

Family Wellbeing and the Common Good: A Catholic Social Ethic Perspective

從天主教社會倫理角度探討家庭幸福 和大眾福祉

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Abstract: This article discusses family wellbeing and the common good, with Hong Kong as an example, from the social science and the Christian perspective. It also discusses some pastoral responses based on the above understandings. In the first section, it is pointed out that family wellbeing, a multidimensional concept, is closely connected with the healthy development and good of a society. Deeply influenced by both the Chinese culture and Western values, families in Hong Kong perform functions similarly to both developed countries and traditional Chinese families with Chinese values. Based on these influence, the major family functions in Hong Kong can be summarized into six domains: family solidarity, family resources, family health, social resources, social connection, and work–life balance, with

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the first three referring to the internal family situations and the last three to the family's relationships with the larger systems (i.e. community and workplace). The overall family wellbeing index in Hong Kong is at the low end of the average level, and deteriorated over the past few years. Comparatively, the internal situation of the family is relatively stable and has higher scores whereas interactions between family and the external environment is not so good, especially work-life balance which is a major challenge faced by many Hong Kong families. In the past few years, social resources which refer to the availability and accessibility of support a family in need can obtain, and social connection, including participation in social affairs, further weakened. The example of Hong Kong allows us to understand family life of a Chinese urban city which may be similar to other Chinese cities in mainland China or other parts of the world.

The second section examines the Catholic understanding of family. Christian families, apart from being the nuclear families focused inward on the welfare of their own members, they are also the socially transformative families that seek to make the Christian moral ideal of love of neighbor part of the common good. The metaphor of “family as domestic church” can serve as the catalyst for critical re-appropriation of a family ethic that is personally and socially transformative, with both material and spiritual dimensions. Based on the Catholic social thought, family has the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love, and itself being a living reflection of and a real sharing in God's love for humanity. Its mission includes

forming a community of persons, serving life, participating in the development of society, and sharing in the life and mission of the church. The understandings of family as communion can address the internal relations of family whereas Christian family's social mission which emphasizes nurturing the social virtues of compassion and justice, serving others and transforming the society call families to build up common good in the society. To carry out its mission, based on the principle of subsidiarity, family must be able to maintain its own rights and functions. The author believes that if these Christian understanding of families can be fully implemented, family wellbeing in Hong Kong as well as other cities would be much better.

In the last section, it is suggested that different stakeholders should continue to strengthen the internal situation of the family, including family relationship, physical and mental health. The Church can play an important role here in encouraging Christian families to carry out the Christian values in family and society. For upholding the family wellbeing, the government should invest more resources to improve the social resources that families in need can obtain; as well as implement family-friendly and social policies to improve the relationship between the family and the external system, especially the social connection and work-life balance situation. Some examples of pastoral responses of the Church organizations in building a happy and healthy family were given.

Keywords: family wellbeing, family solidarity, work-life balance, social ethics, common good

[摘要] 本文分別從社會科學和天主教倫理角度討論家庭幸福和大眾福祉的關係，檢視幸福家庭的概念。基於上述的理解，本文亦討論牧民回應和建議。第一部分指出，幸福家庭是一個多維度的概念，與社會的健康發展和美好生活息息相關。香港家庭深受中國文化和西方價值觀的影響，其功能與已發展國家和具有中國文化價值的傳統中國家庭均有相似之處。基於這些影響，香港家庭的主要功能可歸納為六個領域：家庭成員之間的連繫、家庭擁有的資源、家庭成員的身心健康狀況、社會資源、社區參與和連繫、工作與生活平衡，其中前三項是指家庭內部狀況，後三項是指家庭與外在環境（即工作、社區和整體社會）的互動和關係。香港的整體「家庭幸福指數」水平處於一般範圍，但近幾年的分數有下跌趨勢。家庭內在狀況相對穩定，但家庭與外在環境的範疇得分較低，尤其是「工作與生活的平衡」是許多人面對的一大挑戰。過去幾年，獲得社會資源（指有需要的家庭可以獲得的支持）和社會聯繫（包括參與社會事務和貢獻社會）進一步被削弱。因此，應特別關注家庭的關係方面，包括家庭成員之間以及與社會其他成員的關係。香港的例子讓我們瞭解到一個城市的家庭生活，亦可能反映相類似發展情況的其他中國大陸以致世界其他華人社會的城市。

承接上文對影響幸福家庭元素的分類，本文第二部分從天主教角度探討對家庭的理解。基督徒家庭一方面關注其內在成員的福祉，同時也關心社會轉變下的家庭，力求使關愛鄰人的基督徒道德理想成為大眾福祉的一部分。「家庭

教會」的比喻可以成為批判性地重新塑造家庭倫理的催化劑，這種家庭倫理在物質和精神層面上都具有個人和社會轉化的幅度。基於天主教的社會思想，家庭肩負著守護、揭示和傳遞愛的使命，它本身就是天主對人類之愛的活生生反映和真實分享。其使命包括「形成一個服務生命、參與社會發展、分享教會的生活和使命的團體。」家庭作為共融的理解可以回應家庭的內在關係；而基督徒家庭強調培養憐憫正義的社會美德、服務他人、轉化社會的社會使命，則要求家庭在社會中建立大眾福祉，特別關顧有困難的家庭。為了履行這使命，基於輔助（互補）原則，家庭必須能夠維護自己的權利和功能。

最後，基於以上的理解，本文建議不同社會持分者，包括家庭成員、政府、教會、社會中介團體等，持續強化家庭內部關係，包括家庭成員之間的關係、身心健康等。教會可以在鼓勵基督徒家庭在家庭和社會中實踐基督教價值觀方面發揮重要作用，而且可以透過牧民關顧協助家庭。為了維護家庭幸福，政府應投入更多資源，令困難家庭可獲得更多社會資源和支援；並實施家庭友善和社會政策，改善家庭與外部系統的關係，特別是社會連結和工作與生活的平衡方面。本文亦列出了一些教會團體如何回應建立幸福健康家庭的例子。

關鍵字：家庭幸福、家庭團結、工作與生活平衡、社會倫理、大眾福祉

Introduction

Family is often considered as the basic cell of a society. The wellbeing of the individual persons and of families are closely connected with the healthy development and good of a society. The documents of Vatican II and subsequent documents acclaim the family as the foundation of society and the “domestic church”¹ which bears the Christian vision and mission of the Church. It is a community of faith, hope, and love.

When we talk about Christian families and its pastoral implications, it is often referred to the intra-family situations or problems, such as marital relationship, divorce and remarriage, parent-child relationship, and the relevant pastoral responses, such as pre-marriage formation, whether one can receive eucharist after divorce, and so on. These issues deserve our attention but should not be limited to them. They are usually regarded as issues in the area of sexual and family ethics. On the other hand, the mainstream tradition of Catholic social ethics mainly concerns issues pertaining to social and economic policies, or political and social structures, which is a crucial dimension of public life, but less focuses on families or individuals who can be moral agents of social change and care-givers of the vulnerable. However, what families do is

1 Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 11; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997), no. 2204.

crucially important, and their good is an important indicator of a society's success in encouraging human flourishing. Family is a fundamental part of the Catholic vision of social reform.² It is a community with a social mission that goes beyond itself.

In fact, both social realities and Christian ethics inform us that family issues have their social dimension whereas social ethics cannot neglect the individual and family perspectives. In view of the above, in this article, I would like to examine family wellbeing and the common good from the Christian social ethics perspective. I will also discuss the pastoral responses relating to such understanding. What have been done and what can be done more to preserve and promote family life? Before doing this, based on the research conducted by Hong Kong social science scholars, I will first discuss the understanding of family wellbeing, particularly among Hong Kong people, and the difficulties they face, in order to put our discussion in context. The example of Hong Kong allows us to understand family life of an urban city which may be able to help us in understanding the situations of other Chinese cities in mainland China or other parts of the world.

2 Julie H. Rubio, *Family Ethics: Practices for Christians* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010), pp. 38-39.

1 Family Wellbeing

1.1 Family Wellbeing Index

Family wellbeing is a multidimensionally operationalized and contextually dependent concept. It combines different types of individual wellbeing (i.e., physical, social, economic, and psychological) and contains the relational dimension of human life and family functioning in general, alongside which social and cultural contexts should be considered. Assessments of family wellbeing involve a combination of both objective and subjective dimensions and may vary across societies due to social, cultural, political, and economic differences.³

According to a study conducted by a group of Hong Kong social science scholars, the family wellbeing of Hong Kong people was defined as “the state of family that can perform various functions to satisfy the diverse needs of individual members in the family through interactions with the environment.”⁴ Deeply influenced by both Chinese culture and Western values, Hong Kong families have been shown to function similarly to families in developed countries: providing care, nurture, and support

3 Ivonne Wollny et al., *Can Government Measure Family Wellbeing? A Literature Review* (London, UK: Family and Parenting Institute, 2010), p. 3, <https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/can-government-measure-family-wellbeing-literature-review> [accessed 5 October 2024].

4 Mooly M. Wong et al., *Research Report on a Study on Family Well-being Index in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Family Welfare Society, 2020), p. 8.

for members; managing resources; and providing socialization, guidance, and a sense of identity and belonging. At the same time, traditional Chinese values that emphasize the family's collective interest, close harmonious relationships, and responsibility for members' wellbeing still prevail among Hong Kong Chinese families.⁵

The Hong Kong Family Wellbeing Index (HKFWI) was constructed on the basis of the above-mentioned values, with major family functions summarized into six domains: family solidarity, family resources, family health, social resources, social involvement, and work–life balance, with the first three referring to the intra-family situation and the last three to the family's relationships with the larger systems (i.e. community and workplace).⁶ These elements and contexts mentioned above carry morally relevant features that deserve our attention and reflection.

1.2 Family Wellbeing in Hong Kong

In the past 40 years, Hong Kong has been affected by industrialization, modernization and globalization, and has undergone tremendous changes in all aspects of economy, society and politics. Families have continued to take on new forms,

5 Mooly M. Wong et al., “The Development and Validation of a Family Wellbeing Index for Hong Kong Chinese Families”, *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 31, no. 6 (2022): 1-15, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-022-02281-6> [accessed 5 October 2024].

6 Wong et al., “The Development and Validation of a Family Wellbeing Index for Hong Kong Chinese Families,” p. 12.

including more small families and nuclear families, increasing non-marriage and divorce rate, declining birthrate, more women join labour force, the number of single-parent families rises sharply, and there are more single-person households and elderly people living alone. Although these new trends have brought many challenges to families, former studies have shown that Hong Kong people are generally satisfied with their family life and consider their families to be happy.⁷ But in recent years, there are also other related problems, such as higher suicidal rate among children and youth, and pressure of care-givers, especially the elderly.⁸

According to the Hong Kong Family Wellbeing Index (HKFWI) in 2019, 2022 and 2024,⁹ the overall scores in Hong

7 香港家庭福利會 (Hong Kong Family Welfare Association) , 《香港家庭幸福感調查 2017 報告書》 (*2017 Hong Kong Family Well-being Study Report*) (香港 : 香港家庭福利會 , 2017) ; 香港大學民意研究計劃 (Opinion Poll Program, The University of Hong Kong) , 《香港家庭幸福感調查 2018 研究摘要》 (*2018 Hong Kong Family Well-being Study Report Summary*) (香港 : 香港家庭福利會 , 2018) 。

8 The Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention (CSR), “Statistics of Suicide Data in Hong Kong”, <https://csr.p.hku.hk/statistics/>; 香港社會服務聯會 (Hong Kong Council of Social Service) , 《照顧者喘息需要研究調查結果報告》 (*Caregivers’ Needs Study Report*) , 2021 。

9 The research project was commissioned by the Hong Kong Family Welfare Society (HKFFWS) to the Department of Social Work of The Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2018 and the HKFWI was employed in 2019 for the first time. The subsequent surveys in 2022 and 2024 were conducted by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research

Kong are 6.31, 6.10 and 6.06 respectively (based on a scale of 10),¹⁰ which is at the low end of the average level. It shows that the related areas within the family (including family solidarity, family resources and family health) are relatively better than the areas related to the family and the external systems (social resources, social connection, and work-life balance). The decline of score from 6.31 (2019) to 6.10 (2022) was caused by the weakening of two external areas, namely social connection and social resources.

The studies also demonstrate that most Hong Kong people still attach great importance to family values and adhere to some core concepts, such as family harmony, orderliness of elders and children, and mutual help. The internal situation of the family is relatively stable.¹¹ On the contrary, the quality of the categories related to family and external systems is not so good. The scores of social resources, social connection, and work-life balance are low to poor,¹² reflecting negative interactions between family

Institute. For these full reports, please refer to the website of HKFWS: <https://www.hkfws.org.hk>.

10 HKFWI ranges from 0 to 10. Scores ≥ 7.5 are defined as good, 6 to < 7.5 are average, 5 to < 6 are below average, while scores below 5 are considered poor.

11 In the 2022 (and 2024) studies, family solidarity scored 7.4 (7.46 in 2024, the highest score among the 6 domains), family resources scored 7.47 (7.35), and family health scored 7.07 (6.74). See HKFWI 2024, p. 26.

12 For example, in the 2024 study, social connection scored 3.34, social resources scored 4.69, and work-life balance scored 4.6. See HKFWI 2024, p. 26.

and society. No matter which class people belong to, work-life balance scores are low, which shows that this is a major challenge faced by Hong Kong families. This has something to do with the long working hours and high work pressure of Hong Kong people.¹³

1.3 Family's Relationships with the External Systems

The relationship between family and the external environment includes social resources, social connections, and work-life balance. Social resources refer to whether families are able to receive help when they are in need. Some disadvantaged groups, such as poor families, single-parent families and the mentally ill, are relatively deficient in this regard and need more support. Social connections refer to making connection with the society, such as participation in community affairs and contributions to the society. Studies show that social connection stay at a relatively poor level, 3.34 scores in 2024. It has remained to be the lowest scoring domain in all three surveys of HKFWI. After the social protests in 2019, the general environment of Hong Kong has undergone great changes. Generally speaking, many Hong Kong people withdraw from participating in community activities. The pandemic-related social distancing measures have led to the isolation of many families.

13 黃美菁、馬麗莊、尹寶珊、夏麗麗 (Wong et al), 〈香港「家庭幸福」狀況〉(Hong Kong Family Well-being Situations), 蕭新煌等編 (ed. Michael H. Hsiao et al.), 《勾勒與比較台港社會意索》(*A Comparison of the Social Ethos of Taiwan and Hong Kong*) (香港: 香港中文大學, 2021) (Hong Kong: CUHK, 2021), p. 54.

In terms of work and family life balance, the Hong Kong government has introduced a number of family-friendly employment measures in recent years to improve the balance, such as increasing the number of holidays in 2020 from 10 weeks to 14 weeks for mothers after giving birth, increasing statutory paternity leave from 3 days to 5 days, flexible work arrangements during and after the pandemic. However, generally speaking, there is still a lack of family-friendly practice in the employment policy and management practice in the workplaces. The working hours of Hong Kong people are generally very long, with the average weekly working hours being 50.1 hours, ranking first among 70 cities in the world.¹⁴ A local survey also found that more than half of Hongkongers work over 45 hours a week and some even longer than 70 hours, far exceeding recommendations by the International Labour Organization (ILO) of 40 hours per week. ILO considers working hours more than 48 excessive.¹⁵ Moreover, due to their family status, many women have difficulties in finding jobs in the marketplace. According to the studies conducted by the Equal Opportunities Commission in Hong Kong, 15% of job seekers reported experiencing discrimination

14 International Labour Organization, “Working Time and Work-life Balance around the World”, 6 January 2023, <https://www.ilo.org/publications/working-time-and-work-life-balance-around-world>.

15 The survey, conducted by the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Union, covered 748 full and part-time workers aged above 18, mostly employed in tourism, hotels, catering, retail and wholesale, and transport. See Fiona Sun, “How Overworked are Hongkongers?” *South China Morning Post*, 17 June 2023.

based on family status,¹⁶ 22% experienced discrimination during pregnancy, maternity leave and/or within one year of returning to work after giving birth, and 20% of working mothers encounter difficulties when taking time off to care for their children.¹⁷ Studies of other non-governmental organizations also affirm such phenomenon.¹⁸ These family unfriendly practices lead to the lack of balance between work and family life.

1.4 Internal Situations of Families

In terms of intra-family qualities, although the scores are comparatively higher than those related to family and external systems, there are still much room to be improved.

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- 16 Equal Opportunities Commission, “Research on Family Status Discrimination in the Workplace in Hong Kong”, 2018. Also see 〈推動婦女友善職場〉(Promoting Women Friendly Workplace), 香港婦女中心協會 (Hong Kong Federation of Women’s Centre), https://womencentre.org.hk/Zh/Advocacy/friendly_workplace/ (accessed 15 October 2024).
- 17 Equal Opportunities Commission, “Study on Pregnancy Discrimination in Small and Medium Enterprises and Negative Perceptions of Working Mothers”, 2016.
- 18 Oxfam Hong Kong, “Poverty among Women” (婦女貧窮與家庭崗位限制), https://www.oxfam.org.hk/tc/what-we-do/development-programmes/hong-kong/povertyamongwomen_5542; 香港社會服務聯會 (Hong Kong Council of Social Service), 〈基層婦女就業意欲高但困難重重〉(Grassroots Women Have High Aspirations for Employment but Face Difficulties); 香港社會服務聯會 (Hong Kong Council of Social Service), 《社聯扶貧資訊網電子通訊》, August 2023; 香港社會服務聯會 (Hong Kong Council of Social Service), 《基層婦女就業參與研究》, 2023, https://www.hkcss.org.hk/upload/prs/基層婦女就業參與度研究_研究結果摘要_FactSheet.pdf (accessed 20 October 2024).

Due to the busy life of Hong Kong people, family members generally lack time to get together. Even if they have time to get along, the atmosphere and quality of the relationship is very important. A harmonious family relationship, with respect and authentic communication towards each other, brings happiness which in turn affects “family solidarity”. On the contrary, frequent family conflicts, or lack of communication which is not uncommon among some families, affecting relationships in family. This can occur between couples, or between parents and children, due to a lack of commitment and a sense of respect, difference in opinions or interests, or do not know how to express love. This can lead to family dysfunction, increase the pressure on family members, and even affect the performance of family functions.

Moreover, family members also need to fulfill their respective responsibilities in order to function. For example, some are responsible for making money to support the family and some take care of other members of the family and doing housework. They must agree on a division of work or share different duties among themselves, so that these responsibilities are balanced well, leading to a harmonious relationship. As for the physical and mental health of family members, it also directly affects the overall condition of the family. If someone has physical or mental problems, it can be extremely stressful for both the patient and the caregiver.¹⁹

19 Wong et al., “Hong Kong Family Well-being Situations”, pp. 39-40.

Furthermore, the prevailing competitive culture in Hong Kong has caused many parents to have excessive demands and expectations on their children, causing their children to be under great pressure, lacking study-play balance. Some parents also impose their own interest and values on their teenage children who may feel a lack of respect and unable to express freely in front of their parents. They feel that parents make choices for them without listening to their voices. This not only affects the parent-children relationship, but also affects their children's mental health and joyful growth. Studies show that the more empathy parents have for their children, the more mature and independent their children will be, and the relationship between them will be more harmonious.²⁰

As the life expectancy of Hong Kong people is longer, the burden of taking care of the elderly family members, especially those with chronic illnesses, falls on another elderly partner or their children. The long-term pressure without enough external support makes the care-givers physically and mentally exhausted.

Family resources, including economic resources or psychological resources, affect family happiness. Economic resources include the ability to meet general family needs, and psychological resources include whether there is enough space to live in, whether it is safe, and whether the individual can handle

20 何新滿 (Ho Sun-Moon), 〈如何令親子關係減低緊張感?〉 (How to Reduce Tension in the Parent-child Relationship?), 《HK01》, 24 February 2024.

daily tasks. The dense and small living environment in Hong Kong often affects individuals' physical and mental health.²¹ The neo-liberal capitalistic society with a lack of a family wage policy make low-income families face financial pressures, thus, unable to lead a decent living. The HKFWI Elderly couple families and elderly who live alone also face difficulties due to lack of financial and medical resources as well as social connection.²²

Besides, in the 2024 study, the HKFWI score of families with caregiver(s) or carer was 5.81, which was much lower than that of those without a caregiver (6.24). The physical and mental health of sole carers were poorer than other carers. 41% of the sole carers in the sample were over 60 years old and 17 % even aged 70 or above. It shows the urgent need of support, both internal and external for the carers.²³

To conclude this section, family wellbeing is complex, with both objective and subjective aspects; intra-families and family-external systems dimensions; interpersonal and social-structural levels. The above-mentioned studies and analysis have shown that there are a number of morally relevant factors affecting family wellbeing in Hong Kong, posing challenges to the individual members as well as the whole family. What and how can the

21 Wong et al., "Hong Kong Family Well-being Situations", pp. 41-42.

22 香港樂施會 (Oxfam Hong Kong) , 《年長人士及長者貧窮與就業問題研究》 (*Elderly Poverty and Employment in Hong Kong*) , 香港 : 樂施會 (Hong Kong: Oxfam Hong Kong, 2022) 。

23 HKFWI 2024, p. 9.

understandings of family in the Catholic tradition contribute to affirming family wellbeing?

2 Family and Common Good

From the family situations mentioned above, we can see that there is a close relationship between families and society, in terms of both internal situations and connection with the external systems. Special attention should be paid to the relational aspect of family, that is, relationship among the family members and those relating to other members of the society. Apart from the material dimension, there is also the spiritual dimension. Christian family is not only the nuclear family focused inward on the welfare of its own members but the socially transformative family that seeks to make the Christian moral ideal of love of neighbor part of the common good. “Common good”, as the goal of a society in the Catholic social tradition, refers to “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.”²⁴ Family responsibility and fidelity need to be combined with altruistic social action that makes it possible for

24 Pope John XXIII, Social Encyclical *Mater et Magistra* (On Christianity and Social Progress), 1961, no. 65; and Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), 1965, no. 26. The common good applies to each human community, but its most complete realization occurs in the political community where the state’s role is “to defend and promote the common good of civil society, its citizens, and intermediate bodies.” See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Hereafter cited as CCC), no. 1910.

all families to participate in the common good of society and for women and men to be equal participants in family and in social life, including economic life. Increasingly, Christian theories of family life place it in this larger social context.²⁵ The metaphor of “family as domestic church” can serve as the catalyst for critical re-appropriation of a family ethic that is personal and socially transformative,²⁶ with both material and spiritual dimensions. Bearing in mind of the above social analysis, below I am going to highlight some characteristics of family in the Catholic social tradition that can shed lights on our understanding of family wellbeing with multidimensions.

2.1 Christian Family as a Domestic Church

Although as early as in the fourth century that the Church fathers John Chrysostom spoke of the family as *micra ecclesia* (a little church) and Augustine called it *domestica ecclesia* (a domestic church), it was not until Vatican II (1962-65) that the family was given a qualified recognition as a domestic church.²⁷ In *Lumen Gentium*, it is stated that family is rooted in

25 Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), xii.

26 Cahill, *Family*, p. 83.

27 Thomas P. Raush, “The Domestic Church”, in *Pope Francis on the Joy of Love: Theological and Pastoral Reflections on Amoris Laetitia*, ed. Thomas P. Raush and Roberto Dell’Oro (New York: Paulist Press, 2018), p. 105. Also see Michael A. Fahey, “The Christian Family as Domestic Church at Vatican II”, in *The Family*, ed. Lisa S. Cahill and Dietmar Mieth, *Concilium* 4 (1995): 85-92.

Christian marriage and the baptismal gift of the Holy Spirit, thus perpetuating the people of God throughout history (*LG* 11).

The Christian family is also called to experience a new and original communion which confirms and perfects natural and human communion... The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion, and for this reason too it can and should be called “the domestic Church (*LG* 11).

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,

It is here that the father of the family, the mother, children, and all members of the family exercise the priesthood of the baptized in a privileged way by the reception of the sacraments, prayer and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life, and self-denial and active charity. Thus the home is the first school of Christian life and a school for human enrichment. Here one learns endurance and the joy of work, fraternal love, generous—even repeated—forgiveness, and above all divine worship in prayer and the offering of one’s life.²⁸

In his apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (Christian Family in the Modern World), Pope John Paul II sees the family as both having “the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love,” and itself being “a living reflection of and a real sharing in God’s love for humanity and the love of Christ the Lord for

28 CCC, no. 1657.

the Church His bride.” Reflecting God’s love for humanity gives an ecclesial dimension to the family. Thus, its mission includes “forming a community of persons, serving life, participating in the development of society, and sharing in the life and mission of the church (*FC* 17).”²⁹

Family as a domestic church highlights the notion that the Christian couple and their children participate in an ongoing sacramental reality through which they are sanctified and invited to participate actively in the outward mission of the church, especially through service and hospitality. This metaphor fits well with the church’s principle of subsidiarity wherein the smaller, local associations are linked with the larger institutions, but are also relatively independent. This is true for the family as it relates both to the larger church and to the state. The family is a sacrament of God’s love when parents and children imitate Christ’s self-saving love. The love between husband and wife and among family members participates in the prophetic, priestly, and kingly mission of Christ and the church. In this way the Christian family is a gospel community, a community in relation to God and a community of service to others.³⁰

Pope Francis also refers family as the “domestic church.”

29 Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (Christian Family in the Modern World), 1981, no. 17. (Below quoted as *Familiaris Consortio* or *FC* with number in the text.)

30 Marvin L. Krier Mich, *The Challenge and Spirituality of Catholic Social Teaching*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), p. 108.

In his apostolic exhortation on the family, *Amoris Laetitia*,³¹ it appears at least ten times and its theological underpinnings were developed. He says that as individuals enter upon an ecclesial experience of communion among persons, the family reflects the mystery of the Trinity (*AL* 86). His favorite metaphor is the family as “an icon of God” and “God’s love” (*AL* 11, 29, 70, 121). Through the sacrament of marriage, they became the principal agents of the family apostolate, especially through their joyful witness to the Gospel of the Family, noting that this calls for evangelization and catechesis within the family (*AL* 200). Parents are the first teachers in the faith for their children (*AL* 16). They are evangelizers of their own families, active agents in their catechesis, asking God to work in their hearts.³²

Catholic theologian Lisa Cahill points out that the ideal of family as domestic church must begin from three important premises: 1) Christian families structure their internal relations according to Christian ideals of spirituality and reciprocity; 2) Christian families serve others in society to build up the common good by transforming society itself; and 3) Christian families struggle, survive, and thrive together, despite economic, racial, and ethnic differences or differences in family structure.³³

31 Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love), 2016. (Hereafter quoted as *Amoris Laetitia* or *AL* with number in the text.)

32 Raush, “The Domestic Church,” p. 107.

33 Cahill, *Family*, p. 84.

2.2 Internal Relations: Family as Communion

As mentioned in the last section, the internal situations of family in Hong Kong is comparatively stable and have higher scores in various studies. This reflects the importance of relationship among family members. In spite of this, there are increasing cases of suicide among the children, youth and elderly in recent years which deserve our attention.

In the Catholic tradition, communion and sharing in family life is important in nurturing internal relations of family. As John Paul II pointed out in *Familiaris Consortio*, the fostering of authentic and mature communion between persons within the family is “the first and irreplaceable school of social life, and example and stimulus for the broader community relationships marked by respect, justice, dialogue and love (FC 43).” This is because

The very experience of communion and sharing that should characterize the family’s daily life represents its first and fundamental contribution to society. The relationships between the members of the family community 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 heartfelt acceptance, encounter and dialogue, disinterested availability, generous service and deep solidarity (FC 43).

The family is the place where an authentic community of persons develops and grows (*FC* 18). Popes John Paul II and Francis have discussed in details the functions and values of family based on the Catholic teachings. In *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II emphasizes that the family, founded and given life by love, is a community of persons: of husband and wife, of parents and children, of relatives. Its first task is to live with fidelity the reality of communion in a constant effort to develop an authentic community of persons. Its final goal is love; without love, the family cannot live, grow and perfect itself (*FC* 18). The family finds in love the source and the constant impetus for welcoming, respecting and promoting each one of its members in his/her dignity, as a living image of God (*FC* 22). In the Letter to Families *Gratissiman Sane*, John Paul II states that “Love causes man [and woman] to find fulfilment through the sincere gift of self. To love means to give and to receive something which can be neither bought nor sold, but only given freely and mutually (11).” In addition to love, Pope Francis, in *Amoris Laetitia*, points to tenderness as an outstanding family virtue. He points out that family is the primary setting where we learn to relate to others, to listen and share, to be patient and show respect, to help one another and live as one (*AL* 276).

Love is also expressed in the generous attention shown to the elderly who live in families: their presence can take on great value. They are an example of connections between generations, a resource for the wellbeing of the family and of the whole of so-

ciety. It is not just a question of doing something for older people, but also of accepting them in a realistic way as partners in shared projects — at the level of thought, dialogue and action.”³⁴

The family, in fact, constitutes “a community of love and solidarity, which is uniquely suited to teach and transmit cultural, ethical, social, spiritual and religious values, essential for the development and wellbeing of its own members and of society.”³⁵ By exercising its mission to educate, the family contributes to the common good and constitutes the first school of social virtue, which all societies need (*GS* 52; *FC* 37; *CCC* 653, 2228). In the family, persons are helped to grow in freedom and responsibility, indispensable prerequisites for any function in society. With education, certain fundamental values are communicated and assimilated (*FC* 43).

In the family, special attention must be devoted to the children, by developing a profound esteem for their personal dignity, and a great respect and generous concern for their rights, especially to children who are sick, suffering or handicapped (*FC* 26). The rights of children must be legally protected within juridical systems. The family has a completely original and irreplaceable role in raising children (*GS* 61). The parents’ love finds its fullest expression in the task of educating. The parents’

34 John Paul II, “Message to the Second World Assembly on Ageing”, 2002.

35 Holy See, “Charter of the Rights of the Family”, *Preamble* (Vatican: Vatican Polyglot Press, 1983), p. 6.

love is a source, as well as the *animating* principle and therefore the *norm* inspiring and guiding all concrete educational activity, enriching it with the values of kindness, constancy, goodness, service, disinterestedness and self-sacrifice that are the most precious fruit of love (*FC* 36). The right and duty of parents to educate their children is “*essential*, since it is connected with the transmission of human life, showing the loving relationship between parents and children” (*FC* 36; *CCC* 2221). Parents have the duty and right to impart a religious education and moral formation to their children, a right the State cannot ignore but which it must respect and promote.

Pope Francis suggests more communication among family members. He claims that new technologies or media may be helpful for connecting family members who live apart from one another. But it cannot replace the need for more personal and direct dialogue (*AL* 278). He speaks of parents showing their children the maternal and paternal face of the Lord and a grateful attentiveness to the needs of the elderly and the relatives and friends of a larger family who need more care (*AL* 172, 197).

About women in family, John Paul II claims that women should not be limited to domestic roles alone. The equal dignity and responsibility of men and women fully justifies women’s access to public functions, without neglecting their maternal and family role. These roles should be harmoniously combined. (*FC* 23). He suggests a complementarity model of equality in which

some women and feminist theologians criticize. Meanwhile, men are called upon to ensure the harmonious and united development of all the members of the family (*FC* 23, 25). Pope Francis also addresses the passionate and erotic aspect of conjugal love (*AL* 142).

2.3 Christian Family's Social Mission: Serving Others & Transforming the Society

Apart from focusing on its internal relations, as shown in the former section, relationship between family and the external systems such as work and society is also important for family well-being. In the Catholic teachings, in addition to intra-family concern, Christian families also serve others in society to build up common good through carrying out their social mission. The family's social mission is derived from Christian identity. "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... With families and through them, the Lord Jesus continues to have compassion on the multitudes (*FC* 41)."

Since the Creator of all things has established the conjugal partnership as the beginning and basis of human society, the family is the first and vital cell of society (*AA* 11). The family has vital and organic links with society, since it is the foundation and nourishes it continually through its role of service to life:

it is from the family that citizens come to birth and it is within the family that they find the first school of the social virtues that are the animating principle of the exercise and development of society itself. “Thus, far from being closed in on itself, the family is by nature and vocation open to other families and to society and undertakes its social role (*FC 42*).”

In the family, moral values are taught starting from the very first years of life, the spiritual heritage of the religious community and the cultural legacy of the nation are transmitted. In the family one learns social responsibility and solidarity (*CCC 2224*). It is patently clear that the good of persons and the proper functioning of society are closely connected “with the healthy state of conjugal and family life” (*GS 47, CCC 2210*).

Thus, the family is “the most effective means of humanizing and personalizing society”; it is “the first and irreplaceable school of social life, and example and stimulus for the broader community of relationships marked by respect, justice, dialogue and love.” In the face of societal phenomenon that is inhuman and dehumanizing, with many negative results such as alcoholism, drugs and even terrorism, “the family possesses and provides formidable energies capable of taking people out of his anonymity, keeping them conscious of dignity, enriching them with deep humanity (*FC 43*).”

The mission of the domestic church is construed in such a way that the plight of society’s less-fortunate members is kept

in frequent view. Families are by nature intimate communities of love, basic cells of society (*FC* 42, 46), and participate in, contribute to, and benefit from the common good. This means families must be guaranteed the necessary material and social preconditions of participation. It is the social responsibility of those who are able to contribute to the welfare and full participation of others to do so. Christian families make a preferential option for the poor and disadvantaged (*FC* 32). Families naturally educate members in empathy and altruism, expanding care for the common good to ever larger circles of society.³⁶

John Paul II encouraged families to work for structural reform, claiming that the Christian family “is not closed in on itself, but remains open to the community, moved by a sense of justice and concern for others, as well as by a consciousness of its responsibility toward the whole of society (*FC* 64).” The family’s commitment to the hungry, the poor, the old, the sick, the disabled, drug victims, ex-prisoners, and those without families, especially abandoned children and orphans, leads it to social action (*FC* 41), and “active and responsible involvement in the authentically human growth of society and its institutions (*FC* 48),” extending even to the international level.³⁷

Besides, based on Catholic social teachings, domestic church

³⁶ Cahill, *Family*, p. 90.

³⁷ Mirch, *The Challenge and Spirituality of Catholic Social Teaching*, p. 109.

addresses economic inequities and holds Christian families responsible for just distribution of material and social wealth, not limited to almsgiving but demanding structural change. All families have both a right and a duty to enhance and benefit from the common good of the whole society. Thus, from the very beginning of the modern social teachings, the Catholic Church has supported various kinds of workers' rights, including right to work, family wage, time to rest, safe working environment, and so on, so that work-life balance as well as family wellbeing can be sustained.³⁸

Moreover, the domestic church is a sphere of relative gender equity. John Paul II highlighted the equal dignity and responsibility of women with men. This equality is realized in a unique manner in that reciprocal self-giving by each one to the other and by both to the children which is proper to marriage and the family (*FC* 22).³⁹ Pope Francis, in a conference on women in the church, emphasizes that women throughout history, very often unknown or forgotten, each in her own way sustained and transformed families and communities by the power of their witness. He referred to women as “builders of humanity,” highlighting the nature of women as builders in cooperation with the Creator “in the service of life, the common good, and peace.”⁴⁰

38 Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), pp. 150-183 (refer to the chapter on Human Work).

39 Cahill, *Family*, p. 85.

40 Pope Francis, Address to the Participants of the International Conference

2.4 Society at the Service of the Family

The family and society have complementary functions in defending and fostering the good of each and every human being. But society, more specifically the State, must recognize that the family is a society in its own original right and so society is under a grave obligation in its relations with the family to adhere to the principle of subsidiarity. By virtue of this principle, the State cannot and must not take away from families the functions that they can just as well perform on their own or in free associations; instead, it must positively favor and encourage as far as possible responsible initiative by families. “In the conviction that the good of the family is an indispensable and essential value of the civil community, the public authorities must do everything possible to ensure that families have all those aids- economic, social, educational, political and cultural assistance-that they need in order to face all their responsibilities in a human way (*FC 45; CCC 2209*).”

3 Pastoral Responses and Suggestions

Based on the Catholic understanding of family as discussed above, we can see that different stakeholders can do something to improve family wellbeing. If various parties can put the above values into practices, family wellbeing would be much better.

Different stakeholders should continue to strengthen the

“Women in the Church: Builders of Humanity”, 7 March 2024.

internal situation of the family, including family relationship, physical and mental health. Special attention should be paid to the relational aspect of family. For upholding the family wellbeing, the government should invest more resources to improve the family resources, such as implementing family wage, providing affordable housing, providing health care and other support to caregivers and those in need. Moreover, in terms of the relationship between the family and the external system, especially the work-life balance situation, more family-friendly measures should be increased and implemented, such as providing direct support for childcare and elderly care, attending to young students' needs, alleviating family-work conflict, involving men in family life, enhancing family health and functioning, providing social support network and so on. Furthermore, government policies should systematically understand and improve the conditions of the more vulnerable groups in society, such as poor families, single-parent families, families with members having chronic illness, and families that have experienced major changes.⁴¹

For the role of the Catholic Church in promoting family life, much have been said in the Church documents about love between couples and how to help families in crisis, strengthening

41 Wong et al., "Hong Kong Family Well-being Situations", pp. 56-57; Lily L. Xia et al. "The Family Structural and Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Family Well-being of Hong Kong People", *International Journal of Social Welfare* (2023): 11-12, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12627> [accessed 5 October 2024].

education for children, promoting the sense of care and respect among family members, extending care and love to the disadvantaged families, and so on. Putting them into practices, the Church in Hong Kong have invested much human and financial resources in taking care of the material and spiritual needs of families, through professional social welfare organizations, such as Caritas and groups run by religious groups, as well as pastoral care at parish and diocesan levels. For example, the Diocesan Pastoral Commission for Marriage and the Family has provided a variety of pastoral care services and formation talks on different aspects of family in parishes and Catholic schools. It also helps Christian families in forming or organizing self-help groups and building their families as a domestic church, with a four-fold ministry of worshipping God, reading the Scripture, building family solidarity, and serving other people.⁴² Family members are encouraged to communicate with and caring for each other, through eating, sharing, playing together. With the promotion of dialogue and synodality in recent years, family members are also encouraged to listen to each other in a respectful way. Externally, family members can show concern to neighbors and the needy in the community. In fact, a number of parishes have encouraged

42 In helping Christian families to be a domestic church, sharing materials were designed for family gatherings, so that family members can share, pray and act together. See <https://news.dpcmf.org.hk/fampray/>. For details of the various services provided by the Diocesan Pastoral Commission for Marriage and the Family, please refer to its website at <https://news.dpcmf.org.hk/domesticchurch/> [accessed 1 November 2024].

parishioners and families to participate in volunteer work by visiting the poor and needy.

Besides, the Hong Kong Catholic Commission for Labour Affairs (HKCCLA), together with other civic organizations, has conducted researches on and advocated family-friendly policies, such as just wage or family wage and reasonable working hours, hoping to strike for more family resources and work-life balance for the workers' families. HKCCLA has also advocated for anti-discrimination law based on marital status and just benefits for part-time work, so that women can enjoy equal right to work while taking care of their families. Moreover, it also encourages both Christians and non-Christians to extend love and care to the poor and vulnerable families, through visiting the low-income workers and hearing their stories and working experiences.⁴³

Apart from the above, in recent years, due to the higher suicidal rate among children and youth, many young couples migrated to other places, and pressure of caregivers, especially the elderly, more attention should be paid to these vulnerable groups. Since the Catholic Church run many primary schools and many parishioners are elderly, more pastoral care should be planned to cater these needs. For example, the Christian values of respect, upholding dignity and building a harmonious family can be shared with parents whose children attend Sunday schools

43 For more details of the work of HKCCLA, please refer to its website at <https://www.hkccla.org.hk/> [accessed 1 November 2024].

or Catholic schools. Moreover, volunteers can be organized to visit the elderly in the district where the parish locates, especially those who are caregivers, or their other family members have been migrated to other countries.

Conclusion

Family wellbeing, which is multidimensional, is imperative to the common good of a society. Various studies and analysis have shown that there are a number of morally relevant factors affecting the family wellbeing in Hong Kong, including material, spiritual, relational and social dimensions, posing challenges to the individual members as well as the whole family.

Christian understandings of family, with family as the basic unit of a society, and the metaphor of family as a domestic church reflect a close relationship between families and society. The sacramental reality of Christian couple and their children, Christian ideals of spirituality and reciprocity, the importance of serving others to build up common good, Christian families support each other when facing difficulties, responsibilities of various stakeholders in society – all these notions or values contribute to affirming family wellbeing and the common good of a society.

The teachings of the Church on families do not remain at a theoretical level. By putting these teachings into practices, various kinds of ministry relating to marriage and family

flourish. They try to promote Christian virtues and values in families and parishes during different stages of life-cycle or family life, and also provide remedies and services when marital crisis spring up. At societal level, there are church organizations promoting social teachings and advocating family-friendly policies. Recently, with the promotion of the spirit of synodality, listening voices of family members are emphasized. All these efforts hope to build a society which values family wellbeing and common good.