

Challenges among Young Families

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Judging from big data, the number of people on the Mainland getting married in the last five years has been steadily declining, while divorces are rising. Moreover, 80-90 percent of divorces take place during the first five years of marriage. The situation could be even worse, as many couples did not bother to register their marriage. We will share the challenges among young families by examining several aspects of family life and the level of concern for the family.

First of all, economic pressure is the most obvious challenge to young people on the Mainland. Likewise it affects, and is very challenging to a young family. In addition, a weak or even distorted family awareness is pivotal, and can determine whether a family could develop and renew itself. Furthermore, covert messages and misleading information in the media also lead the young astray. Young Christian families are affected by such an environment and values as well.

Parent-Child relationship

In general, a new family welcomes with great joy and grace the arrival of the first new life. As time goes by, education together with changes in the division of labour, rhythm and consciousness of the family members bring certain challenges. This is the so-called “first storm period” of a family, also known as the “renewal period.” Differences in parenting philosophy, increase in financial pressure, the compression of working hours, the intervention of the families of origin ... in a word, the time belonging to a couple is “compulsively” squeezed, and over a period of time, the young couple can feel depleted.

In terms of education, society always measures the success of a child's cultivation based on academic excellence. Even toddlers are caught up in a "fierce competition"; children in kindergarten start to learn the lessons of primary education.... In short, children "must not lose at the starting line."

Similarly, parents as role models are very important in family education. During the foundation stage of children's personality development, imperceptible influence is extremely important, such as a family praying, exploring faith and acquiring knowledge together.

In their school age, "play" is the main source of learning for children, so parents can use games and performances to help children learn. Bible drama, for example, is a very good opportunity to tell Bible stories. We often edit stories in the Bible a little bit to facilitate the performance, so each can shape their own character and voice. This can also allow children to experience and learn the sacraments and rituals of our Church in an interesting and vivid way, such as simulated eucharistic celebration and demonstration of baptism, etc. Children like these very much.

There is a need to pay attention to the Church's major festivals such as Christmas, by setting up a crèche (nativity scene) at home and explaining the related mission and stories one by one to children. Although it is common in kindergartens and societies to celebrate these festivals today, they know only the Christmas tree and gifts while discarding the core person, Jesus. Parents teaching their own children at home is therefore particularly urgent and important.

No matter how busy they are, parents must spend time with their children, by playing games, playing house and reading illustrated books together, for instance. Through this we can really enter the children's world, experiencing with children the wonderful changes of life and the diversity of creation. It is true that currently some places have prohibited infants, children and adolescents from entering the Church; nevertheless, the grace is to bring back the inheritance of faith to the family, which is also the birthplace of the Church. Back to the family means the roots of faith become more solid.

Intimate relationship

The core of intimate relationship is the couple's life. From the perspective of John Paul II's Theology of the Body, the life of a husband and wife reflects more specifically the love, respect, sacrifice and offering between a man and a woman. At the conscious level, many couples are unable to reach other areas of intimate relationship, such as serving one's family, life sharing, and spiritual conversation, etc. A healthy intimate relationship is based on the personal growth of the couple. Having a sexual relationship does not mean having an intimate relationship. If the sexual need is not satisfied, it can lead to extramarital affairs. Besides, current media propaganda, especially some idol dramas, makes people believe that the outside world is more exciting. The illusion brought by the media makes people like the new and hate the old easily. Moreover, the convenience of online social platforms has further facilitated extramarital affairs. Neglect of fidelity and the permanent bonds of marriage does the greatest harm to intimacy. Sayings like "stay together if we get along well, otherwise just go our separate ways" have given young people a false attitude and illusion regarding marriage.

There is nothing wrong with craving for intimacy, but how to treat and handle this kind of desire is critical. Young couples with limited understanding of intimate relationships are unable to see clearly the level of sexual needs among men and women. On the one hand, the reserve and shyness of the parents' generation fail to provide young people with a basis for facing sexual needs squarely; on the other hand, knowledge about sexual desire comes mainly from some informal channels. No wonder sex has been a taboo subject. The more it is hidden, the deeper is the root of trouble for the relationship between husband and wife. Growing alienation creates a widening gap in marital relations.

The communication between husband and wife

Communication is categorised into shallow and deep communication, effective and ineffective communication. Communication between husband and wife often unconsciously follows the communication model of their family of origin. While

accompanying young couples, I find that everyone is immersed in some kind of narcissism, always trying to solve problems with an attitude of changing the other person. The prevalence of male and female chauvinism; the one who earns more has more authority at home, ... all this causes a breakdown in communication, and can escalate into mutual suppression and a cold war mentality.

Today, technologies like mobile phone and tablet computers are so popular that couples communicate fewer than 30 minutes every day. Even during mealtime, you are watching your TV series, and I am playing my "Strike of Kings." In addition, we bring work home, and then blame work stress for communication problems between husband and wife. An invisible barrier gradually builds up between them. Sadly couples often cannot address the issue directly, or even remain unaware. Over time, they become a couple who does not communicate, that is, a pseudo-couple.

Often communication remains on a trivial level such as what to eat, wear, buy, or use every day. This kind of communication obviously cannot improve the tacit understanding and cooperation between husband and wife, nor raise the happiness index of the family. There are other examples of ineffective communication, such as the self-centered conversation mentioned above: listening only to what one wants to hear, and saying only what one wants to speak, without realising one's responsibility to the needs of the other.

Openness to life

There are three types of attitudes: completely closed, closed within self-boundaries, and completely open. Because of the prevalence of selfishness and hedonism, on the Mainland there are also some DINK ("Double Income No Kids") couples, who do not want children, and they are completely immersed in selfishness and desire. They generally think that having children is troublesome and affecting their work. We know of one couple. During their first five years of marriage, they did not want children. However, it became very hard for them later when they wanted to have children. Without knowing the reason, this kind of closed attitude may reflect a fear of life (having been hurt by the family of origin/during

childhood); it could be due to an attachment to one's own small circle, or certain (warped) expectations regarding marriage. In any case, these have sown seeds of disaster for families in society.

Once I asked my neighbor whether they were still planning to have children. She said: "One is enough; we do not have so much love." There are also some people who saw us looking after several children, and worried about how we could manage to raise so many children. These attitudes to life are common. They see their choice as a temporary narrow buffering of the life they want to live. In fact, they do not see clearly that love in a marriage increases, rather than decreases, with the increase of life. Besides the working hours and the time a couple spends together, there is not much time left for the children. Constantly working overtime, which is a form of exploitation, deters a family, especially a young family, from having children. There is also unnecessary anxiety, particularly after the birth of a son. The family feels very stressed; they start to calculate the budget: kindergarten, elementary school, middle school and university, extracurricular classes, finding a wife, getting a job, and so on. To refuse to be open to life for fear of things that have not yet occurred. What a distorted view of life! The third type, which is full openness to life, is rare, but at least it is starting to emerge in some young families in the Church.

Most people do not know the Natural Family Planning (NFP) well. But now at least the young families we accompany understand it. This method of temperance is very helpful for the growth of a couple and the fullness of a marriage and family. Most of the contraceptive measures people use now, including condoms, rings and sterilisation, are all results of family planning, and also contribute to sexual promiscuity. Today nobody is willing to be temperate, and the attitude to sex is as casual as having breakfast. Young people, university students even have sex when they have nothing else to do; universities distribute condoms to students, while parents give condoms to their children. These are implicit expressions of condoning whatever the young want to do. The whole attitude towards sex is twisted as if it does not matter.

In conclusion, on the Mainland where materialism, consumerism, hedonism, and egoism are prevalent, Christian families face unprecedented challenges, as if struggling in the mud.

In Luke 10 Jesus said, “Go! Behold I send you as lambs among wolves.” This kind of challenge is extremely difficult, but God's grace is sufficient, and this is also a good chance for Christians to be the light and salt for the earth. God knows the complex environment we are in. There is a season and a time in which God works. In spite of the continuous challenges, what we should see is how God exists in our temptations and weaknesses. Each family has a path and model of mutual sanctification. Ignatian spirituality emphasises living in the present, enhancing the ability and grace to face life as it is, as opposed to looking at the real world with a vision of change. Choices are very important, because the choices we make reflect and help us find out the vocation of an individual or a family. The option of each family member affects the development of the whole family, while the development of the family determines the direction of the society. Similarly, the kingdom of God becomes even more abundant through the vocation of a family.