

## The Family - an Existential Topic

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**Abstract.** *The present paper includes an analysis of the contemporary family in relation to the complementary concepts of couple and marriage. It offers three key principles that support the fostering of these models today. The anchors presented have both a scientific and a religious fundament and articulate important pillars for the family building and children upbringing. The decision of constituting a family should be axiologically funded and surpass the hassles of the postmodern contemporary society characterized sometimes by an uncertainty of values.*

**Keywords:** *Family, Couple, Marriage, Society, existence.*

### Introduction

The today re-evaluation of a concept such as that of family is a challenge in itself. Given the today societal and axiological mutations, we are challenged to question the general understanding and our personal views on the idea of family, human relationships, on the way we look at ourselves, and to try to identify axiological benchmarks for the functional development of these relationships.

The way we relate to our own persona and with others will model the way we will structure our couple and family relationships. The family is in fact the mirror of our relational behaviors and of the values, believes, and understandings that lay behind them.

During the last two years, The Romanian Orthodox Church constantly promoted the concept of family as an existential topic, as the year 2020 was dedicated to family, parents and children, and was named the” The homage year of parents and children pastoral care”. In the continuation of this line, 2021 was the year family was officially honored through a religious celebration established in the Church calendar as the Christian Family Sunday at the closest Sunday near the date of 15<sup>th</sup> of May. In the Catholic Church, the Pope Francis proclaimed 2021-2022 as the special pastoral care year dedicated to family, a year named” Familia Amoris Laetitia”. All these initiatives help the spiritual, pastoral and cultural actions dedicated to supporting families that confront the challenges of our times.

These general topics such as the family are re-analyzed and discussed today in society and the Church takes part and involves in these processes, as there are times when the new meanings attributed to the traditional concept of family are opposing the fundamental Christian values. In response, the Church offers its own meanings for the construct

of family and parental roles and by this, it tries a return to the established values and to the normality.

There are also several publishing initiatives undertaken by the Orthodox Church in this respect, volumes which are recently published and demonstrate the major concern of the Church for the family regarded as a foundation stone for the Christian spiritual edifice. The first two volumes represent an analysis of the contemporary family and of the parental roles offered by the two esteemed bishops of the Orthodox Church: *Family, children, youth*, published in 2020 at Renaşterea Publishing House in Cluj-Napoca, author: His Most Holiness Archbishop and Metropolitan Andrei Andreicuţ and *Parental Arms. On parents and children in the parable of the prodigal son*, issued in 2021, author: His Holiness Vicar Bishop Benedict Bistriţeanul. The third volume is a collective one and gathers works of different professionals: theologians, psychologists, specialists in educational sciences. Named *Contemporary Family: Challenges, principles and values*, the volume was issued in 2020 and offers scientific views that are convergent with the religious ones on the today family and parenting approach.

### **Conceptual re-significations**

The very initiative for the publication of the above-mentioned volumes is very significant for the actual need to revisit our own beliefs and understanding on what family (still) represent today. The fact that we need to reflect on family is in itself not a special act. It is in human nature to periodically ask existential questions: Who we are? What is our purpose?... What family is? The premise we start from is that the family topic is an existential one because the family is one of the vectors that define our life. For most of us, the family is the universe in which we spend the most valuable time of our existence, where we expect to find support, motivation, a space where we regenerate our resources and invest in meaningful relations, thus capitalizing emotions and feelings.

In close connection with the concept of family there is the concept of the couple and that of marriage. There are the three concepts that reciprocally relate. It is only natural that the family represents the accomplishment of a couple that decided to reciprocally decided to devote the life to each other and unify their destinies through marriage.<sup>1</sup> This linear model represents the traditional route for a relationship

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<sup>1</sup> A. Băran-Pescaru, *Familia azi. O perspectiva sociopedagogică*, Editura Aramis, Bucureşti, 2006; A. Bacus, *Cum să aveţi autoritate în faţa copilului*, Editura Teora, Bucureşti, 2009; Ion Albulescu, Adriana Denisa Manea, Iuliu-Marius Morariu, (eds.), *Education, Religion, Family in the contemporary society*, Saarbrücken, Lambert Academic Publishing, 2017.

accomplishment. In a strict sense, family represent a complementarity between a man and a woman, expressed in all aspects of life. In this sense, couples are associated with the biological, emotional, anthropological matrix that result from the union of two different partners, based on affective connections and reciprocal support.

Marriage, on the other hand, represent the essence of the kinship and the primary source of the social capital and of the positioning in the social reference group/groups. The marriage equally represents a legal contract, a financial partnership, and a sacred promise in front of the God for a permanent reciprocal dedication to each other. It is a personal and affective union and the starting point of a future family. The question is to what extent the pathway: couple – marriage – family is still a necessary or relevant path today? The three concepts are interconnected. The impulse to create a couple is based on the natural need to look for and to constitute a relationship, to share emotions and feelings, the need for a valued social status. The marriage is the act that gives the couple stability and transforms it into a family. So, it is only natural that a couple should ask themselves what kind of family they wish to build.<sup>2</sup> This is because the family is not a given state in itself, but a state the couple builds by a constant and continuing effort. In this logic, the founding of the family is the beginning of this continuing effort.

### **Three pillars of the family**

The complexity of the epistemological configuration of the concept of family is increasing in the nowadays society. It is rather appropriate to determine the extension of the term than to try a single definition. While making the task of defining the concept more difficult, the multiple perspectives undertaken usually in the effort to understand the construct - social, anthropological, religious, economical, juridical – offer us essential elements in understanding its extension. The family has proved to be the oldest and the most stable form on human cohabitation, insuring the perpetuation of humankind, evolution and continuation of life. Family remains a social phenomenon that develops and modifies along with the evolution of the society, thus having an accentuated historical character.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the question Why having a family? Represents an ever-topical question. Apart from the inherent answers related to the need for following a natural course of life, there are more

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<sup>2</sup> C. Glava, (co-author), *Familia contemporană: provocări, principii, valori*, Editura Renaș terea, Cluj-Napoca, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> R. Laub Coser, *The Family: Its Structure and Function*, New York, State University of New York, 1965.

objective reasons. The families constituted by marriage have certain socially valued features and advantages that make the marriage desirable. The marriage involves the two in a long-term contract, a fact which facilitates the emotional investment, thus developing the relational capital. The marriage relationship becomes an investment, From the financial perspective, the marriage involves the sharing of the economic and social capital for ensuring the couples stability and sustainability.<sup>4</sup> Another advantage of married couples is the improved relationship they get to have with the Community. The society includes a large majority of individuals that are in their turn involved in marital relations and tend to accept and valorize persons found in similar situations.

Family is a personal micro-universe: coherent in itself, with own laws and values, private and withdrawn from the exterior to some extent, having a certain interior dynamic. In the following, we will analyze three of the elements that build the identity of this universe which is defining our existence.

*The first fundamental element* is an axiological one: the family reflect certain values we believe in and thus has certain functioning principles. The consequences of this principle are:

- a. One should be conscious of the values that are important for her even before the marriage is constituted and consider them as fundamentals for building her future state and existence.
- b. One should be flexible in applying the principles and values by sometimes being ready to redefine them in a particular form, relevant for own family, according to the family evolution and with the changes in the socio-cultural context one live in.
- c. It is important to have the capacity of developing this repertoire of personal values and believes, by adding new ones, by deriving and nuancing the existing ones. There are moments when the derived values would give the couple the reasons for continuing, like being flexible, trying to preserve a balance, accepting that for the moment the relationship is challenged and looking for ways to work for the good of the family.<sup>5</sup>
- d. One should permanently remember that her relationship is based on marriage and stat from this premise.

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<sup>4</sup> P. Iluț, *Familia. Cunoaștere și asistență*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Argonaut, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> L. J. Waite, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off* *Financia*, Chicago, Doubleday, 2000; J. Twenge, *Generația internetului*, București, Editura Baroque Books and Arts, 2020.

The first lesson on the bases of this first pilon is: To look for answers at the question: What are the values in the spirit of which I want to build my family?

*The second fundamental element* is given by the fact that the family should be a personal universe which I only partially share with the exterior.

The consequences of this principle could be the following:

- a. To be interested in creating a personal, intimate milieu that family members enjoy being part of, with family customs, traditions, micro-behaviors, with shared activities that give satisfaction to all members of the family and with exclusive family time.
- b. To work for creating a secure milieu. This involves mutual respect and trust. The check-up key question could be: How do I want my partner to be or to become? How do I want my child to be? Self-confident? Courageous? Calm? I can have a contribution to this through my own relational behavior. On the other hand, being sincere and supportive are necessary. Being aware of how we express our affection, care, availability and being aware on what are our believes on what being a child, evolving and becoming mature represent for us can also inform our couple and family behaviors.

The second lesson could be: Understanding that the family is something I can build up, and that involves making the best use of what I have with what is given to me.

*The third essential element:* the once constituted family is not frozen in time, it has an interior dynamic, it constantly evolves. The couple must understand and accept the constant evolution as natural and that this implies a constant construction effort. The partners evolve as personalities. Moreover, the child up-bringing is a challenge in itself, with its inherent hassles such as the ones given by the changes of society and by the natural generations gap. In front of these touchstones, the family becomes a team that works for the common good. As parents, it becomes a must to stand by our children, to constantly support and offer help, to hope and pray for them. The example of Blessed Augustine who prayed her whole life for her husband and son return to the true faith must be taken as a guiding model.

The third lesson we may capitalize is that the couple should be willing to pay efforts for building up the family the whole way trough. The instruments in this respect could be: reciprocal support, acceptance and tolerance, accepting and embracing the good and the limits, the willingness to continue as a family.

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We have the favorable chance of living in a society where the traditional values are still respected and relevant, in which instances such as the Church and cultural and academic institutions are still relevant, where the model of Christian family is still supported and promoted. It is a duty to try to foster them further for the next generations. In this respect, the Church can offer genuine benchmarks in the continuing search for family identity in the nowadays context.