *the cradle and the setting* in which she or he can enter the human generations, and where these in turn can enter the Church." The family finds in the plan of God "not only its identity, what it is, but

¹⁰J. Grootears and J. Selling, *The 1980 Synod of the Bishops on the Role of the Family: An Exposition of the Event and an Analysis of the Text*, Leuven: University Press, 1983, 155.

also its mission, what it can and should do." It is called to be a family of life and love. On the foundation of the self-giving love of husband and wife the family builds new intimate relationship of persons with their specific roles. Love is dynamic and self-giving as much as it is God's own love. The personal communion of love in the family reflects the Trinitarian communion."¹¹

8. Vocations Born in a Catholic Culture

All vocations are a gift of God and vocations to priesthood and religious life are the fruit of the life led in the Holy Spirit in the local Church. All the faithful are called to create a culture of vocations so that more people can hear the invitation of God to a committed life of service lived in pursuit of holiness. Vocations are born of a Catholic culture. Vocations flourish when the faithful truly live their Catholic faith, following Jesus. All of us need to live our faith with courage and joy. The vocation to religious life is a free choice and a candidate should recognize the validity of this gratuitous gift and at the same time appreciate every other Christian vocation. The candidate need a spirit of faith and a life which can respond to the Spirit, a life which is open to God and makes the person ready to enter religious life.

The Catholic culture is not only the result of families living an exemplary life, but also the life and joy shared by the consecrated people in their own way. Consecrated people have a special duty towards the youth and their choice of vocation. We need to teach them to love the Word of God and to participate in the Eucharist reverently and joyfully. This enables young people to grow in self-awareness and in their relationship with God. We should also offer our young ones many opportunities to come together and serve their neighbours in charity.

9. Role and Responsibilities of the Family

Marriage is the rock upon which the Christian family is built. Marriage comes into being when a man and a woman, forswearing all others, freely and exclusively give themselves to one another through an act of "irrevocable personal consent." At the heart of the act establishing marriage is a free, self-determining choice on the part of the man and the woman, a choice through which they give themselves a new and lasting identity. Marriage is an "intimate partnership" of "life and love." The institution of marriage protects and defends conjugal love -

¹¹*Familiaris Consortio*, 21.

that love which is, in fact, the life giving and animating principle. It must guard, reveal, and communicate love, reflecting God's love for His people and Christ's love for His Church. In his encyclical *Christifideles Laici* (1988), the Pope taught that the family is where one's duty toward the society begins. The family's particular task is to protect the virtues and values, by means of education of children, in such a way as to build up and promote the good of individual and of the community. The family to the extent to which it becomes conscious of this singular vocation and measures up to it, becomes a community of sanctification in which one learns to live meekness, justice, mercy, peace and purity of heart.¹²

Family is the environment in which Christian virtues are inculcated and are allowed to grow. Many consecrated and committed people credit their parents and families of origin for giving them a holy environment in which they discovered and responded to the true calling from God. The Church's pastoral care of families throughout the centuries - i.e., the ministry of strengthening them to love God and to love one another - has always been the most precious work for the life of the Church and of the world, and it often indirectly bears great "fruit" in the seeds that grow into religious vocations.

10. Love as the Principal Power

The task of the family is to live with fidelity of communion in a constant effort to develop an authentic community of persons. The inner principle of that task, its permanent power and its final goal is love; a family without love is not a community of persons and, in the same way, without love the family cannot live, grow and perfect itself as a community of persons. It is essentially a school, designed by God, for the evangelization and sanctification of all its members, and through them the larger Church. However, some of them, in a special way, as consecrated and committed members, by means of their special vocation, are set apart to play their exclusive role as signs of the kingdom.

11. Christian Family as the Domestic Church

Pope John Paul II takes up the image of family as the "Domestic Church" which was first used in *Lumen Gentium* of Vatican Council II, and explores its meaning. He observes family as "placed at the service of the building up of the kingdom of God in history by participating in

¹²Thomas, *Family Life: A Christian Perspective*, 75.

the life and mission of the church."¹³ The Church is the people of God and family being the domestic church is also the people of God. Every member of the Church is born to a family. God's call for its members is to be part of a family. It is a community which exhibits the willingness and effort to be present in a personal way to one another. It demands some intimate degree of sharing, caring and communicating. It necessitates the acceptance of the risks, difficulties, and sacrifices that the sharing involves. Family is the pilgrim people of God with one direction and unity, and as such it is a community of hope.¹⁴

Following Christ who "came" into the world "to serve" the Church considers serving families to be one of her essential duties.¹⁵ The Church draws near with loving concern to all who experience situations such as loneliness, isolation, depression, etc., for she knows the fundamental role which Christian families are called upon to play. Furthermore, she knows that a person goes forth from the family in order to respond to and realize in a new family unit the particular vocation in life.¹⁶ The divine mystery of the incarnation of the word thus has an intimate connection with the human family.

12. Christian Vocation and Family

As an image of the Church's life, family is a place where religious vocations would be produced, or rather, "planted." The family provides the seedbed, or to use a biblical analogy, the "good soil" in which the seed of a vocation may be planted and nurtured. Parents are the stewards of the vocations of their children, not the source. While God issues the call to religious life, parents and other members of the family have an essential role in amplifying the voice of God in the hearts and souls of their children. Life of prayer, devotion, Christian generosity and obedience to God's will that are manifested in the family become the context in which a young man or woman discovers a wider call to service and personal happiness.

Christian vocation is mark of God's special love for the person who receives it. The call implies an invitation to respond to his love and to accept the demands of love which in some way is the sharing of the cross of Christ. The capacity to love and receive love is an

¹³*Familiaris Consortio*, 66.

¹⁴M. Lawler and W. P. Roberts, *Christian Marriage and Family*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993, 82.

¹⁵*Letter to Families*, 1994, 2.

¹⁶*Letter to Families*, 1.

indispensable element in any relationship with God, with neighbours and with self. To relate in Christ's Spirit is to love, to become aware of God's love, and to transmit that divine energy to others with a loving and grateful response to the divine lover.

A Christian family is a Christ-centred family, guided by true love which is life-giving and light-giving, always experiencing the qualities of love as Paul describes them (1Cor 13:4-8). Only these qualities can hold the members of a family together in joy and in sorrow, in sunshine and in rain, in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad until death do them part.¹⁷ A Christian family is a confluence of a three-fold love - conjugal love, sacrificial love and filial love. The vocation to religious life has to be nourished in the family, which is deeply rooted in the love of Christ and Christian values.

13. Family Values in the Life of Children

Many sociologists have regarded family as the cornerstone of society. Without this basic unit of the social organization it is difficult to imagine how human society could function. The living examples of the parents and elders and the values learnt in the family help children both to suffer and rejoice out of love for others. For this kind of early education no school rivals an institution like the family. Mutual appreciation among the members of the family, high level of interpersonal communication, solidarity in tapping everyone's resources to deal with crises in a positive way and a determined effort to promote a value based and spiritual lifestyle help children to discern their direction of life in the future.¹⁸

14. Family as the Foundation of Witnessing to Christ

A Christian family is organized around Christian ideals, which are a source of wisdom and insight that provide family with meaning and power.¹⁹ Christian families are called to bear witness to Christ by the quality of their lives and by the way they relate to others. Christian witness should be born at home and outside by the way the members live and affirm one another, the way they face tragedies or share their joy. God has established the family as an intimate community of life and love. This role represents the dynamic and existential

¹⁷J. Kottoor, *Christian Family*, Madras: The Good Pastor Press, 1974, 5.

¹⁸M. Gottschalk, *The Family Revolution*, Princeton: NG Scepter Publishers, 1997, 125.

¹⁹Thomas, *Family Life: A Christian Perspective*, 77.

development of what it is. A Christian family is more than a natural family; it has the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love.

15. Family as the Natural Setting for Vocation

A Christian family's particular task is to protect and foster Christian virtues and gospel values, by means of education of children, in such a way as to build up and promote the good of individual and of the community. The extent to which a family becomes conscious of this singular vocation and measures up to it, it becomes a community of sanctification in which a member learns to live with meekness, justice, mercy, peace and purity of heart.²⁰ Christian parents, demonstrating a loving care for their children from their earliest year, communicate to them by words and example, a sincere and lived out relationship with God, made up of love, fidelity, prayer and obedience. In this way, parents encourage the holiness of their children and render their hearts docile to the voice of the Good Shepherd, who calls everyone to follow Him and to seek first the Kingdom of God. In the light of this blending of divine grace and human responsibility, the family can be considered a "garden" in which the seeds of vocation, which God sows generously, are able to grow to full maturity and blossom.

Blessed Virgin Mary responded to her vocation by means of her fiat (Lk 1:35). Many spiritual writers have fathomed this sublime moment in Mary's life. Intense was her extraordinary experience and grave was the decisiveness of that hour. Many have contemplated Mary's sublime personality before the angel, her deep attitude of listening, her courage to discern and her response of complete availability. This is the moment of her vocation. The vocation today is a proposal and an invitation extended by God in order to bring the saviour to today's world.

The parents in the family should be able to help their children to discern their own vocation in prayer, reading of the word of God and through their own loving examples. Normally, a vocation is born and matures in a healthy, responsible and Christian family background. Certainly, the formation houses play a crucial role of educating and training the candidates to religious life. However, the foundation of a genuine vocation is laid in the family and, in the final analysis, the future course is conditioned by it. Hence, each member of the family is responsible for the vocation of the children.

²⁰Thomas, *Family Life: A Christian Perspective*, 75.

16. Vocation as the Work of the Holy Spirit

Religious vocation is a call by which a person shares in the life of Christ with others.²¹ Furthermore, it is a call to continue through witness and service the salvific action accomplished by Jesus. This witnessing starts at home and it comes to perfection in religious life.

Response given to a religious vocation calls for transformation from within, affected by the power of the Word of God, which is listened to and held fast under the action of the Holy Spirit. Response to the vocation essentially is the work of the Holy Spirit. The action of the Holy Spirit is decisive and it transforms the person through teaching and guiding. The person undergoes a process of becoming, opening up oneself in the Spirit to the other and ultimately to God. It is in and through the Spirit that a person gives response to the divine plan of God.

17. Vocation and Formation

Formation of the candidate who has responded to the vocation positively, seeks to help him/her to acquire his or her identity as a religious and to deepen and mature his/her own personality. In various ways, formation is designed to enable the candidates to dedicate themselves to God in an effective and meaningful way in the eyes of the world. Formation is the work of the Holy Spirit in view of the apostolate and ministry by means of which the religious carries out their mission.²²

18. God's Call: A Gratuitous Gift

God's selection is absolutely gratuitous and stands in contrast to the human understanding of selection. Human beings choose something because it strikes them as favourable and as good for their happiness. Divine election, on the other hand, transcends and upsets all logical conclusions. The divine call is a matter of faith, not logic. It is a pure gift, not a reward. It is a sign of God's superabundant love for one and all.²³ Personal accountability and commitments are the core of a person's response to this call. God always provides a situation in which the recipient decides as a free being how to use the gifts he/she

²¹E. Schmiedeler, *The Child and the Problems of Today*, Bombay: Better Yourself Books, 1971, 8.

²²M. Anatharackal, *Psycho-Spiritual Dimensions of Formation*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2001, 165.

²³Anatharackal, *Psycho-Spiritual Dimensions of Formation*, 161.

has received. Therefore, vocation is fundamentally a dialogue between God who calls and the person who receives the call, and it is a gratuitous gift. In the call, one is made free to love God and others. The art of commitment should be practiced from the very early days of the individual's formation in the family.

19. Formation of Conscience

Family is the place in which one lays the foundation of one's conscience coming to know oneself in relation to others and ultimately to God. A conscience formed in Christian love and solidarity, leads to holiness. The necessary condition for the formation of a Christian conscience is that it be an integral part of education in the faith and at the same time part of the overall education given to the children.

Christian parents instruct their children in the basic teaching of the Church and bring them up in the values that the various stories of the Bible teach. Even before they start school, children come to know about God through the stories; they are aware of the soul, and have learnt the lesson that good is rewarded and wickedness is punished. Nothing has a greater influence on life than the impressions received in childhood. Christian parents accustom them to obedience, modesty, kindness, chastity and justice. They endeavour to train the young to recognize and discern the various vocations available to them and choose them with care and follow them willingly. In the case of a religious or priestly vocation, the Vatican II in *Optatam Totius*, reminds everyone to foster vocation: "The duty of fostering vocation falls on the whole Christian community. The greatest contribution is made by families which are animated by a spirit of faith, charity and piety and which provide as it were, the family is the first place."

20. Conclusion

Family is the cradle of personality development and character formation of young persons. The foundation of healthy life is laid in the family. A person who has not gone through the developmental stages in the family usually feels insecure and is likely to look for love, appreciation, significance and security. A conflicting family atmosphere in early life leaves the young person with a very shaky foundation. A personality built on an unstable foundation is likely or bound to have cracks with disturbing consequences. Today we perceive a number of issues even in those who have responded to the call to religious life. A telescopic observation of what had happened in their past life, especially in their childhood, reveals that the problems

really have their roots in their experiences and inadequate training in the family. A close interaction with these young people reveals the necessity of bringing down the distance between them and their children.²⁴ The good example of parents and the intimacy that they share with their children help them to look forward with hope and enthusiasm to live their life according to the plan God has for them.

One family cannot save the world just as one snowflake cannot make much of a difference, but the same God who allows snow to cause avalanches also inspires families to embrace the saving mystery of His son who was born into a family, so as to transform the current culture of death into a culture of life and love. In today's challenging world, we need more zealous consecrated people to be the sign of God's love to the world. Consecrated life is a stable form of living in which the faithful through their commitment to the evangelical councils of poverty, chastity, and obedience to follow Christ. They are guided by the Holy Spirit and are totally dedicated to God who is supremely loved. In this Year of Family, our prayer is that many young people might come forward responding to their vocation to embrace religious and priestly life so as to wake the world up with their witnessing life.

²⁴Gottschalk, *The Family Revolution*, 166.