

Family or Families? Towards a better understanding of Humanization and Generativity

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Family or families? This question may seem like a dilemma of a Byzantine dispute. However, the question isn't silly or trivial at all. It contains a sentence of life or death, not only for the family, but also for man. As I will try to demonstrate in this essay, the choice is not between two equally valid options. Rather, it is a choice between a unique natural institution that is necessary for people and their development, and a plurality of arbitrarily constructed relational models that are potentially destructive for the person and society. Therefore, in the choice between family and families, there are two things at stake: on the superficial level, the way of understanding primary relationships that are an intrinsic part of the persons' identities; then, on a deeper level, the very reality of man himself.

1. Possibility and Reality of Man

The question "family or families?" already presupposes a mistaken concept of man, as if the actualization or perfection of man consisted in the realization of every possibility contained in his being. Effectuation of possibilities is thus confused with the human reality. From this perspective, the plurality of achievements would correspond to a greater wealth, a more complete reality. It is true that the possibilities contained in the human essence can be brought to fruition in various ways, as can be seen in different culinary cultures. This, however, does not mean that all effectuations are suitable to the person, in terms of fulfilling his/her human essence. For example, even though *cannibalism* may be a form of nourishment, it cannot be considered human. Something similar happens with various models of interpersonal relationships — unmarried, homosexual, lesbian couples, polyamorous relationships. Even though these types of relationships are recognized and sanctioned as families by the constitutions of certain Western countries, such a recognition doesn't actually make them a human family. The fact that these models exist "as families" (nominally) doesn't mean that they *are* the reality signified by that name "family". Because to simply use one's freedom of choice is not enough to give rise to the human reality, as some would like to think. It is rather the human reality that indicates how freedom must be used. The reality of the person, and therefore the family, does not depend on social construction but on actualizing that which is human.

2. The Background of Family Models

If there was a survey with the question “family or families?” a century ago, the vast majority of respondents would have demonstrated bewilderment, for the very thought of having different family models would have seemed to be a somewhat bizarre idea. How did we get to this present situation?

In my opinion, it is the result of a series of theories and historical events intertwined and crystalized into one overarching thought, whereby the family, like sex, is only a social construction. The conviction then follows that we are dealing with a pluralistic reality without any type of exclusions, dependent solely on the polymorphic nature of human desire. Furthermore, the cross between theory and history generates certain circularity. Thus the Hegelian-Marxist criticism of the patriarchal family, along with psychoanalysis and atheist existentialism, forms the basis for the Revolution of 'nineteen sixty eight¹. Its ideologues, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre, Marcuse, have impacted changes in customs: the so-called sexual liberation of woman, the destruction of the family, the principle of paternal authority, etc. When these transformations related to the use of contraceptives and abortion are performed on a large scale, the very foundations of marriage and family are removed even further. Later on, through the reading of French deconstructionists, like Foucault and Derrida, the feminism of '68 took root and led to *gender ideology*, first in the United States and then in Europe². The spread of these ideas through Western democracies entails a variety of changes in constitutions that directly attack marriage, the supporting structure of the family. These modifications include the separation between biological sex and chosen gender, laws against gender discrimination, the approval of homosexual marriage, and the adoption of children by homosexual couples. The latest social imposition of this ideology is the sexualization of children. The claim is made that, in the beginning of their existence, children should have experiences of sexuality as a game in order to “educate them” to be tolerant towards all sorts of sexual behavior and family models.

The substrate of these theories and historical events may perhaps be found in the Enlightenment Project, inaugurated with the French Revolution, to build a society of free men who, despite their diversity, can enjoy equal rights and duties, at least in the beginning. Even though the

¹ To achieve such an utopia it's necessary to destroy the bourgeois family, because this would be intimately connected with private propriety. According to Marx, a typical idea of bourgeoisie is its conception of woman as a «simple instrument for production» (cfr. K. Marx-F. Engels, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* (1847-48), in *Werke*, Dietz Verlag, Berlin 1959 (MEW), IV, p. 478).

² J. Butler argues that «by theorizing that gender is a construction completely independent from sex, the same gender becomes an artifice free from bonds. Therefore, man and male could indicate either a female body or a male one; woman and female, either a male body or a female one» (J. Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York-London 1990, p. 6).

idea of equality for all men- by the simple fact of being a person- is an important achievement, that does not mean there are no necessary differences, and even less that these differences are the root of injustice. Instead, radical feminists consider family and sexual differences of wife-husband, father-mother, man-woman, not as a mutual enrichment, but in terms of master-slave dialectic, which first need to be deconstructed, and then completely abolished, in order to thoroughly eliminate injustices. The result is a society that is apparently tolerant. In reality, it is a society which, by imposing a false homogeneity on its citizens, complicates the possibility for dialogue, the root of all true tolerance

These differences are not, however, a pure construction dependent on the will of those who create them. Rather, they are originally interdependent. For these differences depend on the kind of relation that they entail. Marital, paternal, filial, and fraternal relationships have specific generative, affective, normative, and symbolic differences that cannot be modified without simultaneously transforming those same relationships. For example, if a mother eroticized her child, the maternal relationship would be transformed into something very different, and it would negatively influence the child's identity, since the systematic character of these differences comes also from the members' identities³. There is therefore, a particular circuitousness: only he who properly establishes these relationships is in a family, and only he who forms part of a family can properly establish these relationships that shape his identity. It follows, then, that being in a family through appropriate relationships lies at the core of humanization, that is, the flourishing of the human person.

3. The Humanizing Role of the Family

Perhaps the first and most obvious humanizing characteristic of these institutions is their continuity over the centuries. The studies of Claude Lévi-Strauss, one of the fathers of cultural anthropology, underscored that the family, which he defined as “the more or less durable, socially approved union between a man, a woman, and their children” is a “universal phenomenon, present in each and every type of society”⁴. Certain kinds of data regarding the human person favor the need for these types of unions. There are biological factors, such as the needed state of the child who is obliged to depend more on his parents than is the case with other animals; psychological factors, such as emotional attachment and the separation of the child from the parents (a crucial part of the development of the child's identity, in particular for his sexual condition); and sociological factors, such as people's need to have an environment suitable to beginning their socialization.

³ Cfr. A. Campanini, *Famiglia o famiglie nel terzo millennio*, «Alternativas. Cuadernos de Trabajo Social», 2004 (12), p. 20.

⁴ C. Lévi-Strauss, *La famiglia* (1956), in *Razza e storia e altri studi di antropologia*, Einaudi, Torino 1967, p. 147.

All of this information sheds light on the fact that, as Paola Di Nicola stated, “the family is a complex social relationship that always includes juridical (normative), economic, sexual, psychological, cultural, and emotional dimensions, threads of solidarity, and exchanges with the outside world”⁵. There are henceforth various dimensions expressed in the family that form people and their relationships in a way that is not only a human reality, but also the very start of humanization.

The family models considered above are imperfect expressions of these dimensions. For example, for lack of legal ties, as in the case of unmarried couples; or due to different sexual conditions, as in the case of homosexual unions. Consequently, the models appear to be unsuitable places for humanization. In fact, that which seems to group all these models together is the symmetry of individual rights and duties, under which the relationship is built up starting from the will of the subjects. Each person’s right becomes the other’s duty, in a way similar to what happens in the public sphere. The symmetrical relationship that characterizes these models does not explain the peculiarity of the family. This is because the family, in addition to educating the person in the fulfillment of his rights and duties, introduces the person in an ever more fundamental relationship: namely that of donation, which is at the basis of every symmetrical justice. One does not only learn to love the other person for himself, regardless of his qualities and acts. But one even learns to accept the love of the other as a free gift. To love the other for himself and to be loved for the same reason means that the foundation of the relationship is not pleasure, utility, affection, or the love that I find in the other. Rather, the foundation of the relationship is his happiness, which then becomes my happiness too, precisely because I love him.

The humanizing quality of the family comes from the fact that it is founded on an original asymmetry, the gift of each spouse to the other so the other may in turn give himself/herself. In fact, even if it contains affectivity and personal intentionality, the origin of the family lies beyond pleasure, *eros* and even individual love. The family always requires marriage, a bond formed from a very particular intentionality, for its end is the intentionality of the other in so far as they are husband and wife. In marriage, the establishment of the “we” depends on the gift of the other as spouse. The lack of spousal bonds has repercussions on the child because he/she would not then be a fruit of this special intentionality. Therefore, in all of these different family models, the child tends to no longer appear as a gift, but as a right. It follows, then, that there is an inseparable bond between conjugality and generativity that must be analyzed.

⁵ P. Di Nicola, *Famiglia: sostantivo plurale. Amarsi, crescere e vivere nelle famiglie del terzo millennio*, Angeli, Milano 2008, p. 174.

4. The Family as a Generative Framework

In fact, conjugality is in itself generative, not only because it is the physical origin of the child, but because it is open to the child as a gift of the spouses' mutual donation. That's why there is a systematic relationship between the sexual human condition, marriage, family, and generativity. Not only does the baby's dependent state require a family, but also the sexual condition of the human person and the development of his own generative capacities.

To understand this connection, we must begin with the particular origin of man. Unlike animals, human beings do not reproduce as interchangeable individuals of the same species, but rather as unique beings. As such, the terms of generation and procreation do not mean the same as reproduction. Generation is thus the origin of the human world since each person introduces novelty, or rather a chain of novelties, into nature and history. This was wonderfully expressed by Hannah Arendt in her famous essay *The Human Condition* when she wrote, "The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin, is ultimately the fact of birth, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men... the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope, those two essential characteristics of human existence which Greek antiquity ignored altogether... It is this faith and hope for the world that found perhaps its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospels announced their "glad tidings" of Advent: *A child has been born to us.*"⁶

I think that the novelty of which Arendt speaks is founded on the uniqueness of the person, which in birth is only at the beginning. The human newborn needs to enter into relationship with other people (parents and relatives) and through them, with the human world. His irreplaceability is not that of a monad, but rather that of a being in relation with others: born from love and destined for love. The dependent state of a newborn obliges his parents to satisfy his needs, and above all, to develop his uniqueness through a relationship with the world and others, with his own desires and own emotions. These relationships form the basis of knowledge, love of self, and love of others as irreplaceable beings.

Human generativity therefore always refers to the person's origin, and in particular, his/her irreplaceability. This involves education and formation of a person's sexual condition, as well as his/her generative capacity since it reflects the perfection of his/her uniqueness. Consequently, the

⁶ H. Arendt, *The human condition*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1958, p. 257.

concept of generativity, besides being quite complex and articulated, is intimately linked to the existence of the family and its irreplaceability⁷.

The etymology of education can help us both understand better the richness of the concept 'generativity' and eliminate some prejudices that the Revolution of '68 managed to introduce into modern culture. Among our peers there are those who consider education in values as an attack against liberty and the equality of all persons⁸. According to these authors, educating is tantamount to constricting people to follow norms and behavioral patterns that, in the best case scenario, lead them away from who they really are⁹. These interpretations, however, seem contrary to the etymology of the word "educate", which comes from the Latin *educere*, which means "to draw out". Educating is therefore not about imposing a way of being that is extrinsic to the person (a sort of Freudian superego), but rather it is about promoting that which is proper to man; even if by doing so one must correct that which is wrong. In any case, education should deal more with promotion than correction. Education begins with parents interpreting, evaluating, and managing their newborn's affectivity. Through their words, gestures, and above all, behavior towards the baby's emotions, parents are able to illuminate the child's interior (which up until then has been in darkness) to give meaning. The baby then begins to get to know and interpret his emotions and to use them positively in order to enter into an appropriate relationship with the world and with the other. Affective relationship makes us capable of understanding/loving the other, and communicating that which we experience to another whom we love. This, however, demands a learning that parallels the learning of a mother tongue, i.e. the language in which we are originally loved.

An important aspect of affective education involves learning to distinguish between that which we feel and the reality. To do this, we must be able to see things from the other person's perspective. This requires us to regard the other person as capable of having a similar world view that is also sensible and reasonable. In this way we learn, for example, to not get angry simply

⁷ Wojtyła, for instance, explains the relation between person and family: «it is the family – and it shall be – this particular ordering of forces, where each person is important and necessary in so far as he/she is and who is; it is the most human ordering that is based on the person's value and oriented under every aspect towards this value» (K. Wojtyła, *Metafisica della persona*, Bompiani, Milano 2003, p. 1464).

⁸ Alison Jagger thinks that gender ideology will bring about a new culture: «the end of the biological family will also eliminate the need for sexual repression. Male homosexuality, lesbianism, and extramarital sexual intercourse will no longer be viewed in the liberal way as alternative options... the very 'institution of sexual intercourse' where male and female each play a well-defined role will disappear. Humanity could finally revert to its natural polymorphously perverse sexuality» (A. Jagger, *Political Philosophies of Women's Liberation*, in *Feminism and Philosophy*, Littlefield, Adams & Co., Totowa, New Jersey 1977, p. 13).

⁹ Susanna Tamaro expresses the same thought in a monologue when one of her heroines remembers her childhood (cfr. *Va dove ti porta il cuore*, Baldini & Castoldi, Milano 1991, p. 165).

because the other person's actions contradict our own feelings, but only because those actions are unjust.

On the other hand, the concept of generativity includes the formation of the sexual condition of children as a natural extension of generation. This task, far from being an imposition or intrusion in their life, forms an essential part of the very family structure¹⁰. Moreover, the formation of the sexual condition of children is realized through appropriate family relationships, i.e. those that are capable of organizing the feminine-masculine difference as the origin of interpersonal relationships¹¹. The process of the formation of the sexual condition comes up again in adolescence through the more mature identification of the child with his parental figures and their relationship, which concludes when the child gets married and in turn becomes a parent himself. The acquisition of new functions, such as care, protection, responding to the child's needs, confirms the maturity of his sexual condition, which is closely linked to interpersonal relationships.

Influenced by a hedonistic-individualistic educational model and excessive dependence on parents, the child can be led to choose a sexuality that revolves more around his own pleasure rather than taking responsibility of the other. A self-referential sexuality is the cause of relational problems; happiness can only be found in the gift of oneself to another. Great difficulties arise also from unigender or unisex relationships, which lack sexual differences, because they end up forming the sexual condition of children. An absence or lack of identity flows into children's future marital relations. As a result, the cycle of relational difficulties between genders becomes exasperated and real relational distress is generated.

Furthermore, generativity does not only mean to generate, educate and form identities, but above all, it means openness to a child as a gift, which is a distinguishing quality of conjugality. The love between husband and wife is naturally revealed in the child as a symbol of the couple's union and the reality that they belong to each other. Openness to a child is consequently always possible in a heterosexual couple, but never in a homosexual one. In fact, when a child is born because a homosexual couple resorted to artificial insemination, the child is certainly not generated as a gift. He/she is rather bought under the pretense of being the object of a human right. Something similar may be said of the child adopted by the homosexual couple. He/she would not be a gift to

¹⁰ Cfr. S. Belardinelli, *La normalità e l'eccezione. Il ritorno della natura nella cultura contemporanea*, Rubbettino, Catanzaro 2002, specially the third part.

¹¹ «To say that a family is a sexual relationship means that you make family and are in a family differently as far as you are male or female» (P.P. Donati, *La famiglia come relazione di Gender: Morfogenesi e nuove strategie*, P.P. Donati (a cura di), *Uomo e donna in famiglia. Quinto rapporto CISF sulla condizione della famiglia in Italia*, San Paolo, Torino 1997, p. 26).

which one opens himself, but only the successful achievement of a goal. The conjugal bond thus constitutes the essence of the family, the first relationships established on the basis of sexual identities and differentiations.

Even if the marriage is already generative, fatherhood and motherhood intrinsically imply a new way of being husband and wife, and ultimately, of being man and woman. Therefore, fatherhood and motherhood are not elements that can simply be added from outside the sexual condition or outside the couple's relationship. Fatherhood and motherhood constitute the fullness of the sexual condition: the fulfillment of the generative capacity, for every man has the vocation to be a physical or spiritual father and every woman, a physical or spiritual mother. Actually, the gift of parents to child reaches its perfection when the children in turn become parents, thereby giving the love they have received. In this light, being a father or a mother is not a right, but a duty that is born from an initial gift. The gift tends towards reciprocity, which is certainly asymmetric: the son honors his parents when he becomes a good father. From the lens of a generative dynamic, the relational nature of the human person can be clearly seen here.

Ultimately, in addition to being people's physical origin, *generation* is above all the beginning of their identity and the quality of their relationships. We can thus see a certain circularity: the sexual identity of a person develops through good family bonds, and actually becomes his/her "sexual identity" as such once it reaches the level of maturity as the source of new family bonds.

5. Intergenerationality as the bridge between family and community

As we have said, generation continues through the education and formation of the generative capacity of children and is thus transformed into generativity. And this later continues through intergenerationality, otherwise known as the relationship among generations¹². On the one hand, this extension allows for the transmission and internalization of values and patterns of life that strengthen the bond between genders and generations, resulting in the creation of a community. Intergenerationality becomes the bridge between family and community because the meaning of a person's life is not exhausted in the individual "I" or in the family, which has limited parent-child relationships. Without the encounter of intergenerationality, interdependence and diversity would

¹² «For the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships. The possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide » (A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory* (1981), 3th. edition, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame (Indiana) 2007, p. 221).

be forgotten. When people relate only with equals, they become more and more fragile, lonely, and exposed to the danger of being exploited by an invisible power that imposes an inauthentic way of existence. They end up thinking about what *is thought about*, or say what *is said*, or they do what *is done*¹³. On the other hand, when one is open to intergenerationality, the family becomes the sphere where the members' identities are strengthened. The key to such openness is the realization that you are limited and at the same time capable of giving.

If limitation is derived from man's finite nature, gift springs from participation. Participation is a complex reality, for it refers to the potentialities upon which relationship is based (by nature of being human) as well as to their actualization. In fact, in addition to forming part of the biological, affective, symbolic and relational ties, the family also consists in the participation of relational goods. In other words, there is always a dimension of "forming part of" or "belonging to" the family; family members are always in relation to each other (husband/wife, father/mother/child, grandfather/grandmother/grandchild). But there is also the sense of forming an active part of a sexual condition, a family, a generation. If "belonging to" something indicates a certain *dependence*, then "forming an active part of" something indicates *freedom and responsibility* in accepting this belonging and collaborating in order to generate and regenerate it. The concept of participation thus overcomes the juxtaposition among generations that are indifferent towards each other, and the contrast derived from judging the other person as a threat to keeping one's belongings, and as an obstacle to continual progress¹⁴.

Intergenerationality demands a common heritage: the overcoming of prejudices and the creativity to take an active part in forming new bonds. This doesn't justify the revolution of the person who, in trying to respond to current gender and generational problems, proposes new family models. Besides being utopian, this attitude impedes the formation of the sexual identity. This is manifested in the gradual loss of generativity, and consequently, of intergenerationality. The prudent approach lies in the capacity to integrate these two aspects: belonging and creative participation¹⁵. Through a reflective knowledge of the other generations, it is possible to personalize one's family history and traditions, interpreting and assimilating them into one's own identity. This is why the intergenerational encounter is needed to build the personal and family identity. Through the giving and accepting of the shared heritage, people are capable of giving unity to time spent in

¹³ Cfr. M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (1927), Gesamtausgabe II, Vittorio Klostermann Verlag, Frankfurt 1977, § 35.

¹⁴ Cfr. P. Raciti, *La cittadinanza e le sue strutture di significato*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2004, p. 196.

¹⁵ A good example of balance between both extremes is P. Binetti's book, *La famiglia fra tradizione e innovazione*, Magi, Roma 2009, p. 114.

three areas: the past, as a treasury of experiences, the present, as a place to encounter others, and the future, as an openness to hope.

6. The holy family as the very model of family

God Himself decreed the essence and dignity of a family when, through Divine Providence, Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary with Saint Joseph as His foster father.

Saint Joseph's concern to care for Jesus and Mary is human providence with God sustaining and providing for the Holy Family's destiny.

Blessed John Paul II in his Angelus message on December 31, 1995, said: "It is in virtue of this providence that those who are parents endeavor to avoid every kind of evil and to provide their children and family with every possible good." As Saint Joseph did for Jesus and Mary.

The Christian family is a community of faith, hope and love. It is a "communion of persons, a sign and image of the communion of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2205).

As the vital cell of society, it is tasked to be a domestic sanctuary of the church through the mutual affection of family members with their common prayer offered to God, promotion of justice and good works for all brethren in need (Second Vatican Council, the Laity).

Thus, the Christian family, which springs from marriage as a reflection of the loving covenant uniting Christ with the Church, should exemplify the Savior's living presence in the world and the genuine nature of the Church today, according to Second Vatican Council.

It is in the family that children are taught how to grow and nurture the roots of virtues and wings to fly and direct flight toward life's great destiny—heaven.

It is the smallest unit of society where a member should be welcomed in triumph or defeat, and taught the five most important phrases: "I love you," "thank you," "please forgive me," "may I help you?" and "excuse me," among other Christian virtues.

The world today, despite the advances in technology, experiences untold sufferings because of "know-it-all" children and "yes-to-all" parents.

Is it a wonder then that the world is turned "inside-out, upside-down and truly out of control?"

Love has been lived backwards, evolved to self-gratification.

How does a child become a man? He acquires his physiognomy, he brings his structure into being, he grows into an unmistakable personality through a continual osmosis due to the fact of belonging to an event with a structure and a face all its own: the family. The more the family possesses its own physiognomy—the more it is aware and rich with humanity—the more the child comes to have a personality of his own. It is precisely the experience of continuity that allows the differentiation of persons, the formation of his distinctive traits. This is the wonderful paradox that expresses the root of that endless unity that generates each and every man; it is the deep principle of creation. Analogously, man walks toward his destiny, he realizes himself, by living within that familiar "fact" of the brotherhood of men in Christ, of men who recognize one another and share a common path, because Christ is among them.....In this way, the adult man is "saved," that is, he grows, and finds with time that he has changed; he matures, and finds himself ever more immanent to him for whom he was made, and for whom his entire being cries out.

7. Conclusion

Perhaps someone can see in this notion of family only a fact that is irrefutable from a biological rather than sociocultural perspective. But this would imply a failure to understand that the biological aspect of a family forms part of certain personal relationships that are in themselves

generative. The concept of generation, though rooted in biology, is exquisitely anthropological. This reality is visible in a variety of contexts: the “generation” of the husband-wife bond through marriage, the physical and educational “generation” of children, the “intergeneration” between various family members, and the “regeneration” of the husband-wife or parent-child relationships or the possibility for their “degeneration”. Family thus has biological, affective, symbolic, and interactive ties among their members. In this way, we discover the totality of the human person. This is why the family, unlike other artificial models, is a humanizing institution: through the integration of different aspects, the person should learn to personalize his own nature. To reduce the family to merely some of its aspects would be to destroy this capacity.

Furthermore, the most humanizing aspect of the family is found in the logic of gift, based on the original asymmetry, by virtue of which we are capable of giving only because we have first received (beginning with the gift of life). And precisely because we are capable of giving (the capacity to give is part of our identity as persons) we should give. The duty that a person has in the family, therefore, does not mainly lie in rights of another, but in the gift received. The love among family members is thus simultaneously gift and duty, just like the spouses’ openness to children. The generativity of a family depends on this gift, which is a duty. Gift and duty, however, have two different objects. People themselves are a gift (in their identity). When they exercise their duty to give back to their parents or siblings as son/daughter or brother/sister, they fully receive back from this other person. The same thing can then be said of all other family relationships. Duty, on the other hand, responds to the logic of gift in its asymmetry and reciprocity, confirming the gift as such. Perhaps this particular duty to love flows from the unrepeatability of the person, who must be loved as an end in him/herself. In order to blossom, personal uniqueness requires generation and appropriate relationships; it requires the family. We thus see the existence of a tight link between family, generativity, personal uniqueness and donation. In brief, you can say that the generativity of a family carries in itself the gift of persons.